To Kill a Child

Stig Dagerman, with an introduction by Steven Hartman

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Translator’s Note:

While covering postwar Germany as a foreign correspondent for the Swedish newspaper Expressen in the fall of 1946, the Swedish writer Stig Dagerman (1923–1954) was advised by a fellow correspondent in the Allied Press Corps “with the best of intentions and for the sake of objectivity to read German newspapers instead of looking at German dwellings or sniffing in German cooking-pots.” The implicit criticism stemmed from Dagerman’s ambition to chronicle the supposedly “indescribable” realities of life for ordinary Germans in a land left in ruins—at a time when world sympathies for the German people were at an all-time low and the Press Corps and all the world were focused on the drama and expiation of the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

Dagerman sought instead to chronicle as nakedly as possible the suffering of all the remaining victims of the war and its ravages with an eye unaffected by the collective need to assign guilt for the atrocities of a horrendous Nazi Regime. What followed were a series of articles,
later collected in the book *German Autumn*, that examined the very nature of human suffering and the moral complexities of justice.

As he came to understand just how much his own motivations were at odds with those of the international press corps, Dagerman wrote in frustration to fellow Swedish writer Karl Werner Aspenström in the midst of his assignment in Germany:

A journalist I have not yet become, and it doesn’t look as if I’ll ever be one. I have no wish to acquire all the deplorable attributes that go to make up a perfect journalist. I find it hard to meet the people I meet at the Allied Press hotel — they think that a small hunger-strike is more interesting than the hunger of multitudes. While hunger-riots are sensational, hunger itself is not sensational, and what poverty-stricken and bitter people here think becomes interesting only when poverty and bitterness break out in a catastrophe. Journalism is the art of coming too late as early as possible. I’ll never master that. *(Translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson)*

If journalism was the art of coming too late as early as possible, then in short fiction Dagerman sought its antithesis, *the art of coming in time*. In his focus on fragile human subjects, particularly young people swept up in or swept aside by circumstances and forces much greater than themselves, Dagerman sought to create links of identification and empathy that could give his readers an understanding of the tragedies of human suffering before they became *faits accomplis*.

His classic short story “To Kill a Child” is a fine example. For a meager fee of seventy-five kronor Dagerman was commissioned by the National Society for Road Safety to write a cautionary tale as part of a campaign designed to get Swedish motorists to slow down on highways when speeding was becoming an increasingly difficult social issue with serious consequences for public safety.

What could have been an ephemeral and gimmicky work of public service fiction became perhaps the greatest short short story in the history of Swedish letters, for in this tale Dagerman took the simple redressing of a particular social problem as the starting point rather than as an end in itself and out of these mundane materials created a poignant tale of choice, chance, and human loss that rises to the highest levels of art, literary balance, and philosophical concision.

What makes this particular story gripping, like so many of Dagerman’s tales, is his earnest investment in short fiction as a vehicle of moral agency and insight, with a capacity to generate human empathy, identification, and understanding—a commitment, in short, to the art of coming in time.

—Steven Hartman

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**To Kill a Child**

It’s a peaceful day as sunlight settles onto the fields of the plain. Soon bells will be ringing, because today is Sunday. Between fields of rye, two children have just come upon a footpath that they have never taken before, and in the three villages along the plain, window panes glisten in the sun. Men shave before mirrors propped on kitchen tables, women hum as they slice up cinnamon bread for the morning meal, and children sit on kitchen floors, buttoning the fronts of their shirts. This is the pleasant morning of an evil day, because on this day a child will be killed in the third village by a cheerful man. Yet the child still sits on the kitchen floor, buttoning his shirt. And the man who will kill the child talks of the day ahead, of their rowing trip down the creek. And still humming, the woman places the freshly cut bread on a blue plate.

No shadows pass over the kitchen, and yet even now the man who will kill the child stands near a red gas pump in the first village. He’s a cheerful man, looking through the view-finder of his camera, framing a shot of a small blue car and a young woman who stands beside it, laughing. As the woman laughs and the man snaps the charming picture, the attendant screws their gas cap on tightly. He tells them it looks like a good day for a drive. The woman gets into the car, and the man who will kill the child pulls out his wallet. He tells the attendant they’re driving to the sea. He says when they reach the sea they’ll rent a boat and row far, far out. Through her open window, the woman in the front seat hears his words. She settles back and closes her eyes. And with her eyes closed she sees the sea and the man sitting beside her in a boat. He’s not an evil man. He’s carefree and cheerful. Before he climbs into the car, he stands for a moment in front of the grille, which gleams in the sun, and he enjoys the mixed aroma of gasoline and lilacs. No shadows fall over the car, and its shiny bumper has no dents, nor is it red with blood.

But as the man in the first village climbs into his car and slams the door shut, just as he is reaching down to pull out
the choke, the woman in the third village opens her kitchen cupboard and finds that she has no sugar. The child, who has finished buttoning his shirt and has tied his shoes, kneels on a couch and sees the stream winding between the alders, pictures the black rowboat pulled up into the tall grass of the bank. The man who will lose his child has finished shaving and is just now closing his portable mirror. Coffee cups, cinnamon bread, cream, and flies each have a place on the table. Only the sugar is missing. And so the mother tells her child to run over to the Larssons’ to borrow a little. As the child opens the door, the man calls after him, urging him to hurry, because the boat lies waiting for them on the bank of the creek, and today they will row much, much further than they ever have before. Running through the yard, the child can think of nothing else but the stream and the boat and the fish that jump from the water. And no one whispers to the child that he has only eight minutes to live and that the boat will lie where it is today and for many days to come.

It isn’t far to the Larssons’. It’s only across the road. And just as the child is crossing that road, the small blue car is speeding through the second village. It’s a tiny village, with humble red houses and newly awakened people who sit in their kitchens with raised coffee cups. They look out over their hedges and see the car rush past, a large cloud of dust rising behind it. The car moves fast, and from behind the steering wheel the man catches glimpses of apple trees and newly tarred telephone poles slipping past like gray shadows. Summer breathes through their open windows, and as they rush out of the second village their car hugs the road, riding safely, surely, in the middle. They are alone on this road — so far. It’s a peaceful thing, to drive completely alone on a broad road. And as they move out onto the open plain, that feeling of peace settles deeper. The man is strong and contented, and with his right elbow he can feel the woman’s body. He’s not a bad man. He’s in a hurry to get to the sea. He wouldn’t hurt even the simplest creature, and yet, still, he will soon kill a child. As they rush on towards the third village, the woman again shuts her eyes, pretending those eyes will not open again until they can look on the sea. In time with the car’s gentle swaying, she dreams about the calm, lapping tide, the peaceful, mirrored surface of the water.

Because life is constructed in such a merciless fashion, even one minute before a cheerful man kills a child he can still feel entirely at ease, and only one minute before a woman screams out in horror she can close her eyes and dream of the sea, and during the last minute of that child’s life his parents can sit in a kitchen waiting for sugar, talking casually about the child’s white teeth and the rowing trip they have planned, and that child himself can close a gate and begin to cross a road, holding in his right hand a few cubes of sugar wrapped up in white paper, and for the whole of that minute he can see nothing but a clear stream with big fish and a wide-bottomed boat with silent oars.

Afterward everything is too late. Afterward there is a blue car stopped sideways in the road, and a screaming woman takes her hand from her mouth, and it’s red with blood. Afterward a man opens a car door and tries to stand on his legs, even though he has a pit of horror within him. Afterward a few sugar cubes are strewn meaninglessly about in the blood and gravel, and a child lies motionless on its stomach, its face pressed heavily against the road. Afterward two pale people, who have not yet had their coffee, come running through a gate to see a sight in the road they will never forget. Because it’s not true that time heals all wounds. Time does not heal the wounds of a dead child, and it heals very poorly the pain of a mother who forgot to buy sugar and who sent her child across the road to borrow some. And it heals just as poorly the anguish of a once cheerful man who has killed a child.

Because the man who has killed a child does not go to the sea. The man who has killed a child drives home slowly, in silence. And beside him sits a mute woman with a bandaged hand. And as they drive back through the villages, they do not see even one friendly face—all shadows, everywhere, are very dark. And when they part, it is in the deepest silence. And the man who has killed a child knows that this silence is his enemy, and that he will need years of his life to conquer it by crying out that it wasn’t his fault. But he also knows that this is a lie. And in the fitful dreams of his nights he will try instead to gain back just a single minute of his life, to somehow make that single minute different.

But life is so merciless to the man who has killed a child that everything afterward is too late.
