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Killing Family Joy: Mothers on the Run in Twenty-First Century Swedish Literature

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“I’ll make sure they know. I’m going to tell them what you did, that you just took off. Left your own children. Fuck” (Myrén 9).¹ This is Johan speaking; he is Marie’s husband in Viktoria Myrén’s novel *I en familj finns inga fiender* (*In a Family There Are No Enemies*). Marie is one of many mothers in twenty-first century Swedish literature who run away from their families. They appear in novels by critically acclaimed writers such as Sara Stridsberg, Åsa Linderborg, and Kristina Sandberg, as well as in chick lit and crime fiction by writers like Emma Hamberg and Åsa Larsson. The mothers in Swedish literature usually are in heterosexual relationships and nuclear families with small children, but some of them are single mothers, step-mothers, or have teenage children. Some of them return, some do not, and in a few cases the ending is unclear. With a few exceptions, Mothers who leave is not a common theme in literary history, especially in narratives told from the mother’s point of view (Jackson 45, 115).² Moreover, cultural representations of mothers who leave have not been much discussed in previous research. One exception is Rosie Jackson’s study, which deals with a mostly Anglo-American context and a different time period than this article (primarily the twentieth century).³ I have also published two previous articles on mothers who leave in Swedish literature (Björklund, “Att lämna”, “Motherhood”).

Why are there so many mothers who leave their families in contemporary Swedish literature? And why in Sweden of all places, which is usually seen as one of the best countries in the world to start a family, especially for mothers (see, for instance, Esping-Andersen)? The Swedish welfare system, with paid parental leave and state-funded pre-schools, has made it increasingly possible for both women and men to combine family and professional lives. Since the late 1960s, Swedish politicians and authorities, along with the

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¹All translations from Swedish into English are my own, in collaboration with line editor Rebecca Ahlfeldt.

²However, mothers who are already absent or dead are common in literature and popular culture (Anolik; Dever; Feasey; Francus; Greenslade; Haas; Murdock; Rose; Warner; Worthington; Åström, “Döda mammor”, *The Absent*, “The Symbolic”).

³Mothers who leave are discussed briefly by Hansen and Rye but the foci of their studies are elsewhere.

implementation of the social services, have encouraged men to become active fathers who care for their children (see, for instance, Klinth; Klinth and Johansson). Women still use 75% of the parental leave, but the fathers' proportion is increasing (Statistics Sweden). Compared to many other countries, Sweden thus seems to provide women who become mothers with a higher degree of support and flexibility. At the same time, previous research shows that Swedish mothers face particular challenges as they are expected to meet two different societal ideals. On the one hand, parents—including mothers—are expected to have a professional career, and, on the other hand, family life has become more child-centered, in that it revolves around the children and their needs. Parents are expected to put their children above everything else (Forsberg 28–31; see also Bekkengen). Lucas Forsberg (now Gottzén) shows how the expectations on parents to be involved and put their children's needs above everything else have greater impact on mothers. Statistics and other studies confirm that Swedish mothers assume greater responsibility for household work and childcare, and they spend more time doing unpaid work than Swedish men (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten; Elvin-Nowak; Magnusson, *Hon, han, Vardagens*; Statistics Sweden).

Despite these challenges Swedish mothers seem privileged in an international context, and the family also has a strong position in Sweden. For decades researchers have argued that the family is on a decline; marriages seem less stable, people seem more reluctant to have children, and more people choose singlehood or less binding forms of partnerships. In a recent study Gøsta Esping-Andersen confirms this trend up to a certain point in time, but he argues that over the last two decades the family is recovering, especially in the Scandinavian countries. In line with previous research, he acknowledges that the revolution of women's roles initially led to, for instance, higher divorce rates and lower fertility rates, but as the society has adapted to women's new roles, this has changed. The change is most visible in countries where the social institutions—like the welfare state and the labor market—as well as men within partnerships, adjust to the fact that women now have full-time life-long careers. Recently, the family has gained a stronger position in the Scandinavian countries. Divorce rates have decreased and birth rates are among the highest in Europe, and Esping-Andersen links these developments to a progressive family politics that promotes gender equality (see also Jensen 355–62). However, the strong position of the family can also become normative. As Anna Adeniji points out, Sweden is often seen as liberal, and there is room for different lifestyles and family formations in politics and legislation. Still, her research shows that the norms surrounding relationships and family formations are strong. Adeniji focuses on the marriage norm, but she also acknowledges that having children is seen as the mandatory next step following marriage and that the heterosexual nuclear family holds hegemonic status (48, 130, 247–91). Other scholars confirm that

the idea that everyone wants children has a dominant position in the Swedish and Nordic discourse; this so-called pronatalism, is expressed both on a general societal level and on an individual level (Engwall and Peterson; Möller 220; Peterson 258–59), and it seems to have a stronger impact on women than on men (Johansson 64–65; Peterson and Fjell).

Thus, overall Swedish mothers can be seen as privileged in an international comparison, but Swedish motherhood is also shaped in a context where the discourse of involved parenthood, discussed by Forsberg, puts particular pressure on mothers to focus on their children, while at the same time investing in a professional career. Moreover, the progressive family politics that facilitates for Swedish parents to combine family and professional life seems to enforce an idea of mandatory motherhood. I will argue that the novels about mothers who leave their families should be read in this context. While the studies referring to Swedish and Nordic pronatalism mentioned above primarily discuss this concept in relation to women who are not mothers, I will focus on representations of women who are mothers.⁴ Cultural studies scholars, such as Stuart Hall, have shown that cultural representations are crucial to the production of meaning; they both reflect and shape our understandings of the material world. Moreover, as Niall Richardson states, “representations are *never* innocent—they do not just suddenly happen by accident—but are always a construct in accordance with a specific set of politics and ideas” (3; emphasis in original). Thus, the strong presence of mothers who leave their families in contemporary Swedish literature speaks to contemporary social and political ideas, such as the strong imperative to have children. In the following analysis, I will explore representations of mothers who leave their families in twenty-first century Swedish literature (see Table 1).⁵ In the first section of the article I will discuss novels where the mothers are represented as sympathetic characters who leave their families in order to come to terms with gender inequality. I will show how these mothers, even if they return to possibly more gender-equal relationships, never seriously challenge gendered power structures and instead adapt to post-feminist and individualist discourses, as described by Angela McRobbie. In the sections that follow I will move on to explore novels about mothers who in various ways fail to live up to cultural expectations of good motherhood. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s concepts of the family as a happy object and the feminist killjoy as well as Judith “Jack” Halberstam’s theories of failure as resistance, I will show how these novels

⁴Orna Donath (2015) has discussed pronatalism in relation to mothers who regret becoming mothers in a different national context, namely Israel.

⁵I will draw on texts from different genres—critically acclaimed novels as well as more popular narratives. Even if a chick lit novel like Emma Hamberg’s *Brunstkalendern* (*The Heat Calendar*) might not treat the issue with the same complexity as, for instance, Sara Stridsberg’s novels, it still contributes to the meaning production around mothers who leave their families. Also, popular narratives that at first glance seem to deliver quite conventional messages can, in fact, be revealed to carry other meanings (see, for instance, Halberstam).

Table 1. Novels referred to in the article.

Author	Title	Year of publication	Mother
Kristina Sandberg	<i>Ta itu</i>	2003	Maria
Åsa Larsson	<i>Det blod som spillts</i>	2004	Eva
Sara Stridsberg	<i>Happy Sally</i>	2004	Ellen
Åsa Larsson	<i>Svart stig</i>	2006	Rebecka's mother
Maria Sveland	<i>Bitterfittan</i>	2007	Sara
Emma Hamberg	<i>Brunstkalendern</i>	2007	Lena
Åsa Linderborg	<i>Mig äger ingen</i>	2007	Tanja
Mian Lodalen	<i>Dårens dotter</i>	2008	Connie's mother
Sara Kadefors	<i>Borta bäst</i>	2009	Sylvia
Viktoria Myrén	<i>I en familj finns inga fiender</i>	2009	Marie
Helena von Zweigbergk	<i>Sänt man bara säger</i>	2009	Louise, Susanne
Sofia Nordin	<i>Gå sönder, gå hel</i>	2011	Anna
Åsa Larsson	<i>Till offer åt Molok</i>	2012	Marcus's mother, Maja's mother, (Rebecka's mother)
Sara Stridsberg	<i>Beckomberga: Ode till min familj</i>	2014	Lone, Vita

challenge the hegemonic status of the nuclear family and Swedish pronatalism. As such, they critique society and argue for change in a more forceful way than the novels where the mothers are represented as sympathetic characters.

Gender inequality: Adapting to individualist discourses

One night when everyone is asleep, Lena in Emma Hamberg's *Brunstkalendern* (*The Heat Calendar*) walks out on her family, leaving a note to her husband on the kitchen table: "Now you get to take care of everything. Take care of your own children. Take care of your own house. Either let someone else take care of your company. Or let someone else take care of your children. You choose" (157–58). Lena is one of the mothers in my material who leaves her family because of gender inequality. In this section I discuss Lena in *Brunstkalendern* and Sara in Maria Sveland's *Bitterfittan* (*Bitter Cunt*) who leave their families but return to possibly more gender-equal relationships. I show how Lena and Sara are depicted as sympathetic characters who love and care about their children and take responsibility for making their relationships more gender-equal. Thus, these novels can be said to adapt to and uphold both Swedish discourses on family and motherhood (Bekkengen) and individualist discourses on gender equality (McRobbie).

Lena lives in a big house in the countryside with her husband Robert, four children, and a number of pets. Robert owns a gas station with a repair service and works long hours while Lena has a few different part-time,

unskilled jobs, but she mostly takes care of the home and the children. In the beginning of the novel she is exhausted, on the verge of a break-down, and she has stopped cleaning and caring for herself and the children. When she organizes a birthday party for one of her children, her sisters find Lena's house dirty and in chaos: "Rabbits jump around. Piles of laundry, rabbit poop, plants that have not been watered, cat hair, dog food in bowls by the couch" (Hamberg 54). Lena has thinned out and her hair is greasy. She continually hides in the bathroom to cry and comes out as "a wreck, swollen from crying but with a stiff smile" (Hamberg 64). Robert does not realize the gravity of the situation until it is too late and his wife has already left. Lena hides in a nearby village for a month, and while she is away Robert gradually changes. He adjusts his schedule at work and learns how to take care of his children. After Lena has been gone for a month, Robert reflects on how great it is to be an involved father:

The feeling of being a dad has just . . . grown and filled him entirely. Earlier he didn't completely get that they were his kids, and how radiantly warm it feels inside when somebody relies entirely on him, thinks he makes the best sandwiches and smells the nicest. Someone that the kids fight over being close to. He always used to be the shoulder-shrugging second choice. The children never came to him after dinner to sit on his lap. No, first they went to Lena, and if she was absolutely occupied they tentatively shuffled over to him. Maybe. Or they cuddled with Vincent [the dog] instead. The dog or daddy, never mind. (Hamberg 284; ellipsis in original)

When Lena returns she and Robert have both changed; Lena wants to start her own business and Robert wants to spend more time with his children. Their relationship is not entirely uncomplicated—they have to deal with feelings of anger and betrayal—but they do want to be with each other and create a better and more gender-equal relationship together.

Even if Lena leaves her four children, she is represented as a sympathetic character who adapts to her children's needs, and she thus fulfills the expectations connected to good motherhood. Cultural ideals of good motherhood—also referred to as "intensive" or "essential" motherhood—have been discussed at length in previous Anglo-American research and include ideas about mothers as primary caregivers and as self-sacrificing and nurturing characters who put their children's needs before their own (see, for instance, DiQuinzio; Hays; Kaplan; O'Reilly). These cultural ideals of good motherhood impact Swedish mothers as well. For instance, Lisbeth Bekkengen argues that the nuclear family is upheld by two discourses: one is the belief that men and women are different, and the other is the idea of what is in the best interest of the child. Bekkengen acknowledges that both the nuclear family and Swedish society as a whole have become more child-oriented, but this child-orientation has different consequences for men and women because of the discourse that represents men and women as different. This

discourse allows men to choose their level of engagement as parents, while women are expected to adapt their lives to their children's needs (250–56; see also Forsberg). Hamberg's Lena is one of the main characters, and the narrative follows her perspective closely. The reader thus has access to her thoughts and feelings and learns both how hard she is struggling to take care of her home and her children without any help from her husband and how difficult it is for her to leave them. She misses her children immensely while she is gone, and she even brings some of their dirty laundry so she can remember the way they smell (Hamberg 163). Lena is thus represented as a mother who loves her children but who is overwhelmed by the demands of being a mother in a family without gender equality. Disappearing becomes a way of coming to terms with gender inequality, but this is also presented as in the best interest of her children: They will have access to a happier and less exhausted mother and an active and more involved father. When Lena returns she is afraid her leaving has traumatized her children: "But she had also given her children a father. Isn't it remarkable that it takes a trauma for their father to find his way back to them" (Hamberg 313). Lena is represented as a good mother whose own needs coincide with her children's needs; she left them in order to achieve a higher goal, which will give her children a better life in the long term.

Moreover, Hamberg's novel represents gender inequality as primarily an individual problem with individual solutions. This can be read in line with a discourse that Angela McRobbie, in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, calls "post-feminist," and which, according to her, dominates Western society and culture today: "a situation which is marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period" (1). Crucial to McRobbie's argument is that "feminism has been taken into account" within the post-feminist discourse—elements of feminism as well as a feminist vocabulary are in use, but converted into a more individualist discourse that serves as a substitute for feminism. There is a shift away from emancipatory politics directed at social criticism and change to a new individualism focused on individual progress and success (1, 11–19). In Hamberg's novel Lena's situation comes across as unique, and thus as an individual problem, since the other female characters are depicted as more independent in relation to the men around them. Also, the solution to the problem of gender inequality is placed on an individual level. Lena never connects personal experiences to gendered power structures. Her husband is represented as a good guy who just needs to learn a few things, like in the following quote, where one of Lena's sisters reflects on her brother in law: "She

understands why Marie thinks he is totally disabled. Psychologically he is slightly disabled. But he doesn't know any better. Åsa suspects this. That he doesn't know any better" (Hamberg 62). Robert as an individual is clueless to understand and needs to be fixed, which is indeed what happens in the novel; when Lena leaves, he steps up and learns to become a more gender-equal man. However, Lena is the one who is responsible for changing the relationship. Although Robert is represented as a man who can be fixed, he has to be forced to change by somebody—a woman. Lena, the individual, is thus responsible for her happiness; the female protagonist has to educate her husband to become more gender equal (see also Björklund, "Mer än makor"). Hence, gender equality is viewed as something that can be achieved on an individual level, and the novel never challenges gendered power structures or argues for societal change.

Unlike Hamberg's *Brunstkalendern* Sveland's *Bitterfittan* represents gender inequality as a structural problem. As Margaretha Fahlgren (358) points out, throughout the novel gender inequality is depicted as a problem that has to be solved through societal change. But, somewhat paradoxically, the ending of the novel locates the solution to gender inequality on an individual level. The mother in *Bitterfittan*, Sara, leaves her husband and two-year-old son for a week to go on vacation to the Canary Islands, and she returns to them in the end of the novel. Like Lena, Sara misses her child and she leaves her family partly to regain her strength: "I believe I will become a better mother if I can have this week to rest" (Sveland 13). Like Lena, Sara connects leaving her family to what is in the best interest of the child and thus fulfills the expectations linked to good motherhood. But unlike Lena, Sara is aware of the different expectations on mothers and fathers, and she is upset about the fact that men's parental leave is seen "as an *outstanding achievement*," while it is taken for granted that she should stay at home with her son (Sveland 77; emphasis in original). Sara also links the gender inequality she faces in her own relationship to gendered power structures, for instance by referring to sociological research and statistics on gender inequality (Björklund, "Det måste gå"). This can be understood as a way of challenging post-feminist and individualist discourses by locating gender inequality on a structural level.

Still, Sveland's novel seems to favor individual solutions over emancipatory politics aimed at changing structures. The ending of *Bitterfittan* implies a return to status quo. Sara finds out that she is pregnant again and believes she and her husband will be better prepared and equipped to fight for gender equality this time. She returns to her family and concludes that her story has a "heteronormative . . . ending" that she is surprisingly happy with (Sveland 222). In the end Sara focuses on gender equality in her own relationship rather than on gendered power structures; for instance, Sara's husband suggests that Sara should go on a trip every time he is in more intense

working periods, because she always gets upset when he turns inward and focuses on his work (Sveland 217).⁶

Thus, in both Sveland's and Hamberg's novels the mothers return to possibly more gender-equal relationships, indicating that gender inequality is a problem that requires individual solutions. Both endings locate the novels within the individual discourses, which at least Sveland's novel seems to be critiquing. Also, since the nuclear family survives in the end, the mothers' disappearances do not challenge the hegemonic position of the heterosexual nuclear family. The novels also uphold Swedish pronatalist discourses: Lena returns home to her four children, and Sara learns that she is pregnant with her second child.

Mental health struggles: Challenging the family as a happy object

The vast majority of the mothers who leave their families in twenty-first century Swedish literature are unhappy, and many suffer from depression or other mental health problems. A handful of them attempt suicide, and most of those succeed. In some of these novels the suicidal mothers are not main characters, and their suicides are not a major part of the plot, but two of the mothers who attempt suicide are also protagonists.⁷ Some of the mothers in my material do not attempt suicide, but they still suffer from mental health struggles. The representations of these unhappy and depressed mothers correspond to social trends in contemporary Sweden. Swedish women report that they suffer from anxiety to a larger extent than Swedish men (Statistics Sweden). Research shows that men and women use about the same amount of medical leave before they have children, but after the first child is born women's use of medical leave increases significantly relative to men's (see, for instance, Angelov). The novels can be said to reflect the ill-health that Swedish women, and mothers in particular, experience. But I will argue they do more than this; the novels' representations of ill-health work as a kind of resistance. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's discussion in *The Promise of Happiness*, I will argue that the mothers who suffer from mental health problems resist Swedish family norms by refusing to see the family as a happy object and by becoming killjoys.

My primary focus of this section, Sofia Nordin's *Gå sönder, gå hel* (*Break Apart, Come Together*), consists of two different narratives (one in the past and the other in the present), which run parallel to each other but depict the

⁶Katarina Carlshamre also points out that the idea of subjectivity in Sveland's novel is grounded in male thinkers' accounts. Sara is preoccupied with her autonomy and her professional identity, thus struggling to assume a traditional male position (129–30).

⁷The protagonist mothers who attempt suicide are Ellen in Sara Stridsberg's *Happy Sally*, who succeeds, and Maria in Kristina Sandberg's *Ta itu* (2003; *Take Apart/Deal With*—the Swedish title has double meanings), who fails. Mothers who commit suicide also appear as minor characters in several novels (Larsson, *Svart stig*; Lodalen; Stridsberg, *Beckomberga*).

same woman. In the past this woman named Lena steals her twin sister's baby. She eventually ends up homeless in Stockholm, where she becomes increasingly mentally unstable. She stops taking care of herself and the baby, and in the end of the novel two volunteers from an organization working with homeless people find her in a shed, holding on to her dead baby. In the present Lena has started over; she has changed her name to Anna, and in order to control her mental instability she creates a life as simple as possible: "After taking a name I just added everything that is expected to be in a life: a home, a partner, a family, a job, friends, hobbies" (Nordin 8). In this process Anna is extremely structured; she avoids everything that can evoke memories and feelings, both negative and positive, and she chooses a kind of life that will go unnoticed. After finding a husband she becomes a housewife, and this life becomes a kind of structure that keeps her from feeling anything. Her previous mental instability is also kept in control with the aid of this structure and medication. However, when she eventually starts working she becomes friends with a woman, and their friendship evokes suppressed feelings in Anna because it reminds her of her relationship with her sister. When Anna realizes that she has started to feel too much, she decides to leave her carefully created life, including her family.

Anna as well as the other mothers who escape through mental health struggles and/or suicide, can be read in the light of Sara Ahmed's discussion of happiness and the feminist killjoy. Ahmed links happiness to family; she argues that happiness has become associated with certain life choices and objects and not others, and she sees "family" as a happy object. Ahmed also discusses the figure of the happy housewife: Historically the woman has had a duty to keep the family together, and happiness was used as an argument for keeping up the gendered division of labor. The happy housewife is supposed to generate collective happiness, and "[i]t is women's duty to keep happiness in house" (55). Instead, Ahmed connects feminism and unhappiness: The feminist is a troublemaker, and by breaking the "scripts" for how to live well (the happy family), she becomes the feminist killjoy. Important in this context is that Ahmed does not assume that happiness is necessarily a good thing; rather, it is a narrow concept, and feminism can allow women to break free from it: "Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. . . . The feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (65). Ahmed argues that feminists are often read as being unhappy, such that various situations (conflicts, violence, etc.) "are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminist are unhappy *about*" (67; emphasis in original).

The mothers who suffer from mental illness in the novels are usually unhappy *about* something. For instance, both Ellen in Sara Stridsberg's

Happy Sally and Maria in Kristina Sandberg's *Ta itu* (*Take Apart/Deal With*—the Swedish title has double meanings) are unhappy about the expectations of family life. Anna in Nordin's novel has a different approach to family life; throughout most of the narrative she produces the family as a happy object, and she does not turn into a killjoy until the end of the novel. In her struggle not to think about the past and in her striving to create a perfect life structure, Anna seeks out the plain and "normal." When she is looking for a husband on online dating sites, she deliberately avoids men with unusual names or hobbies, and she picks Anders who represents an "abundance of normality" (Nordin 20). With her structured strategies for creating a simple, plain life that does not stand out, Anna might seem cold and calculating. The narrative style contributes to representing her as slightly distanced; as a first-person narrator, Anna does not reveal much about her feelings, and her matter-of-fact tone, void of emotions, corresponds to the way she acts when organizing her life. She does reflect on how her life plan affects other people when she meets Anders: "All my calculating, sorting, my lists with criteria he had to meet. He probably dreamed about growing close, sharing thoughts, building dreams. He would never have that with me" (Nordin 21). However, Anna reaches the conclusion that everybody calculates when it comes to love—it is obvious, for instance, when reading women's magazines' advice to their readers: "You have to do this in order for him to believe that you feel like that, you have to do that in order for him to believe you feel like this" (Nordin 21).

Throughout the novel, Anna tries to fulfill a ready-made role. She does not enjoy the actual household chores and is not particularly good at performing them, but she likes the structure and likes to fit into a role that already exists, a cliché (Nordin 83–84). She deliberately creates a seemingly perfect family with a good-looking husband, two well-behaved children (a girl and a boy), a nice house and two dogs of common breeds. In Nordin's novel family is connected to structure and normality, something that helps Anna lead a life that goes unnoticed. But it is also produced as a happy object. As discussed above, Ahmed argues that happiness has become associated with certain life choices and objects, and family is one of these. Anna notices that others view her perfectly created family with envy: "I could see the envy in the gazes of some. I could also see the contempt in others'. The contempt for the all too perfect. I chose to think that it was a kind of envy, too. What was it about us that wasn't worth envying? We were happy. Yes, I think I would call it that in complete honesty: Happy" (Nordin 9–10). Here Anna describes her carefully crafted family as a desirable object linked to happiness.

By creating her perfect family and thus producing the family as a happy object, Anna seems to adhere to pronatalist and nuclear family ideals; but when she starts socializing with other people, the novel reveals the family as a happy object to be a construction. Anna is invited to a "girls' night," and in

order to fit smoothly into the group, she uses the Internet to find out how to behave—what to wear, what to bring, and what to talk about. She later observes the interaction between the other women, feels confused but tries to imitate them (Nordin 104–108). In this section Anna is an outsider who observes social practices, questions them but tries to adapt to them, and it becomes clear that these practices are governed by certain rules. The social event is represented as a kind of act, or performance, which everyone takes part in and upholds. Anna explicitly reflects on this dimension of acting at another dinner party: “Again I had the feeling that it wasn’t just me who acted myself. The only difference was that the other didn’t act with the same perfection as I did—it was possible to sense glimpses of something else, the actor who hid behind the part” (Nordin 131). This quote, which refers to the interaction between the host and the hostess, reveals family life practices to be performative acts (Butler). In the novel, the family as a happy object is produced through repeated normative acts, resting on heterosexuality. This is particularly clear in the case of Anna, who deliberately creates her family in line with normative expectations, but it also becomes clear in her surroundings, discussed above—the women’s magazines that advise women to behave in a certain way to be successful in love, the girls’ night that follows pre-established rules that Anna is able to find out about online, and the dinner party where Anna is able to perceive the dimension of acting in the interaction between a husband and wife.

When Anna eventually leaves it is because she has started to long for something more than her normative life: “I knew very well that I had to settle and be content, but I still allowed myself to feel a kind of shapeless ennui, a yearning without direction. For so long I had succeeded in shutting down, in focusing on the details. I had even been happy, a kind of happy” (Nordin 228). The creation of the family as a happy object only makes Anna “a kind of happy,” and this is not enough for her. As we have seen, the novel has revealed the family as a happy object to be a construction. At the end of the novel Anna is unable to see the link between family and happiness, and as a result she escapes. By leaving her family she kills the joy of others, the fictional characters around them. Thus, the novel suggests that the family should not necessarily be seen as the ultimate happy object. To kill joy, Ahmed argues, is to make room for something else, to open up new possibilities, new life, and this is particularly clear in Anna’s case: She longs for something more, and although there are some indications that she might create a new family,⁸ the narrative is open-ended, and we do not know what Anna decides to do.

⁸Anna regrets the fact that they do not have a tent that she can bring and thinks that next time she will choose a man who is a little out-doorsy (Nordin 229).

The reluctant mother: Failure as resistance

As briefly mentioned above, depression and other mental health struggles portrayed in this selection of texts are often related to the expectations of family life. Some of the mothers who leave their families seem to be generally ambivalent, even reluctant, about family life and, in particular, motherhood. These mothers refuse to see the family as a happy object and decide to leave instead of keeping happiness in house. There are several reluctant mothers in the body of text I studied, and in this section I will focus on two of them: Ellen in Sara Stridsberg's *Happy Sally* and Marie in Viktoria Myrén's *I en familj finns inga fiender*.⁹ I will continue to draw on Ahmed's concepts discussed in the previous section, but I will also use Jack Halberstam's argument in *The Queer Art of Failure* in order to bring out how representations of reluctant and failing mothers can be read as resistance against nuclear family norms.

Halberstam explores failure as a mode of resistance to heteronormative and capitalist discourses, which link success to reproductive maturity and wealth accumulation. Drawing on Barbara Ehrenreich's discussion of the ideology of positive thinking, linking optimism and hard work to success, which in turn makes failure a personal responsibility, Halberstam argues that failure can offer ways to critique "the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3) and might open up for other ways of living based on creativity and cooperation: "Relieved of the obligation to keep smiling through chemotherapy or bankruptcy, the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life" (4). The ideology of positive thinking is similar to the postfeminist discourse described by McRobbie in that they both emphasize individual responsibility. The novels discussed in the first section, Hamberg's *Brunstkalendern* and Sveland's *Bitterfittan*, represent the mothers as sympathetic characters who love and miss their children but have to leave them in order to come to terms with the problem of gender inequality. But, as we have seen, these novels never seriously challenge the structures they critique, and the privilege they give to individual solutions in the end locates them within individualist discourses. Moreover, the heterosexual nuclear family is left intact in both novels, which confirms its hegemonic status. Halberstam argues that "[f]amily as a concept is deployed in contemporary popular culture as well as in academic cultures to gloss a deeply reactionary understanding of human interaction; it may be the case that we must *forget* family in our theorizations of gender, sexuality, community, and politics" (71; emphasis in original). He sees forgetting family as a

⁹Other reluctant mothers are Sylvia in Sara Kadefors's *Borta bäst (Away Is Best)*, Louise and Susanne in Helena von Zweigbergk's *Sånt man bara säger (Things One Just Says)*, Tanja in Åsa Linderborg's *Mig äger ingen (Nobody Owns Me)*, Lone and Vita in Sara Stridsberg's *Beckomberga: Ode till min familj (Beckomberga: Ode to My Family)*, and four mothers in Åsa Larsson's crime fiction novels, including the protagonist Rebecka's mother (*Det blod som spillts; Svart stig; Till offer åt Molok*).

queer kind of project since “queer lives exploit some potential for a *difference in form* that lies dormant in queer collectivity . . . as a possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives” (70; emphasis in original). While Halberstam focuses on the potential of queer lives to challenge the family as concept and the strategy of forgetting, I argue that many of the representations of mothers who leave their heterosexual families disrupt heteronormativity in a similar way, through the strategy of leaving, thus rejecting heterosexual coupledness and the nuclear family. The novels discussed in this section represent reluctant mothers who fail to live up to cultural ideals of good motherhood; they do not act in the best interest of their children and seem unfit for motherhood. They also reject the nuclear family and disrupt the link between family and happiness.

Stridsberg’s *Ellen* is the focus of one of the two respective parallel narratives; the other is the historical figure Sally Bauer. Ellen is a swimmer, and she practices intensively to be able to cross the English Channel, like Bauer did in 1939. Her husband Viktor harbors another water-related dream—sailing across the Atlantic Ocean—and the two of them have a deal: “If you make it: unlimited time to swim, an apartment in the attic on Paradise Street, swimming pool in the yard. If you lose: the Atlantic journey, unlimited play time with [the children]” (Stridsberg 22). This deal pinpoints the core of the novel: how Ellen’s struggle to get time on her own interferes with her children’s needs, and how playing with her children is viewed as a kind of punishment. The narrator is Ellen’s adult daughter who remembers the summer when Ellen attempts but fails to swim across the English Channel and the sailing trip that follows. Many of the novels about mothers who leave their families are narrated by the disappearing mother herself, and if not, she is at least focalized. In *Happy Sally* the reader only has access to Ellen’s thoughts through the fourteen postcards she writes to her daughter while they are sailing along the Atlantic coast between European harbors, preparing to cross the ocean. Still, even if the reader mostly lacks access to Ellen’s mind, she is the center of the novel, since her daughter focuses on telling her mother’s story rather than her own. The daughter also refers to her mother as “you” throughout the novel, which conveys intimacy.

As an adult narrator, Ellen’s daughter returns to her childhood memories of how she and her younger brother H were constantly clinging on to their mother, preventing her freedom and independence. For instance, Ellen’s daughter describes how she and her brother would set an alarm clock to be able to sit down and watch outside the attic door in order to catch Ellen before she left for her early-morning swim practice (Stridsberg 25). They cling on to Ellen, begging her not to leave, but Ellen always finds new ways to escape, like crawling out of her shirt when her daughter holds on to her mother’s sleeves (Stridsberg 40–41). The daughter also depicts Ellen’s need to be independent and her ambivalence toward motherhood. When playing

with her children, Ellen tries to reason with them: “The worst thing with you children is that you always want to do things a hundred times. I hardly dare to suggest things because then I get stuck in them. Why are you like that, do children really have to be like that? Can’t we just do the fun thing once and not again? Please kids...” (Stridsberg 116–17; ellipsis in original). She even tells her daughter that she does not like to play with her children: “I liked to be with you, but the games bored me. I wanted us to be friends, companions. A team” (Stridsberg 120). In admitting that she does not like to play with her children, Ellen challenges the image of the good mother, who is self-sacrificing and puts her children’s needs first. Both her wish to be “partners” with her children and her struggle to reason with them about not doing things over and over again convey an unwillingness to assume the role as responsible adult and caregiver. Ellen refuses to be caring and self-sacrificing and treats her children as equals. However, the children seem to feel her evasiveness and become clingy, which in turn causes Ellen to flee from them. In line with Halberstam’s argument Ellen’s failure to meet the expectations of a good mother can be seen as resistance, in this case to a discourse that connects family life and motherhood to happiness.

The deal Ellen has with her husband contains the possibility of more freedom from family life; if she wins she will have unlimited time to swim, including a swimming pool in the backyard, and her own attic apartment in the family house. Losing means the opposite: the Atlantic journey and unlimited playtime with the children—she has to become the self-sacrificing kind of mother she strives not to be. Symptomatically, when Ellen realizes that she is not going to be able to reach the Dover coast, she grabs her son’s hand, stretched out toward her from the boat. She gives up swimming across the English Channel and at the same time surrenders to family life.

When the family embarks on their journey across the Atlantic Ocean, Ellen has limited possibilities to be on her own; her family members follow her wherever she goes. They are described as a swarm of flies around Ellen: “We are buzzing and intrusive, and as soon as you settle down somewhere another one lands in your face and there is no point in brushing us away because we always come back regardless of your efforts to shoo us away” (Stridsberg 118). The image of Ellen’s family as a swarm of flies, impossible to get away from, represents her as trapped, which corresponds to Ellen’s situation; she is stuck on a boat in the Atlantic Ocean with her family. Her only escape is suicide, and one morning when the children wake up Ellen is gone. Thus, for Ellen suicide is a better alternative than being forced to lead family life.

The narrative of Sally Bauer functions as a contrast to Ellen’s story. Sally does not have children; she is disgusted by mothers—she sees them as swollen, idle beings with no aims in life—and she swears she will never let

herself be claimed by another human being like that (Stridsberg 186). She gets pregnant at one point but goes through an illegal abortion; when swimming while pregnant she feels like the fetus is poisoning her from inside (Stridsberg 100). In the end of the novel we learn that Sally eventually gets married and has a son, but when she prepared to cross the English Channel, being a mother was just not an option. She could not have any emotional bonds that distracted her; she even distances herself from the woman who is the love of her life, Marguerite. This causes their relationship to end, but Sally does not have any regrets: “I have lost the most valuable thing I have ever owned, my precious Marguerite, but still I don’t have any regrets. I would choose the Channel over and over again if someone gave me the chance to turn back time” (Stridsberg 203).

While Sally can choose to cut the emotional bonds to people who are close to her and instead focus on the channel, Ellen does not seem to have the same choice. Even if she constantly struggles to get time on her own, mostly to swim, she has responsibilities as a mother. In contrast to Sally, who could abort the fetus that holds her back, Ellen cannot get rid of her children; she can only eliminate herself. Even before her suicide Ellen’s behavior has challenged the idea of family as a happy object—her constant struggle to get time on her own, away from her family, contrasts with the expectation that she should convene around happiness. But through her suicide she becomes the ultimate killjoy; she kills joy not only for others but also for herself. By choosing death over family life, Ellen effectively dethrones the idea of family as a happy object, both for herself and her family members. In this novel, motherhood is dangerous, even lethal.

Ellen’s longing for independence causes her to opt out of family life and thus she actively chooses to become a failing mother. Marie in Myrén’s *I en familj finns inga fiender*, whose husband was quoted in the very beginning of this article, struggles but fails to meet the expectations of motherhood. Her failure, like that of Ellen’s, can be seen as resistance against family norms. Marie leaves her husband and two young children and goes to a country house she recently inherited from her grandmother in order to rest, but she also has to deal with a visit from her own mother, with whom she has a complicated relationship. This novel emphasizes how family life is the cause of Marie’s depression and anxiety. She finds it difficult to be alone with her children, and she struggles to get through the day when her husband leaves in the morning: “Nine hours until he got home and I had rules I wouldn’t break: Don’t stand by the window before five o’clock, don’t call more than three times during the day, four if it was a crisis. Don’t look at the clock, not again” (Myrén 79–80). In this novel too, the imagery stresses the connection between family life and danger by referring to suffocation: “Tiny, tiny hands around my neck, hundreds of hands around my neck and I can’t breathe” (Myrén 56).

While family life is represented in Myrén's novel as the cause of Marie's depression, on the face of it the novel does not make clear if it is sourced in the individual or in gendered power structures.¹⁰ Compared to the mothers discussed in the first section on gender inequality, Marie is represented as flawed to a certain extent. For instance, she is depicted as unfit for motherhood and incapable of dealing with her children, while her husband Johan is a caring father. He never raises his voice, and when Marie locks herself into the bathroom, he comes home and takes care of the children who are crying outside of the locked door and tells them: "It's okay, daddy is home now" (Myrén 47). The fact that Johan is able to handle the children makes Marie come across as more fragile, and he also treats her as if she is weaker. Moreover, it is indicated that there might be a genetic dimension to her depression; she finds old doctors' charts in the attic, which show that her grandmother has been admitted to a hospital for depression, and Marie's mother indicates that madness runs in the family and that Marie might have inherited her emotional instability (Myrén 94–95). Marie's own mother was also ambivalent about being a mother; she would sometimes leave the house when she got tired of her children, even if they were too small to be left on their own (Myrén 75), and she even tells Marie that she did not want to have children in the first place: "I didn't want you; your father was nagging and when I eventually had you, it didn't matter anyway. We might as well have another one. It was already too late" (Myrén 219). The fact that Marie grew up with a mother who did not want her could indicate that she was "psychologically damaged" in some way, explaining her failure as a mother. Both Johan and Marie's mother keep indicating that Marie's failure as a mother is due to her depression, which could have genetic causes or other origins, but this explanation nevertheless places the individual in focus; she is flawed in one way or another.

But the novel also shows resistance to individual explanations. When Marie's mother accuses her of being selfish for leaving Johan with the children, Marie thinks she is wrong; she has forgotten how many times Johan has left her alone with the children when traveling abroad for work. Also, the novel indicates that Marie spends more time with the children than Johan, who leaves for work every morning. Her life seems to be structured around conventional gendered divisions, where she is the parent with primary responsibility for the children, confined to the private sphere, while her husband has the possibility to escape to the public sphere. This opens up for seeing Marie's depression as caused by external conditions, which moves the responsibility from the individual to gendered power structures.

Moreover, the novel indicates that the nuclear family itself is dysfunctional, and Marie's failure to be part of it can be seen as a critique of the

¹⁰For an analysis of individuals versus structures in Myrén's novel, see Björklund, "Att lämna."

hegemonic status of motherhood and the nuclear family. Marie mostly relates to family life as a performance and feels like a bad parent when comparing herself to other parents. But in a few passages she sees her chaotic family life in the light of family life in general. For instance, she wonders whether other parents feel the same way as she does, thinking that she cannot be the only one (Myrén 140). Sometimes on weekends Marie and Johan take their children to visit other families with “another parent who sat waiting, hoping that someone or something would push a bit of distraction into that greyish, muddy nuclear family vacuum” (Myrén 82). Also, the family takes center stage in the title of the novel, which states that there are no enemies in a family—a statement that ironically contradicts the novel’s many representations of conflicts in the family. These passages suggest that not only Marie and Johan suffer under the pressure of the nuclear family norm, according to which the nuclear family is seen as self-sufficient; all family members are supposed to live in harmony, but as the novel clearly demonstrates, this is not the case, and the idea of the nuclear family as self-sufficient keeps it in isolation, a “nuclear family vacuum.”

As reluctant and failing mothers, Stridsberg’s Ellen and Myrén’s Marie offer a more radical critique of society than the sympathetic mothers, discussed in the first section, who return to their families and adapt to individualist discourses. Ellen commits suicide and kills joy, not only for her family, but also for herself. Marie explicitly asks herself whether motherhood is really for everyone and reaches the conclusion that it is probably not; not everyone should become a mother (Myrén 186). She also reflects on whether it is an option to leave one’s own children, not just temporarily, but for good, as an active choice (Myrén 215). By refusing to take responsibility for the happiness of their families, the failing mothers resist the discourses that frame success as a personal responsibility. Halberstam argues that few queer kinship scholars call for a rejection of the family “as *the* form of social organization par excellence” (72; emphasis in original). As discussed above, he sees forgetting as a strategy to challenge the hegemonic status of the family in order to be able start from a new place. For instance, Dory’s forgetfulness in *Finding Nemo* (2003) challenges the hegemonic status of the nuclear family; her short-term memory loss prevents her from becoming Nemo’s new mother and Marlin’s new wife since she cannot remember her relation to either one of them (80). Ellen and Marie disrupt the nuclear family, not by forgetting it, but by leaving and failing to be part of it. When the nuclear family does not survive in these novels, they open up to other ways of organizing life and close relations. Similar to forgetting, failing as mothers and leaving the family can thus be seen as a rejection of the family as the hegemonic form of social organization, which allows us to start from a new place.

Conclusion: Challenging Swedish pronatalism

As stated in the introduction, the Swedish welfare state has promoted a progressive family and gender equality politics, which has led to relatively high birth rates, and research shows that the family has gained a stronger position in Sweden in recent years. Helen Peterson touches on the link between progressive family politics and pronatalism when she discusses interviews with Swedish child-free women. These women do not see career as a reason for choosing not to have children, and Peterson connects this tendency to the child-friendly discourse in the Nordic societies: “In a child-friendly society the norm prescribes that rather than having to choose between career and children, women should be able to combine a professional career with the role of being parent” (290). Drawing on Peterson I would like to suggest that the pronatalism in Sweden is in fact related to its child-friendliness. Not only is it impossible to see career as a reason for not having children; there is no excuse for not having children in a child-oriented society where the welfare state is doing everything to facilitate a balance for parents. The pronatalism is further reinforced as groups who were previously excluded have received reproductive rights; as Ulrika Dahl points out, the newly gained right to form families and the possibilities that come with new reproduction technologies have led to pronatalist pressure even within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer contexts (155–56).¹¹

Previous research suggests that pronatalism affects men and women differently; in Swedish and Norwegian media, men are represented as relatively unaffected by the decision not to have children, while when portraying women who have chosen not to become mothers, newspapers focus on how they are questioned: other people see them as selfish or not feminine enough. Media also gives privilege to women’s stories about choosing to be child-free, and men are usually portrayed only when interviewed together with their partners (Peterson and Fjell). The difference between how child-free men and women are represented can be understood in the light of the supposed connection between ideal or normative femininity and motherhood (Peterson 266; see also DiQuinzio xiii). The pressure on women to become mothers can also be related to the idea of women’s citizenship as linked to their role as mothers—to provide the nation with future workers (Engwall and Peterson 17; Peterson and Fjell 116). The novels pinpoint the difficult position being unhappy about motherhood and family life in a child-oriented society through the representations of the mothers who leave their families.

However, the mothers are unhappy for different reasons. The mothers discussed in the first section—Hamberg’s Lena and Sveland’s Sara—are unhappy about the lack of gender equality in their relationships. Lena and

¹¹The strong pronatalism in Sweden is also discussed by several of the authors in an anthology, where twelve Swedish women write about their choice not to have children (Adolfsson).

Sara take responsibility for changing their husbands and return to seemingly more gender-equal relationships, but these novels focus on the individual's responsibility to initiate change and never challenge gendered power structures. They also restore the nuclear family in the end and adapt to pronatalist discourses: Lena returns to her four children, and Sara returns pregnant with her second child. The novels discussed in the second and third sections take a more critical stance to the nuclear family. Nordin's novel represents the nuclear family as something that has to be upheld through performative acts, thus revealing it as a fragile construction that could easily fall apart. Stridsberg's and Myrén's novels represent the nuclear family as a problem and even as what causes the mothers to leave; they are reluctant about motherhood, and their failure to be part of family life can be seen as resistance. Nordin's Anna, Stridsberg's Ellen, and Myrén's Marie disrupt the link between family and happiness, thus challenging both the hegemonic position of the nuclear family and pronatalist discourses.¹² In some of the novels, the connection between family and happiness is even ironically emphasized through the names of the locations where the families live: Lena in Hamberg's novel lives in Braby (Good Village), and Stridsberg's Ellen lives on Paradisgatan (Paradise Street). Lena returns to her family, and the happy ending restores the link between family and happiness. But the representations of her family life prior to her leaving are anything but happy. Ellen is represented as unhappy about motherhood, and her suicide efficiently dethrones the family as a happy object.

While Hamberg's and Sveland's novels reinstate the family as a happy object in the end, the other novels depict mothers who refuse to see the family as a happy object, "to meet up over happiness" as Ahmed (65) expresses it, and thus they kill the joy for others. I would argue that they kill joy also for the reader; the idea of the family as a happy object is so normative that we cannot accept mothers who refuse to be mothers. But if we read them carefully we realize that Anna, Ellen, and Marie, like Ahmed's feminist killjoy, are unhappy about particular things: motherhood and family life. By failing to be good mothers and by leaving their families, these mothers challenge both the Swedish discourse of mandatory motherhood for women and the hegemonic status of the Swedish nuclear family. The novels also critique individualist discourses, which keep the nuclear family in isolation and threaten the health and even the lives of mothers. The mothers

¹²However, Ahmed acknowledges how the link between family and happiness looks different in contexts that are not white and middle class. She points out that white feminist consciousness novels "tend to involve freedom-from-family and its narrow scripts of duty and obligation" while black feminist consciousness novels "may involve freedom-to-family, as family is what is lost through unfolding histories of displacement and dispossession" (86). The mothers who leave their families in Swedish novels can be read as primarily white and middle class, and the novels thus depict this particular context. These mothers are privileged enough to be able to pursue "freedom-from-family," and they usually have resources to do so—they have country houses to go to or can afford trips abroad.

who commit suicide are extreme cases of the killjoy who refuses to meet up over happiness. Both Ahmed and Halberstam argue that leaving happiness and embracing failure not only challenge normative ways of life; they also open up for new possibilities. Ahmed talks about “leav[ing] happiness for life” and “becom[ing] alive to possibility” (78), and Halberstam points out how failure “offer[s] more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). Most of the novels discussed here do not present any alternatives to the nuclear family and mandatory motherhood, but by refusing to see the family as a happy object and by embracing failure, the mothers open up for something else: new ways of being in the world.

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