

*February 20, 2019*

Dear Mr. Knausgaard,

My friend Lisa told me the other day, when we were standing in the children's section of the bookstore she co-owns, that she'd read in a recent interview that you've stopped smoking. I was so relieved to hear this I actually felt a weight lift off me. I guess it was visible because Lisa laughed and gave my shoulder a nudge. Later that same day, another friend, who lives in London and who knows all the local literary gossip, informed me that you've moved to that city from Sweden and have fathered yet another child (your fifth) with your newest wife or lover, whichever. I hope your latest domestic arrangement finds you happy, but as an avid reader of your work, I confess I find it hard to digest these abstracted bits and pieces of your personal life. In fact all the hoopla surrounding your extra-literary activities (hoopla many of my more bookish friends feel I need to know) is for me a tempting but ultimately unwelcome distraction. I

prefer to read your work without the fluorescent glare of your public persona shining over it. God knows it's hard enough to keep you, the author, Karl Ove Knausgaard, separate from you, Karl Ove Knausgaard, the narrator and protagonist of *My Struggle*. And not just because you've put every last obstacle in the way of the reader who seeks such a division, but because your face, pleasant as it may be, is plastered all over the FSG paperback editions of *My Struggle*, at least as they've appeared here in the U.S. over the past several years. How annoying I find those covers, which for a while were so boldly displayed in nearly every bookstore I ventured into. Even long before I cracked the spine of Book 1, your rugged, vaguely Christ-like features—long, graying hair, soulful eyes, scraggly beard, dramatic cheekbones—actively repelled me from countless display cases. *Who is that glowering man?* I wondered. *What kind of a writer would allow himself to glower so hammily? Isn't glowering, outside of the most popular art forms (cinema, pop music) outdated, even tacky?* But your public persona clearly thrives on old-school tropes like glowering. Indeed, your entire physical person appears to fulfill every last physiognomic stereotype of the macho male genius. You're a modern day Hemingway. A Norwegian Nabokov. A

Bolaño with bone structure. A Sebald with sex appeal. Of course, it's not your fault you look the way you do, but at the same time you are the one regularly posing for all kinds of photos, and those tropes—which demand some cultivation—emanate from you in these photos like an aura of high-voltage static, a fact FSG knew perfectly well when they decided to stick your face on the covers of the books that comprise *My Struggle*, which they pumped out just as fast as humanly possible—though when all was said and done, the pace of things wasn't really *that* fast given the gargantuan task you'd set your translators. What a monster you've written. 3,600 pages! And here again, the question of ego arises, simply by way of page count.

...continued (2 p.m.)

It's incredibly blustery here today. The wind rises and subsides in audible crescendos and decrescendos. Pine cones and shriveled seed pods fly off the bare branches of the trees in our yard and ping against our roof before scattering noisily down its slope. The sky is no color. It's a little frightening. The entire building seizes up in the strongest of the winds, and at these moments the architecture surrounding me feels like an extension of

my own body. It's as if my own spine were at the center of it all. Just a few minutes ago, the electric company called with recorded tips for what to do in case we're hit by one of the many power outages affecting the area, but I hung up before it finished. I'm not sure why.

I'm home alone, as is usually the case during my son's school hours. His school happens to be right next door, which is nice because on less forbidding days I can often hear him running around outside, shouting to his friends during gym class and recess. The sound of Jonah's voice floating over the chain-link fence that separates our yard from the school yard makes me incredibly happy even though, every time I catch it, I mourn the day I no longer will, because I'm built that way, with nostalgia at my core, which is a bad way to be built. Nostalgia, after all, is just a sepia-tinged indulgence. And pre-emptive nostalgia is even worse: a masochistic fantasy—one you, yourself, might call “feminine,” as you call so many things you deem mild, weak, or false. But I don't mean to put you on the defensive. I see that, already, I've accused you, only quasi-obliquely, of being hammy, macho, egotistical, and, just now, misogynistic. Honestly, it's not my intent to accuse of you anything. I only want to hash out my experience of reading *My Struggle*

with you, because it was just that—an experience, one that changed some important things in my own life and mind. For instance the act of reading is, for me, different now than it was before I read *My Struggle*. So is writing. Beyond that, how I think about life itself has changed; and by life I mean not only my life, and not only human life or social life, but *all* biological activity, which, as you remind your readers again and again, crawls and seeps and races and squiggles and flows over and in and through the cracks and crevices of everything that does not live but simply exists: material reality, in short. In fact, this aspect of your work—your soft-spoken but relentless metaphysics, a metaphysics obsessed with the *inner* and the *outer*, with the *living* and the *non-living*, with the *open* and the *closed*—is one of the more important gifts I've received from reading *My Struggle*. It's like a puzzle I didn't have before. I play with it all the time.

There are other things I received from reading those books, but they are harder for me to put my finger on.

...continued (February 21)

What did I do all day? Straightened the house. Sent a few emails. Some yoga. It doesn't add up.

I'm supposed to be at a music lesson with my son right now (we take flute class together), but I made the excuse of my vertigo, which really has been bad today, and bowed out. Jonah walked to the lesson alone. He's twelve. It's fine. But I still get nervous. James, my husband, will pick him up at six. In the meantime, here I sit, in front of my laptop at the dining room table with a small plastic tub of Marcona almonds at one elbow and a glass of bourbon at the other. Ah, the guilty pleasures. The smaller they are, the sweeter they are, don't you think? Like reading—the guiltiest of all!

“For some perverts the sentence is a *body*.”

—ROLAND BARTHES

Here's my thought: I'm going to tell you, as best I can, the story of how I read *My Struggle*. It's a simple story, but it was difficult for me. Not surprisingly, it's a story that begins in a bookstore. Lisa's.

Lisa co-owns and manages the Brookline Booksmith, just a few blocks from our apartment. But her job is much more than a job to her, it's a kind of calling. Books are her obsession, her religion. I'd go so far as to say that Lisa is a kind of high priestess of reading. She has often described to me, for instance,

the beauty of those hours before the store opens, before any employees show up, between five and seven a.m., when she wanders the aisles, alone with the stock. “It’s a form of prayer,” she once said: shelving new books and re-shelving old ones that have been misplaced, climbing and descending the many hanging ladders in order to rotate the stock so that the better-selling titles have prime real estate, right at eye level, and the less popular ones go higher up or lower down. Your books are bam in the middle. Mine are either very high or very low.

I often visit the Booksmith—sometimes to talk with Lisa, sometimes, obviously, to buy books, occasionally to pick up a last-minute present (they maintain a pragmatically large gift section). One day, about two years ago, on my way to the pharmacy, I popped in to say a quick hello. When I found Lisa busy with a customer—a white, middle-aged woman in a camel hair coat—I perused the table with the sign over it that says “Books We Love.” As I thumbed through one of the newer releases, I overheard Lisa telling the woman in the coat, “These books will change your life. In a good way,” and turned to find her pressing the first three volumes of *My Struggle* into the woman’s hands. The customer was clearly hesitant. Maybe she didn’t

want to spend so much money on three books at once, when of course there was no guarantee she'd like even the first one. Or maybe she didn't want to make such a huge time commitment. Books 1–3 alone, after all, clock in at nearly 1,500 pages. Then again, maybe she didn't quite trust Lisa. The thought did occur to me. Lisa has slightly wild green eyes. They glitter. "Just buy Book 1, then," she said. "When you're done you can come back and buy Book 2. It will be your reward."

Lisa's one of the best readers I know, so I was intrigued by her assertion that *My Struggle* could change a person's life in a *good* way. Which is why, a couple of minutes later, I found myself coughing up sixteen dollars and change for Book 1, despite my annoyance at the photo on its cover.

I began reading that very afternoon, and even now I distinctly remember two things from that early encounter. The first is this: I noticed an intense atmospheric shift on page 25, when, following three asterisks (which themselves follow an occasionally florid introductory passage about the physical characteristics of the heart and the fate of the human body after death), you begin writing about yourself sitting at your desk, crying perhaps (one eye is wet, the skin beneath it "dimly reflects a little light" in a window).

In this passage you inform the reader—with all the jollity of a man giving instructions to an engraver for his own headstone—of the precise date and time, your name, your birth year and month, your current age (thirty-nine), as well as the fact that you have three children and are on your second marriage. It goes on for a while in this vein, but what I remember most clearly is how those first few autobiographical sentences, so simple and factual, arrested me completely. It was as if my inner barometer had suddenly plummeted. If you had been speaking to me in person, I would have leaned in. But of course you weren't. The second thing I remember is how boring I found what followed—a couple hundred pages detailing a tedious teenage escapade of yours involving beer and a New Year's Eve party. It was the whole hiding-the-beer-in-the-snow thing that made me put down the book. I forgot about it for a while.

And yet something of those early pages stayed with me. So much so that when I had the opportunity to present on a panel at a writers' conference in Iceland in May of 2017, but was undecided about whether or not I should go (time, money, social anxiety), the fact that you were giving the keynote turned out to be a significant item in the “pro” column. Though really it was

the draw of Iceland itself that convinced my husband and me to buy five tickets to Reykjavik. Everyone was going: James, both our kids, and—in a somewhat unexpected turn of events—my father.

Your father, of course, is a central figure in *My Struggle*: an intimidating man, tall, charismatic, and cruel, who projects onto you, his youngest child, relentless accusations of idiocy and effeminacy. According to your depiction, he seemed incapable of not tormenting you, even though, on some level, every instance of his small-scale sadism—chiseled and merciless and focused on minutiae as meaningless as a missing sock—seemed to cause him as much emotional anguish as it did you. It's the death of this fragile yet brutal man that forms the untouchable axis around which all six volumes of *My Struggle* orbit. As we learn over the course of Book 1, your father died of a heart attack that occurred while he was drunk and installed in an armchair in front of the television in his mother's living room, surrounded by empty vodka bottles scattered all over the floor. But, as you explain, there's also the possibility that he didn't actually die *in* the armchair, only near it. Yes, it could have been that your father's body fell out of the armchair at some point *before* the actual moment of death. Or it could have fallen out of the chair *after* his death. On