

When Caregiving Becomes Desperate

Subjectivity, responsibility, and ethics in contemporary mother-daughter narratives of care

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*To be a caregiver while also being next of kin is emotionally charged. This article discusses narratives of care that goes beyond what Amelia DeFalco calls “caregiving at the limit”, i.e. care necessary for basic survival. In these narratives of what we call desperate care, not only is life at stake, but the care is anxious and urgent, partly done against the will of the care recipient, and the caregiver is exposed and vulnerable. To explore the concept of desperate care we analyze two contemporary Swedish narratives, in different media and from different perspectives. Marie Tillman’s graphic novel *En trasig historia* (2020) depicts a young girl, Mia, trying to care for a mentally ill and unpredictable mother. Sara Gordan’s prose work *Natten* (2022), tells the story of a mother who tries to prevent an unruly adolescent daughter from mismanaging her diabetes. A fundamental similarity between the works is how desperate care shapes the identity of the caregiver: their subjectivities become tied up in an intense, dyadic dynamic and highly calibrated towards and dependent*

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on the care recipient. Through these works, the article explores the narration and practices of desperate care, discussing the subjectivity, responsibility, and hyper attentiveness of desperate caregivers, as well as their defeats, when the dyadic dynamic is abandoned as the caregiver turns to institutions for help. The article also discusses the ethics of narrating desperate care: the ethical challenges, as well as how the narration can be regarded as an ethical care practice in itself.

Introduction

To be a caregiver while also being next of kin is emotionally charged in many ways. Close family ties both give meaning to and complicate the caregiving, and this is as true in real life as in caregiving narratives. In this article, we will discuss narratives that not only depict what Amelia DeFalco calls “caregiving at the limit”, performances of care necessary for basic survival (DeFalco 2016: 53), but narratives that go one step further. In these, not only is life perceived as being at stake, but the care is partly done against the will of the care recipient. The modus of care is urgent and anxious, and the caregiver exposed and vulnerable. These are stories of care fraught with complications – fear, dependency, control and loss of control, and difficulties in keeping up boundaries between caregiver and care recipient. We will here, through an analysis of two contemporary Swedish narratives of care, Marie Tillman’s graphic novel *En trasig historia* (“A broken story”, 2020) and Sara Gordan’s prose work *Natten* (“The Night”, 2022), propose the term *desperate care*. In this care, both the frenzy and the despondence of desperation are crucial features, and our analysis of the works aims to delineate important building blocks of the practices of desperate care and prominent traits of how it is narrated.

The two works focus on the relationship between mother and daughter, but in different media and from different perspectives. Tillman depicts the story of a young girl, Mia, trying to care for, but also eventually emancipate herself from, her mentally ill and unpredictable mother. Gordan tells the story of a mother who desperately tries to save an unruly adolescent daughter and prevent her from mismanaging her diabetes. We read these narratives both as works of art – carefully constructed, aesthetic designs – and as representational – life-like portrayals where the reality of care can be depicted and examined in all its messy and relational complexity. The two are “next of kin”-stories where care becomes a necessity, and where one part of a close-knit mother-daughter dyad attempts to take responsibility for the other. In these narratives, the caregivers have a notably strong focus on the other, which also deeply affects their self-care and their sense

of self. By comparing one story where a mother acts as a desperate caregiver for her daughter and one where a young daughter is forced to assume a responsibility beyond her years and attempt to care for her mother, we want to discuss the narration and practices of desperate care, with a primary focus on subjectivity, responsibility, and ethics.¹

Our analysis is situated within a hermeneutic paradigm. The methodology consists of a close reading and a comparative analysis, where we read and re-read the narratives with an emphasis on similarities and recurring narrative patterns. In the analysis of Tillman's work, there is further a focus not only on the verbal elements but on the medium-specific narrative strategies of the graphic novel: visual style and metaphors as well as the dimension of spatio-topia – the grid structure and layout of the panels (Groensteen 2007). In our analysis, the concept of desperate care is thus both extracted, constructed and explored through the narratives, in a dialectical movement between the primary material and theoretical discussions. Taking our inspiration from DeFalco's discussion on caregiving at the limit and her use of narratives, we want to further this aspect of care research, as well as the growing and multifaceted interdisciplinary research at the intersection between health, medicine and culture.²

Narrating desperate care: Mother-daughter auto/biographies in different media

Marie Tillman (b. 1982) is a graphic artist and social anthropologist who has published four graphic novels, *En trasig historia* being her second.³ Her style is expressive and characterized by a dark humor, and reoccurring themes include mental illness and dysfunctional relationships. With *En trasig historia*, she contributes to one of the strong themes in Swedish graphic memoirs, depicting

1. The fact that the stories explore relationships between mother and daughter could also invite a more extensive discussion on gender and care, and also on aspects of class and race, since dependency work, that is paid or unpaid labor to care for "persons who are dependent on an other in order to meet essential needs", is most often "carried out by women, and not infrequently by women (and sometimes men) who are marginalized by virtue of race and class" (Feder & Kittay 2002: 2).

2. At this intersection many fields meet and overlap, such as medical and health humanities, narrative medicine and graphic medicine.

3. Tillman's other published works are *Tänk positivt annars kan du dö* (2018), *Fråga livscoachen* (2021), *Familjen fågel – Först är det roligt* (2022) and *Ångest för alla* (2022, together with Sara Ringarp). She was also a regular cartoonist with *Livscoachen* in the newspaper *Metro* 2016–2019.

mental illness.⁴ Tillman's story gives a daughter's perspective on attempting to care for – and keep alive – a mother who suffers from symptoms associated with bipolar disorder: intense mood swings, impulsive behavior, excessive shopping and substance abuse. The mother-daughter relationship is unpredictable and isolated: only a few other characters show up on the pages. There is no one else in the family. Sara Gordan (b. 1972) is an author and translator who had published three novels before *Natten*, all playfully making use of intertextual references to other authors.⁵ *Natten* became her public breakthrough and won her two national literary prizes.⁶ It depicts a mother's desperate attempts to care for a teenage daughter whose adolescent unruliness risks becoming life threatening due to the daughter's diabetes. In this story, many people are present: siblings and half-siblings, father and stepfather, grandparents and friends, and it also includes several other illness stories, forming a whole family history of illnesses. Despite this, the other people and events are consistently relegated to the background as the story primarily focuses on the mother-daughter relationship.

Regarding genre, these narratives are autobiographically inspired. The autobiographical stance is present but also complicated. Tillman's work is not explicitly framed as either autobiographical or fictional on the physical book, even though the genre "graphic novel" suggests a degree of fictionality.⁷ The name of the protagonist is Mia (a common nickname for Marie), and the themes, as well as the drawing and lettering style (hand drawn, black and white, raw lines) are all genre traits associated with the graphic memoir.⁸ On her blog, Tillman has also

4. Mental illness is a common theme and part of a genre tradition in graphic memoirs in Sweden. When Nina Ernst 2017 mapped the genre in a Swedish context, she found the theme present in over a third of the works. Ernst 2017: 83. As discussed below, Tillman's work is not labeled as such but has a lot of common ground with the genre of the graphic memoir; hence it is relevant to relate to that context.

5. Gordan translates from French to Swedish, notable authors including Hélène Cixous and Michel Houellebecq. After her debut *En barnberättelse* (2006), she has also published *Uppställning med albatross* (2009) and *Martin Andersson. Ett skuggspel* (2013).

6. In 2022, Gordan received two prestigious literary prizes, from the national newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* and the literary magazine *Tidningen Vi*.

7. The text on the back cover does not mention the name of the protagonist and seems almost deliberately vague: "*En trasig historia* is a graphic novel about growing up with a parent lacking boundaries". Swedish original: "*En trasig historia* är en serieroman om att växa upp med en gränslös förälder". All translations from Swedish are done by the authors of the article.

8. 8. About the genre traits of the graphic memoir see El Refaie 2012; Ernst 2017; Horstkotte & Pedri 2022: 60.

confirmed the autobiographical background (Tillman 2021b).⁹ Gordan's work is categorized as a novel, but both the phrasing of the back cover text and several interviews emphasize the lived experience behind the narrative. She explicitly thematizes the challenges of autobiographical writing, pointing out more than once that the story, from the daughter's perspective, probably would read completely differently. She also comments that memory is fragile, and that she deliberately has prioritized the perspective of the worried mother and the subjective truth: "As an author I have tried to be truthful to her, she who tried to hold everything in her hands" (Gordan 2022: 176).¹⁰

For us, the importance here is that these works can be conceptualized as what G. Thomas Couser calls *auto/biographies*, i.e. stories whose focus is plural rather than singular, and "oscillate between biography and autobiography" (Couser 2004: 56). At first glance, the focus of the story is the family member portrayed, but the relation between author and family member is "so intimate that the author-narrator also comes under scrutiny" (Couser 2004: 56). The writing of the self and of the other is thus intertwined and almost impossible to separate, making the relationship the real center of the stories.¹¹ This kind of relationality is, as Paul John Eakin reminds us, a part of all autobiographical writing since all identity is relational (Eakin 1998: 63), but Couser's distinction is helpful to distinguish a kind of narrative that explicitly focuses on this relational aspect. The auto/biographical stance in these two works is important to account for when discussing the possibility of reconciliation and the ethical dimensions of the narratives, and both the narration and imagery underscore the messy auto/biographical relationality and the desperation of the caregiving in the two works.

The title *En trasig historia* includes the word "broken", which can be interpreted both in relation to a complicated childhood and to the fragmented construction of the storytelling. The graphic novel presents short scenes from the childhood and adolescence of Mia. In a blogpost on her website, Tillman references how trauma makes it impossible for the subject to experience her life story as a coherent, linear chronology – bringing the theme and the structure of the story together (Tillman 2020b). The bulk of *En trasig historia* consists of episodic chapters spanning from

9. The reception also highlighted the lived experience of the narrative as "partly autobiographical" ("den delvis självbiografiska boken") (Lundgren 2020).

10. Swedish original: "Jag har som författare försökt vara ärlig mot henne, hon som försökte hålla allt i sina händer."

11. Cf. Nesby commenting that in curoographies, her term for caregiving narratives written by next of kin, the next of kin story can be seen as a variation of the care recipients's story, with the care recipient dominating the narrative relationship. Nesby 2023: 227.

early childhood to when Mia, now a young adult, has moved out. Even while trying to emancipate herself, she continues to care for her mother to the point where the situation escalates, and Mia is forced to alert the authorities.

The fragmented episodes are preceded by a prologue, a short story of a laboratory rat that serves as a frame of interpretation for Mia's childhood. A narrator states that when laboratory rats do not know if they will receive food or an electric shock when they press a specific button, they stop trying and instead starve themselves to death. The image of the rat reappears in a later episode, as a framed canvas in their home. This visual braiding of the frames remind us as readers of the prologue.¹² Functioning as a structuring metaphor in the work, the rat emphasizes Mia's vulnerability and subjection to unpredictability, which is opposed to the expectation of the parent as a guarantor of safety and stability. The desperation in the narrative lies not only in the mode of care, but also in the uncertainty and the depletion of trust.

The focus of the story is Mia's mother. Her face is drawn in detail, most notably on the cover, where she is completely in focus (see fig. 1). The degree of realism continuously changes, depending on the mother's mood and illness. As her illness progresses, she becomes more out of focus and in a state of dissolution, which is especially noticeable in the drawing of her eyes (see fig. 2). These deviations from what James Phelan calls "the mimetic norm" or "baseline" in graphic narration underscore that we share Mia's perspective (Phelan 2023: 141–142).¹³ The images foreground her experience of the mother rather than realistically portraying the outer reality.

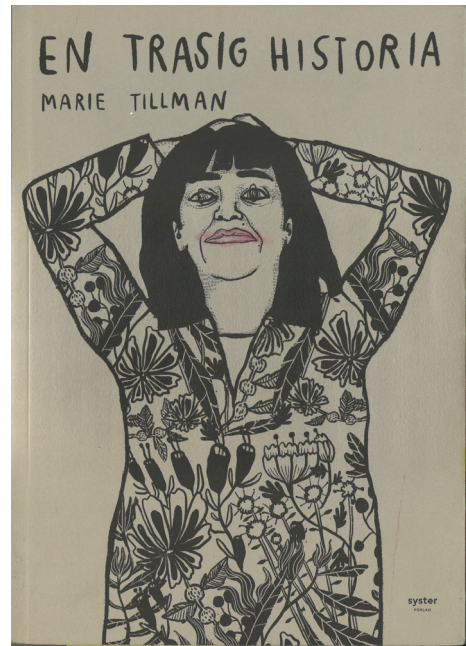


Figure 1. Mia's mother depicted on the cover of *En trasig historia*. This and all successive illustrations come from *En trasig historia*, © Marie Tillman 2020. All images are reproduced with the permission of the artist.

12. Braiding is a term from comics studies, where separate frames are linked to each other through different means, for instance by the repetition of a motif, see Groensten 2007: 145–158.

13. Cf. Horstkotte & Pedri 2022: 60–61, on how shifts in style can work as focalization and make the reader adopt a particular perspective.



Figure 2. Mia's mother in a dissolved state (Tillman 2020: 186).

As a contrast to the way the mother is portrayed with singularity and expressiveness, Mia herself is throughout depicted as not fully formed, which stresses how there is not enough space for her in the relationship. The twisted arms and the almost invisible hands encourage associations to mutilation, a graphic trope which Nina Ernst shows can be used to indicate an instability of the self and a struggle with control (Ernst 2017: 107). The small mouth can be read as symbolizing her lack of voice and inability to speak up for herself. Throughout the story, Mia is drawn with small facial features and expressions, often seemingly genderless (see fig. 3). She is graphically stripped of individuality, and as the years in the story pass, she hardly changes. All individuality is placed in the drawings of the mother, while the child depicted could be any child. The portrayal emphasizes how Mia's development and subjectivity is impeded by caring for the mother.¹⁴



Figure 3. Mia is drawn with small facial features and expressions, graphically stripped of individuality (Tillman 2020: 136).

Whereas Tillman's fragmented graphic novel has an almost invisible narrator, *Natten* is a prose work consisting of short chapters written in second person, where the mother addresses her beloved and rebellious

14. Cf. Horskotte & Pedri 2022: 81–83, on how the graphic memoir is especially apt to portray the formation of subjectivity as social and identity as processual and interrelational.

daughter as “you”. The narration starts in the present tense and tells a coherent story, covering the time of less than a year while the daughter is a teenager. During this time, the daughter repeatedly runs away from home, the mother looks for her, and various care institutions are called upon for help. When that does not work, the daughter is sent off to two different institutions and is later allowed to return home. The present time is interlaced with pro- and analepses which cover a longer period, going back to the point when the narrator first became a mother, recounting how the family situation has changed over the years, and finally hinting at the peace and community that will come after the difficult time of adolescence. The narrator’s intimate address in second person creates a form similar to a letter, which emphasizes communication and community, and the rhythm of the narration, where the long sentences only separate their clauses with commas, captures the flow and insistence – and often desperation – of the thoughts.

The focus on relationships is emphasized by the fact that no one is given a name in the story – not only “I” and “you” are nameless, but the others are designated by how they relate to the daughter (“your brother”) or the narrator (“the man who would become my husband”).¹⁵ This focus is also present in the mother’s thoughts not of her daughter, but of “them”, as having diabetes. This encapsulates how the illness affects the whole family, but it also underscores the heightened closeness between mother and daughter, a closeness the mother cannot help but push for: “co-dependency can appear in so many ways” (Gordan 2022: 44).¹⁶

Just as the brokenness of Tillman’s work is visible already in the title, the structuring metaphor of Gordan’s work is made explicit in the title’s use of the word “night”. This night is a relentless state that seems to have no end, a state of having no way to keep the daughter alive when she is out of reach, when she is “anywhere where I am not with my sandwiches and dextrose tablets, beyond my control” (Gordan 2022: 28).¹⁷ The metaphor emphasizes the feeling of time standing still, except for the flow of worry she calls “variations of helplessness” (Gordan 2022: 96).¹⁸ The narrator sees herself becoming a watch dog or a prison guard to

15. Swedish original: “din bror” and “mannen som skulle bli min make”. A few are also designated by their nationality, like “the Frenchman” for the daughter’s father, perhaps an attempt to downplay his importance to both of them.

16. Swedish original: “medberoende kan se ut på så många sätt”.

17. Swedish original: “var som helst där jag inte är med mina smörgåsar och druvsockertabletter, bortanför min kontroll”.

18. Swedish original: “Hjälplöshetsvariationer”.

her daughter in an attempt to stop her from running away (Gordan 2022: 48, 81). Phrases as well as actions are repeated, coming back in variations. When the daughter is gone, the night includes a constant movement in search for her, as well as finally giving up, to simply wait:

It is the cape of the final night; it is four o'clock and there is nothing more to do than give up. [...] There is a point when everything is done, and nothing is left except the night. You are alive or dead, I will not know until you are found or allow yourself to be found, and with this thought I must go to bed, nothing is in my hands. (Gordan 2022: 8–9)¹⁹

The uncertainty and impossibility to control or even know what is happening shapes the desperation constantly swirling in the mother's head. The night as a metaphor captures the powerlessness of the immutable state created by the repetitions.

To summarize, the rat and the night are characteristic of the different flavors of desperation in the two works. In *En trasig historia* ambivalence is a key part of the desperation: the mother's unpredictability and inability to successfully parent means that Mia never knows what to expect or when acts of care will be needed. In *Natten* there is a consistency: the daughter rebels and moves away, the mother's desperation lies largely in her attempts to keep her child alive.

The subjectivity of the protagonists is intimately bound to the caregiving relationships. In *En trasig historia*, Mia's individuality is visually toned down and contrasted with the expressiveness of the mother, indicating the difficulty in developing a subjectivity beyond this relationship. In *Natten*, the mother's subjectivity is closely tied to the care for and the survival of her daughter. As the earliest point covered by the narration is the birth of her first child, the narrator is, in a sense, born as she becomes a mother. The ever-present fear of the daughter's death can thus be regarded as a threat to her identity as well. This relational directedness is a crucial part of the way these stories are narrated, and the caregiving does not only "shine a light on human conditions as inescapably interpersonal", as Arthur Kleinman has noted (Kleinman 2020: 238), but also on the formation of subjectivity, as the desperate caregiving deeply shapes the protagonists.

19. Swedish original: "Det är den yttersta nattens udde, klockan är fyra och det finns ingenting mer att göra än att ge upp. [...] Det kommer en punkt där allt är gjort och ingenting finns kvar utom natten. Du lever eller är död, jag vet inte förrän du hittas eller låter dig hittas, det är med den tanken jag måste gå och lägga mig, ingenting är i mina händer".

The practices of desperate care

In stories of caregiving, it is not unusual that the stakes of the story mean confronting an imminent death i.e. caring for a loved one who is approaching the end.²⁰ In the works discussed here, the stakes are about caring for someone on a destructive trajectory, where they have to be saved from a possible death that could be either on purpose or the unintended consequence of recklessness.

It is worth noting that the question of mental versus somatic illness is not overly important here. The illnesses in the stories are bipolar disorder and diabetes respectively, but the dynamics of care are strikingly similar. A common feature is the struggle to keep the other alive against their own disinterest in their well-being. Both are stories of standing next to someone – a close next of kin – who moves away, fast and in the wrong direction, and not being able to stop them. In *Natten*, the narrator references a famous mother's story about a daughter with schizophrenia (Spungen 1996), and identifies the same rapid movement towards a metaphorical cliff in her own daughter: "this is a child I cannot manage, nothing I say or do affects her, her motor is already in full gear and headed towards the precipice" (Gordan 2022: 12).²¹ The mother's movements and actions are strongly dependent on the daughter's: where she leads, the mother follows. In Tillman's work, Mia tries to match her mother's movements, and Mia's own movement, actions, and in a wider sense her whole identity, is shaped by her mother's illness. Mia is transformed from child to desperate caregiver, while in *Natten*, the parental care is heightened to desperate care. The metaphor of being caught up in, and dependent on, somebody else's movement is an apt metaphor for the experience of being next of kin in both works.

In our analysis, we identify three important building blocks as constitutive of desperate care. Here, we will explore how the works portray these building blocks: first, the worry and responsibility and the repetition they entail. Second, the hyper attentiveness and co-dependency of the protagonists, and third, the unsuccessful care and the turn to institutions as a last resort.

20. On the dynamics in these kinds of caregiving narratives, graphic and in prose, see for example DeFalco 2010.

21. Swedish original: "det här är ett barn jag inte rår på, ingenting jag säger eller gör kan påverka henne, hennes motor är redan på fullt varv och riktad mot stupet".

Worry and responsibility

The mother in *Natten* is in an almost constant state of worry – the strongest emotion to exist within her state of night. She makes use of Schrödinger’s cat as a metaphor, which emphasizes the pain of not knowing. As she tries to call her daughter, she only reaches the answering machine: “You are somewhere in one or another acute state or not, I have no way of knowing, *unfortunately I can’t answer right now*. I’m thinking of Schrödinger’s cat [...] before the box is opened the cat is theoretically both dead and alive at the same time” (Gordan 2022: 98–99).²²

The worry about death is also a constant for Mia. In a childhood episode, Mia hears an ambulance when she is out with a friend and immediately rushes home – the sound makes her fear for her mother. We follow the panic, the running, and Mia wondering what it will look like if her mother is dead (see fig. 4). The apartment is empty, and when the mother comes home, Mia hugs her hard. For a second, she can return to being the child, to be comforted by the mother – an illustration of how the protagonist oscillates between the roles of daughter and caregiver (Tillman 2020: 13–26). Later, she tells a friend that she feels it will be her fault if the mother dies (Tillman 2020: 119). The persistent imagining of the loved one being dead makes both Mia and the mother in *Natten* insist on their constant movement and search.

One way this is shown is through the concept of *the round*. Making a round entails repetitive searching and checking. As Mia searches the most likely places her mother can be, one checkbox is visible in each frame, and she finally, checking



Figure 4. Mia running up the stairs in search of her mother after hearing an ambulance (Tillman 2020: 23).

22. Swedish original: “Du är någonstans i ett eller annat akut tillstånd eller inte, jag har inget sätt att få veta, *tyvärr kan jag inte svara just nu*. Jag tänker på Schrödingers katt. [...] innan lådan öppnas är katten teoretiskt sett både död och levande samtidigt”.

the same pub for a second time, finds her mother (see fig. 5). Gordan's narrator repeats her rounds almost like a mantra, every description of the repetition similarly phrased. She checks off her list both by making physical visits and by calling the same numbers over and over again:

I have called you a hundred times, I have called all your friends, I have sent angry, loving, threatening, and begging texts. I have talked to the field assistants, the after-school teen centers, the police and various emergency services, your photo is distributed to the employees in all the subway stations. (Gordan 2022: 8)²³

Not only is the search portrayed as repetition in *Natten*. Further, repetition is shown to structure every activity of caregiving performed by the mother. Looking back at her earlier life, a similar repetition – parental caregiving interlaced with a large dose of medical caregiving – is presented:

Every afternoon, collect you at daycare, prick your finger, make dinner, dinner insulin, evening activities (bathtub, somersaults in the living room, different fairy tales), prick your finger, supplement with food or extra insulin, heart medicine, put you to bed, go out on the balcony, breathe. [...] Put on an alarm in the night, wake up, prick your finger, give banana or extra insulin, morning again. (Gordan 2022: 72)²⁴

The desperate care is shown as a heightened version of the previous parental care – akin but intensified, twisted. Caregiving at the limit is a subset of what DeFalco calls “para-ordinary care”, adjacent to the ordinary, but so demanding

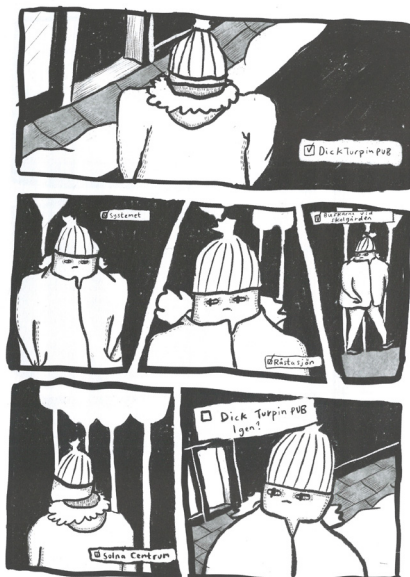


Figure 5. Mia making her round in search of the mother (Tillman 2020: 169).

23. Swedish original: "Jag har ringt dig hundra gånger, jag har ringt alla dina vänner, jag har skickat arga, kärleksfulla, hotfulla och bedjande sms. Jag har pratat med fältassistenter, fritidsgårdarna, polisen och olika jourinstanser, ditt foto är distribuerat till personalen på alla tunnelbanestationer."

24. Swedish original: "Varje eftermiddag, hämta er på dagis, ta stick, laga middag, middagsinsulin, kvällsaktiviteter (badkar, kullerbyttor i vardagsrummet, olika sagor), ta stick, komplettera med mat eller extra insulin, hjärtmedicin, natta er, ställa mig på balkongen, andas. [...] Ställa larm till natten, vakna, ta stick, ge banan eller extra insulin, morgon igen [...]."

that it is not understood as “ordinary”, despite being quite common (DeFalco 2016: 7). The mother’s care depicted by Gordan is closer to the ordinary, while Tillman portrays a reversal of roles as the young child is forced to care for the parent. The everyday repetition of parental care, and the security created by it, is missing here, and Mia’s everyday life – like the rat’s in the prologue – is instead characterized by unpredictability and uncertainty. In both cases, the worry, responsibility, and repetition exceed ordinary caregiving and brings the caregiving at the limit into a mode of desperation. DeFalco argues that care shaped by extreme dependency “recall the interrelationality of identity regardless of ability” and “conjugates the inevitability and necessity of care for all embodied subjects” (DeFalco 2016: 53). This argument also applies to desperate care, which in its urgent mode – and in the different forms that the two works portray – has elements that are relevant in ordinary caregiving situations as well.

Hyper attentiveness: A fine-tuned calibration towards the other

In desperate care, the worry is linked to what we identify as the second building block, attentiveness, or rather hyper attentiveness, towards the other. The protagonists are watchfully observing, adjusting their own lives due to the worry about the other, evaluating every situation. This is something that can be understood both in terms of responsibility and control – and the two are not always easy to separate in situations of desperate care. This hyper attentiveness is a result of co-dependency: the protagonist’s whole existence is dominated

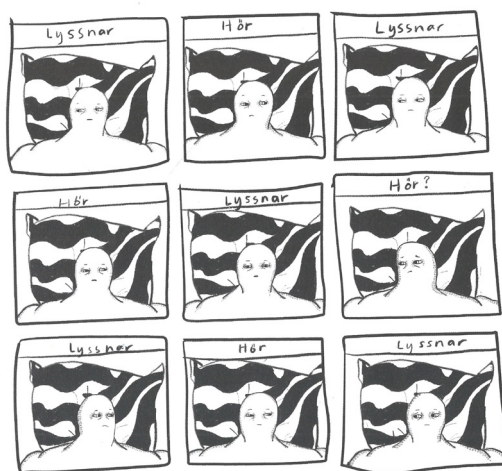


Figure 6. Mia lying in her bed, attentively listening after the mother. The caption switches between “listening” and “hearing” (Tillman 2020: 62).

by the sick family member.²⁵ The mother in *Natten* is setting her work and partly her other children aside, while Mia is afraid of moving out, fearing that her mother will not make it without her.

One example of this attentiveness is Mia's listening from another room, afraid that she hears her mother drinking alcohol in the morning (Tillman 2020: 62–65). Mia's hyper attentiveness is portrayed by the juxtaposition of the words "listening" and "hearing" – two words ascribing slightly different meanings to the same activity (see fig. 6). The repetition of them over two spreads highlights the degree of Mia's attunement to listening to, guarding, and being there for the mother.

In Gordan's work, the mother is completely absorbed by watching out for the daughter: searching for her when she is away, looking for signs of flight when she is at home. No attention is left for anything else. About a dinner with friends, she writes:

Candles, low key conversations and mild laughter, often tjälknöl is served in these days between Christmas and New Year's Eve, but I have no memory of the food, the only thing I can think about is you. All of you children are here and I wander between the rooms like a shepherd dog, scared to death that you will run away (Gordan 2022: 132–133)²⁶

The shepherd dog, a variation on the metaphor of the watch dog, emphasizes the mother's guarding and observing presence. Her attentiveness and nigh-on absorption also dissolve the boundary between herself and the daughter. "What is the rest of the family doing? I do not know, I only have enough attention for you", she comments, and later adds: "[E]verything is about my daughter. When she feels better, I feel better. It is impossible to separate" (Gordan 2022: 47, 75).²⁷

Gordan's mother cannot distinguish clearly between her own needs and the daughter's needs, defining everything by how it affects the daughter. Sometimes she mentions aspects of her own life like her work and writing, but the focus is incessantly on the daughter's well-being, life, and breathing.

Mia's well-being, or rather lack thereof, is also closely tied to her mother's. In one light-hearted episode, the mother tries to hand her a hamburger dressing, but it ends up in the potted plant instead. Despite the relative happiness of the

25. Cf. Nesby, who notes that in curoographies, the healthy narrator's body is calibrated after the ill person's body. Nesby (2023: 220).

26. Swedish original: "Levande ljus, lågmälda samtal och milda skratt, ofta serveras tjälknöl vid de här mellandagstillfällena men jag har inget minne av maten, allt jag kan tänka på är dig. Alla ni barn är med och jag irrar mellan rummen som en vallhund, livrädd att du ska dra".

27. Swedish original: "Vad gör resten av familjen? Jag vet inte, min uppmärksamhet räcker bara till dig". "[A]llt handlar om min dotter. När hon mår bättre, mår jag bättre. Det går inte att skilja åt".

episode, which ends with them laughing together, Mia cannot allow herself to laugh until observing her mother laughing (Tillman 202a: 56–57). As Mia grows, she tries to emancipate herself. She moves out, and she does not always answer her mother's phone calls. But despite this, Mia's subjectivity remains dominated by the mother: ever present in repeated texts and phone calls where she seeks Mia to comfort her loneliness and in Mia's constant worry (see fig. 7).



Figure 7. Mia comforting her mother over the phone (Tillman 2020: 138).

The protagonists in the two stories thus continue to exist primarily in relation to the care recipient. Only secondarily do they exist in their own right. Discussing the construction of different selves in relation to caregiving, Eva Kittay highlights what she calls the idea of a *transparent self*, “a self through whom the needs of another are discerned, a self that, when it looks to gauge its own needs, sees first the needs of another” (Kittay 1999: 51). This idea is productive when considering the protagonists of the two stories, who in many ways see the needs of another first. At the same time, their selves are not transparent (i.e. invisible), rather the construction of their subjectivity is highly visible and messily intertwined with the care recipients’.

Unsuccessful care and the turn to institutions

The foregrounding of the mother-daughter pair in the two narratives underscores the intimate relationality of the desperate caregiving and places it within the context of family. This, however, is only part of the story. In a discussion on the ethics of care, Joan Tronto points out that care is never only dyadic or individualistic. Care encompasses much more than the emblematic caring of a mother for a child, and a focus on that relationship risks leading to a romanticization of care (Tronto 1993: 103). Even as depictions of dyadic care and mother-daughter relationships takes the centerstage in these narratives, there is nothing romantic or idealistic about the

care performed. Furthermore, in the end, it is not successful, and the narratives show how this dyad cannot fulfil care on their own.

Both narratives are set in Sweden, a Nordic welfare state where a societal structure of institutions and social networks can offer help. In both works, the possibility to turn to these welfare institutions is shown as ethically ambivalent. It is simultaneously portrayed as a last resort and a rescue, as a way of giving up and asking for help when the next of kin caregiving is rendered impossible, and as a form of betrayal.

In Mia's case, reaching out to someone outside of the mother-daughter dyad is a difficult choice. She seems to have had no contact with any help before and has rather protected her mother from being spotted by others. When she, in the end, decides to contact the authorities, it is in the form of "the crisis team" (Tillman 2020a: 177).²⁸ On a single page, we see her call for help. The shrinking lettering, the unfinished sentence, and the way it continues through all the frames underscores Mia's hesitation: she can hardly bring herself to say the words (see fig. 8).



Figure 8. Mia calling the crisis team at the end of the graphic novel (Tillman 2020: 177).

When the police and the social workers arrive, we see them stand behind Mia as support while she is still in the foreground: she has brought these representatives of society into the home. The drawings of the mother's face are dissolved in a previously unprecedented way, and the same goes for the lettering in her speech bubbles (see fig. 9). Mia, in contrast, still looks very much like a child. Contrary to the mother's features, hers are still small, as are the lettering in her speech bubbles. The controlled depiction of her is a stark contrast to the disarray of the mother, but Mia is not portrayed as empowered, but as insecure and guilty.

In *Natten*, the societal help has always been there, through the mother's contacts with different teams and care institutions. Field assistants, after school teen centers, police, social service's emergency unit, hospitals – a whole range of helping community bodies have been invoked and contacted. Still, this does not work.

28. Swedish original: "Krissteamet".

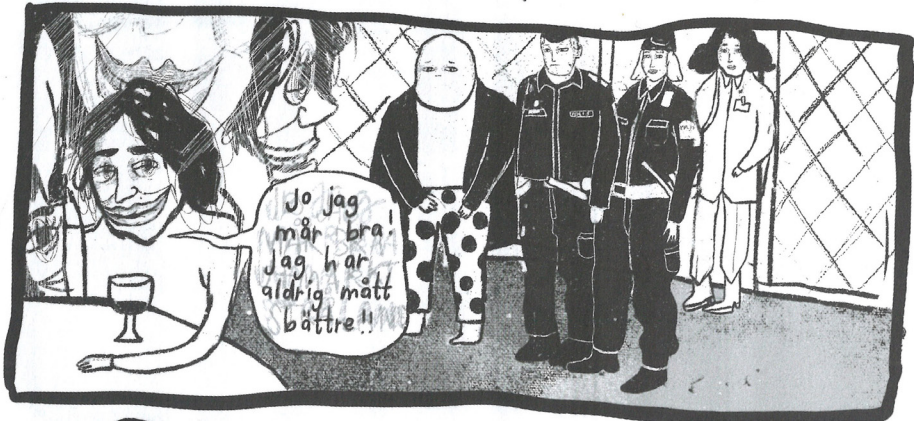


Figure 9. Mia, the mother, and the crisis team. Note the mother's highly dissolved state (Tillman 2020: 185).

Here, the turn to the institution will instead result in the daughter becoming institutionalized – not just helped, but taken away, because the family is afraid that she might otherwise die. While the daughter is away, the mother on one hand feels lost without her, and on the other manages to slowly come back to her own life and work. In the end, a therapist helps to structure the care within the home, but she also emphasizes that the mother's action was a form of betrayal: even if it was to save her daughter's life, "it was still an abandonment" (Gordan 2022: 168).²⁹

In both works, the turn to the institutions of society is thus portrayed as necessary but also as ambivalent for the characters - at the same time a betrayal and a lifesaving rescue, though in *En trasig historia* it is possibly as much a rescue of Mia as it is of the mother. For the mother in *Natten*, turning to the institutions means relinquishing part of her responsibility, whereas Mia needs to give up the whole responsibility and break the caregiving bond. The turn to the institutions also breaks up the dyadic structures and highlights their insufficiencies. Even though the institutions are not perfect, they are portrayed as the better choice when compared to the desperate care that has dominated the narratives up to this point.

29. Swedish original: "det var ändå att överge."

Aftermath: the (im)possibility of reconciliation

The turn to the institutions entails a breaking point in the caregiving relations in both works. What can be seen as a necessary betrayal has different repercussions for the two protagonists.

In *Natten*, the break offers a chance to find a new kind of relationship between mother and daughter. The narrator shows that in a close future – written as a prolepsis at the end – there is a prospect of reconciliation, where the daughter is a young adult and they both take their part of the blame. Gordan allows for the perspectives to not fully align, but without rivalry between them – she simply allows the story in its messiness to exist as it is. “Much later all this will be forgotten”, she points out: “Much later all this will be over, I promise, and the only thing that remains is the story. And you will say, mummy, that was not the way it was, and I will answer, no, not for you” (Gordan 2022: 168).³⁰ This acceptance of the different stories may be the final proof that the mother has learned to, at least to some extent, hand over the agency to the daughter.

Another expression of the reconciliation is when the narrator clearly takes on the adult responsibility while they both scrutinize themselves, but the daughter replies: “I think we both did wacky things” (Gordan 2022: 174).³¹ In all its

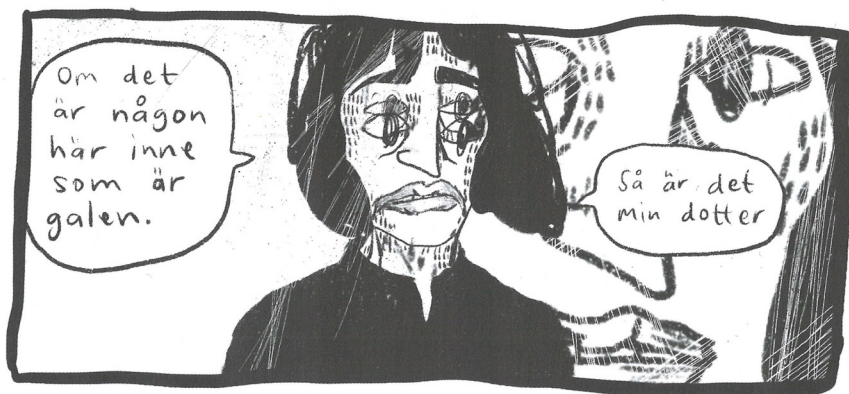


Figure 10. The mother calling Mia crazy. “If there’s anyone in here who’s crazy, it’s my daughter” (Tillman 2020: 188).

30. Swedish original: “Långt senare ska allt det här vara glömt. (...) Långt senare ska det här vara över, jag lovar, och allt som finns kvar är berättelsen. Och du ska säga, mamma, det var inte så där det var, och jag ska svara, nej, inte för dig”.

31. Swedish original: “jag tycker att vi båda två gjorde knäppa saker”. Cf. earlier when the mother notes about herself that she has been “a little crazy, or the mother from hell”; Swedish original: “Lite crazy, eller, morsan från helvetet” (Gordan 2020: 146).

simplicity, this summarizes the complicated repelling and attracting between the two main characters – as doing “wacky things”. A hopeful and conciliatory view on their relationship, even the most difficult parts of it.

In Tillman’s work, there is no reconciliation, no meeting beyond the disintegration of the caregiving bond between mother and daughter. The mother tries to brand her daughter as the crazy one to the policeman: “If there’s anyone in here who’s crazy, it’s my daughter. She’s really fucking crazy. If anyone should be locked up, it’s her!” (See fig. 10. Tillman 2020: 188).³²

From the mother’s point of view, the turn to the authorities is a betrayal, even though it is ultimately a result of her initial failure to fulfil the parenting role. In the very last panel of the fragmented chronological story, Mia stands alone, framed as if by a spotlight (see fig. 11). She still has the same small facial features, her neutrally set mouth subtly betraying her sadness. Throughout the story, she has moved out and started her own adult life, but there is still not room for her to be grown, have strong emotions, and be her own person.

The narrative does not end here. This final disaster is followed by an earlier memory, where the mother makes a joke – the same joke as she makes in the first episode – that Mia as a small child does not understand. The very last panel has the exchange: “What do you mean, mommy?” “Yes, what do I mean, Mia” (Tillman 2020: 191).³³ This could possibly be seen as a way of softening the end, but most acutely, it emphasizes the lack of understanding between mother and

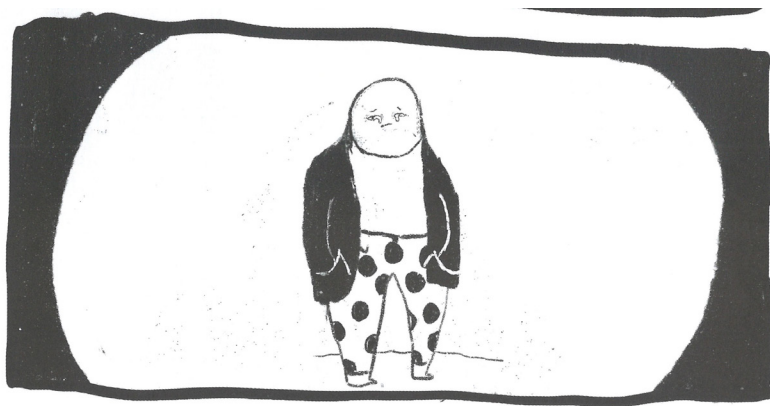


Figure 11. Mia in the spotlight, ending the main story of the graphic novel (Tillman 2020: 189).

32. Swedish original: “Om det är någon här inne som är galen. Så är det min dotter. Riktigt jävla galen är hon. Om det är någon som ska spärras in så är det hon!”

33. Swedish original: “Vad menar du, mamma?” “Ja, vad menar jag, Mia.”

daughter. The mother talks over Mia's head, and the enigma of the mother takes the central stage. The braiding of the first episode and the last creates a sense of repetition and circularity: has anything changed at all? There is no real contact in this epilogue – the mother does not meet her daughter's eyes, the daughter poses a question she does not get an answer to, as it is only answered by another question.

The mother in *Natten* finds a way to hand over some of the responsibility to her daughter and tone down her caregiver role, strengthening the mother-daughter relationship. The position of caregiver can be rehabilitated as a functioning part of everyday life, and the relationship returns to more normal parental care. In *En trasig historia*, this is not possible. Mia's toning down the caregiver relationship can only happen by handing over responsibility to the authorities. The only act of care possible – both with regards to the mother and to Mia herself – is to turn to the institutions of the welfare state. There may not be reconciliation, but in a sense, Mia learns to care not only for her mother but also for herself.

Concluding remarks: The ethics of narrating desperate care

Through the analysis of the narration and practices of desperate care in *Natten* and *En trasig historia*, we have shown how both the narration and the building blocks of care underscore the desperation, the strong interdependency and responsibility, and the dyadic construction of subjectivity at play in these works. To further the discussion theoretically, we want to consider the ethical questions raised by these kinds of messily relational, auto/biographical narratives of desperate care.

Both Gordan and Tillman address ethical questions posed by these kinds of narratives. What happens when I cannot tell my own story without, to some extent, telling that of another? The metafictional reflections in *Natten* address the question of authenticity and perspective. The narrator emphasizes that the story would look different from the daughter's perspective. In an interview, Gordan has also stated that all family members have approved the story before publication (Andersson 2023). Similarly, Tillman has addressed the issue on her blog, where she writes about the hesitation to narrate her experiences, "when my life has been so completely influenced by somebody else". She emphasizes that this poses an ethical conundrum: her mother does not want to be exposed, but if she cannot tell her mother's story, that would result in "her then owning my story" (Tillman

2021b).³⁴ Both Gordan and Tillman have also chosen to label their stories as a novel and graphic novel respectively, avoiding the stronger truth claim of the out-right autobiography. From this perspective, auto/biographies of desperate care can be considered as ethically challenging, running the risk of imposing on the story of another whilst telling one's own.

Without disregarding this perspective, we want to suggest that these works also invite a somewhat different discussion on ethics: of narration as a way of amending desperation and as an ethical care practice in itself. One fundamental similarity between *Natten* and *En trasig historia* is that desperate care shapes the identity of the caregiver; their subjectivities become tied up in an intense, dyadic dynamic and highly calibrated towards and dependent on the care recipient. Their life stories become "irrevocably intertwined, interdependent and mutually constitutive" (DeFalco 2016: 53). From a feminist standpoint, Kelly Oliver re-evaluates dependence, often thought of as opposed to autonomy, as a necessary condition for subjectivity. She emphasizes the formation of subjectivity as dialogical, shaped both by one's contextually situated subject position and by responding to and addressing others and, through self-reflexivity, oneself. "Subjectivity, in fact, is responsibility, respons-ability, and ethical responsibility" (Oliver 2002: 327).³⁵ In the works of Gordan and Tillman, the dialogical process of responsibility and the formations of subjectivity are warped in two main ways. Firstly, one other – the care recipient – takes precedence over all others in shaping the protagonist's subjectivities. Caught up in a dyad of desperate care, through worry and hyper attentiveness, they respond (or try to respond) only to the other half of the dyad, not to any others or to themselves. Speaking on a societal level, Oliver points out that one's subject position can limit the sense of subjective agency (Oliver 2002: 326–327).³⁶ Here, we primarily view this limitation in the context of family; the subject position as next of kin can, in these narratives, be described as a factor that limits the protagonist's subjective sense of agency.

Secondly, the response-ability in these works becomes lopsided, aimed mainly one way, from caregiver to recipient. The position as next of kin is reinforced by the desperate mode of the care that the protagonists perform. Oliver uses the term

34. Swedish original: "Jag har tänkt mycket på det här att berätta vad jag varit med om. Hur gör man det på ett okej sätt när mitt liv har varit så totalt influerad av någon annan?" and "Att hon då äger min historia".

35. Cf. Tronto 1993: 127 on attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness as the four ethical elements of care.

36. On this societal level, Oliver talks about subject positions as oppressed or marginalized in the dominant culture, for example by race or gender.

affective attunement to describe the processual ability to respond and attune to others' signals and affective energy (Oliver 2002: 329). What happens in these works can, with this framework, be described as a circulation of desperation. The daughter desperately tries to break free in *Natten*; in *En trasig historia* the unpredictable mother desperately calls on her daughter for comfort whilst simultaneously evading the care. Lacking other kinds of response from the care recipients, the caregivers attune to the affect of desperation, to the motor – in Gordan's phrasing – being "in full gear and headed towards the precipice" (Gordan 2022: 12).

Oliver emphasizes that at the heart of subjectivity is the ethical obligation to promote the health and well-being of others through "loving attention" (Oliver 2002: 330). With the subject position as next of kin limiting agency, and the lopsidedness in responsibility and respons-ability, the loving attention in these works is overshadowed by desperate, urgent and anxious attention. The promotion of the other's well-being is both unsuccessful and excessive, and the protagonists fail to address and respond to themselves. Both the turn to institutions and the decision to narrate their stories can be described as attempts to remedy the ethical deficiency born out of desperate care – attempts that in the works have different resolutions, demonstrating the breadth of the concept. In both narratives, turning to the authorities is a way of breaking up the dyadic dynamic and the circulation of desperation. Likewise, the narration itself constitutes a new way of responding – both to the care recipient beyond the mode of desperation and to oneself.

In the end, however, these narratives do not promote an illusionistic ideal of autonomous, independent subjects (cf. Feder & Kittay 2002: 4–5). Rather, breaking up the desperate, dyadic dynamic between mother and daughter enables constructions of subjectivity within a wider social context: the mother in *Natten* is able to respond to the rest of the family and to her work, and Mia no longer responds only to her mother. Thus, breaking up the dyadic dynamic is not a rejection of dependency, but makes less destructive dependencies and a plurality of responses possible.

The self-reflexivity lost in desperate care is also regained through the act of narration, used as a practice of care for the self, especially the past self: Tillman retrospectively cares for herself as a child; Gordan remains faithful to the desperate mother. Arthur Kleinman writes that care does not stop with death; it continues in the caring for the memories (Kleinman 2019: 3). In a parallel way, these stories show how desperate care continues even after the relationship has been transformed, through either normalization, as in *Natten*, or a break, as in *En trasig historia*. When it continues as narration, the care performed is no longer desperate but takes the shape of stories of desperate times.

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