



Standard Length of a Miracle

© Jonas Hassen Khemiri 2016
Translation: Rachel Willson-Broyles

Commissioned by: Goldin+Senneby

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:
'Goldin+Senneby: Standard Length of a Miracle'
27.1 – 15.5 2016
Tensta konsthall

Graphic design: Mehrdad Arta
Printed by: Ineko
Edition: 1000 copies



Standard Length of a Miracle

He enters the room, sits down, and says: Wait a second, don't say anything, just take it easy, let me have my say, because I know what you're thinking, I can read your faces like an open book, you look at me and think I'm a liar, you're thinking "surely this guy can't be Anders Reuterswård," and yes, you're right, I admit it, I made up that name so I could come here, I borrowed "Anders" from my old basketball coach, "Reuterswård" is from a customer who brings his suits to us, he plays handball, has three kids, and is related to a mountain-climber who died on Mount Everest, the relative, that is, the customer is fine, he came by last week to pick up his clothing, jackets with button sleeves, shirts with gold thread on the labels, raw-denim designer jeans that had to be dry-cleaned, we did it all and he said thanks and paid and folded the clothes into the backseat of his shiny silver Audi A4 and once he was gone I tested out "Anders Reuterswård" on my application and something happened, one plus one became three, where one was my experience and one was "Anders Reuterswård" and three is the fact that we're sitting here today, I suspect you would have formed a different impression of me if I had written my real name, you might have gotten the idea that I couldn't be trusted, that I would try to filch the art instead of guarding it, or that I would start fights with the visitors instead of helping them, but nothing could be further from the truth, you can rest one hundred percent easy, I will be a perfect gallery attendant, I am sharp and responsible, I am service-minded and super socially competent, lots of people give up when they come across a locked door but I just take out the bobby-pins and fashion a lock-pick, when the highway is closed I find a path, when people argue over whether the glass is half empty or half full I am at the ready with a carafe, I pour and pour until the glass overflows, no one will leave the room thirsty when I'm around, and when I say water I mean water in the

metaphorical sense, water as a symbol of my torrents of creativity and my infinite stubbornness, but I have not always been this success case you see before you now, three years ago I was nothing, I had just been released from the hospital, my wife had left me, she had taken our daughters and moved to her parents' house in Strängnäs, I started helping out at my uncle's dry cleaner, I was planning to go back to the university at some point, but I was having some problems with my short-term memory, sometimes I forgot people's names, sometimes I got downtown and wasn't sure why I had come, who I was supposed to meet and where, the doctors said it was perfectly normal, it might take up to two years before everything stabilized and the scar would heal too, it's not nearly as visible as it was back then, right after the hospital I noticed that people would react when I got on the subway, people made an effort not to look, or else they did look but quickly looked away again, or else they would use the reflection in the window to look when they thought I wasn't looking, the only ones who were honest were the kids because they would look and point and ask their parents what had happened and I didn't get mad, I never get mad, I just smiled at the kids and sat down further on in the car and when I started at the dry cleaner's I was allowed to help here and there, I numbered hangers and went out with deliveries, I talked to customers and pinned up pants, I didn't think anything was different but my uncle commented that I was talking nonstop, he said something must have happened at the hospital, he reminded me that I didn't need to ask everyone who came in about their weekend plans, he said he would fire me if I didn't quit my verbal diarrhea, and I tried to dial down my social competence but it was obvious that the customers appreciated it, we got more and more business, after a few months we expanded into the building next door and later that fall my uncle started talking about opening another branch closer to

downtown, everything was going smoothly, my uncle was happy, I should have been too, but I felt empty, there was something missing, one day a customer came in with a discolored coat, the sun had burned away the black dye on the shoulders and my uncle said there was nothing he could do, but if the customer liked he could try to re-dye it and the customer asked my uncle to do it and my uncle asked me to do it and I went to the store and bought “back to black,” a dye that is actually meant to be used in a washing machine but my uncle said a bucket would work just as well so I filled it with lukewarm water and tossed in the coat and let it soak for a few hours, the water turned black as oil but the bucket didn’t change color at all, so I thought it would be fine to use my hands to take it out, but as I did I noticed my fingers started stinging and the dye, which didn’t stick to plastic at all, stuck to my hands right away and once the coat was dyed and hanging on a hanger and looking like new I stood there with black hands and black nails, and no matter how hard I scrubbed it wouldn’t come off, my uncle sighed and shook his head and called me an idiot, because he knew that one surefire way not to win respect at a dry cleaner’s was to walk around with dirty fingers and black nails, at lunch he sent me to the café to pick up some food and as I was waiting two girls came in from the street, their ratty canvas bags, strange hairstyles, and matching leopard-print capri pants indicated that they went to the art school on the other side of the courtyard, once they had ordered they looked at me and asked if I went to their school too, I looked down at my hands, which looked like a car mechanic’s, and realized that they thought I was someone I wasn’t, maybe it sounds strange but suddenly it was like everything that made me me, the jeans and the hoodie and the scar and my hands, became part of something else, as if I were something more than I was, about the same way as it did when I wrote “Anders Reuterswård” on my application, I nodded and said that I had just started at their

school, we dissed a few teachers and said time was tight for getting our portfolios out to Konstfack and before we went our separate ways one of the girls asked if I was coming “to the opening tonight” and I asked “which opening” and they told me and then my food was ready and the guy behind the register with the birthmark on his forehead looked at me and smiled and raised both eyebrows to show me he wouldn’t give anything away, after work I stopped by the opening, I wasn’t particularly nervous, I had no reason to be nervous, after all I wasn’t the one on my way there, it was the person they thought I was, and I had no intention of trying to hook up with one of the girls, I was faithful to my wife, she hadn’t managed to fool me into thinking that it was over, she never sounded convincing when she said that she’d moved on, plus the girls were way too ugly, one was fat as a pig and had dreadlocks even though she was white, the other had a pierced cheek and one of those earrings that makes your earlobe as big as a plate, but I went there anyway because I’m not a person who closes doors, I see every experience as a different sort of driver’s license in the race of life, it’s never a bad idea to have a broad network of contacts, I thought as I came up from the subway and turned left toward the art gallery, I had been here before, once to test-drive a dark gray Toyota Prius that I was thinking about buying until I discovered it had a squeaky steering wheel, another time when a couple of friends arranged a barbecue out on the field, we had just enough time to light the grill before the first drops of rain started to fall, and most recently when we were going to kidnap a friend for his bachelor party, he was having dinner at his girlfriend’s parents’ house, we had borrowed ski masks and baseball bats from my cousin, our friend was so scared when he saw us jumping over the balcony railing that he called the police, we called him “Squealer” for the rest of the night, those were fun memories, memories from the past, but even though I had been here before I had no idea that there was an art gallery here, and when

I walked into the building I realized why, no one there looked like they lived in the neighborhood and all the conversations died when I walked in, but I didn't let their looks bother me, I moved around and looked at the art and soon people started talking again, just like before, only a little quieter, but I didn't care, I was used to it, I just thought I had as much right to be here as they did and if I felt uncomfortable I could look down at my hands and remind myself that I belonged here, that I was one of them, the girls weren't here and so I walked around by myself, I looked at the art, which sometimes looked like art, but a lot of the time looked like something totally different, a documentary about a foreign company was being shown on one wall, print-outs of curves that looked like stock-exchange data hung in one corner, in the very innermost room, which was the size of a church nave with walls many meters high, there was an old, rusty coin machine, every piece of art had lengthy operating instructions, I circulated, I heard a guy say that the art was bursting at the seams with references to "Pad Thai and his asphalt concept," someone else said "process versus works: one nothing," and someone responded that she loved art that dared to be so "über-theoretical" like this did and I nodded, I agreed, it was great to see art that dared to be so different and dealt with something other than life, but on my way home, when I had been here for forty-five minutes and neither of the girls from the café showed up, I felt more like I wanted art that was about life, about what actually does exist here and now, later that same evening I started sketching out art pieces and looking into art schools, I thought that if those artists got to do that kind of art, there must be room to do other sorts of art, I applied to a couple of art schools, I wrote letters and uploaded sketches of art pieces I wanted to create, then I waited for responses, time passed, I kept working at the dry cleaner's, I got a letter from my wife's lawyer, it was full of so many lies that I couldn't even deal with responding, I thought, soon they will see proof that

I wasn't the person they thought I was, I imagined my wife's face when she opened the envelope containing the invitation to my first solo exhibit, but the schools were not ready for my art, they thought my style was too innovative, they didn't even invite me for an interview, really I should have gone back to the university, I only had one semester left, but I was no longer interested in economics, something else had awoken inside me and when the politicians in my neighborhood brought in an artist to decorate our town square the artist decided to let the citizens do her job, she said it was so the artistic process would be "more democratic" but I suspect she was just out of ideas and I knew that this was my big chance, if no schools wanted me I would have to find another way, because I'm not the kind of person who looks at the birds of opportunity and lets them soar on by, no, I stand with my net at the ready, I shoot the birds with a sawed-off shotgun, I light up the flamethrower and eat bird steak morning noon and night, if the opportunity presents itself, when people say a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush I say that best of all is ten birds in the freezer because that means you're prepared for the future, I sat in the office at the dry cleaner's and sketched out forty-two art pieces in less than two weeks, I sent them in under my own name as well as pseudonyms, I thought I would get the job, I was one hundred percent certain I would be chosen, I wasn't chosen, the artist chose a different suggestion by a person who didn't even live in the neighborhood, together they made a slideshow of uplifting quotations and started showing them on the building behind the square and when I saw the artwork and read the quotes that were like "seize the day" or "a thought can change more than a thousand weapons" I felt like I enjoyed the piece anyway, I thought it was nice that someone thought we might be worth those beautiful sayings, but lots of people in the area were angry and said that those words were a mockery and my cousin said that if he seized the day the police would be there two hours later, forcing him to give a urine sample and taking the day

back, a few weeks later the projector that showed the quotes was stolen and then a few weeks passed and then the projector was set up again in a theft-proof cabinet with big padlocks that were supposed to make it impossible for anyone to steal it, and two days later someone had climbed up and stolen the entire cabinet, all that was left were a couple of severed electrical cords swaying in the breeze and I was still working at the dry cleaner's and trying out a night course at the university but my brain was still chaos, nothing would stick and when I saw the ad for here I put together an application, I decided to give it a shot even though it says you're looking for people with an arts education, I know I'm perfect, you will not regret it, and if you ever end up with nothing in the gallery you can use my art, you don't even have to pay me, my pieces would be perfect here, they're about all life's big questions, in the parking lot you could show SECRET LIFE, which consists of a gigantic Russian doll, and when I say gigantic I mean gigantic, as in like ten meters high, it takes at least four parking spots to stand steadily, and it's important for it to be well made and really look like those Russian dolls that are toy-sized, with a red pouting mouth and black hair part, a red shawl and red freckles on its cheeks, inside the big doll is a smaller one, exactly the same, and inside that is an even smaller one, and so on and so on until you get to the middle and there, inside a doll that's no bigger than about like this, I want the visitors to be able to whisper a secret into it, there can be a pipe that goes straight in and the visitors can squat down and say something that they have never told anyone, like that they have rape fantasies or they like the smell of their own farts or that they have made certain choices in life that they will regret forever, in the hall you can show PAST LIFE, which is made up of a lot of smoke, the audience comes in and they can't see their hand in front of their own face, it smells like those fog machines at youth discos when we were little, it crunches when the audience walks around as if they are walking on tiny bird

bones, but it's just chips and sticky spilled soda, the audience walks around the room and feels confused, they don't know where they are, only a few of them notice that at the very back, where it's smokiest of all, you can hang up stuff to symbolize things you've lost, it could be a drawing of an old house that was deserted when its occupants fled, it could be class pictures in which all the crossed-out faces mean that that person was lost to drugs or run over or had to move out of the country to get a job, it could be a photo of two daughters in a back seat, the older one has wriggled out of her car seat, she's got her arms around the younger one, both are smiling and a strange white garbage truck is driving by in the background, and . . . I don't know if I'm misinterpreting the signals you're giving me, but it feels like you're all getting impatient, I'm sure you have many questions of your own to ask and our time together is limited so I want to end by telling you about my vision of what could happen in the innermost room, where the audience comes in and the high ceiling makes them dizzy, their steps echo as they approach the tree, the members of the audience shiver because it looks so real, the trunk is so thick that their arms aren't long enough to hug it and as they get closer they realize that this is no fake tree, this isn't made of clay or papier-mâché, this is an actual fucking tree, it is growing up out of the cement floor, the roots have forced their way through the foundation, somehow or another this oak ended up here and on the trunk there's a small gold plaque with two names on it, further off, on a plain old chair, sits a gallery attendant, he doesn't say anything, he just checks his phone, he's waiting for a particular time, and the audience walks around the room believing that the tree is art, but then, once a day, at exactly twelve past two, the guard stands up and opens his mouth, he clears his throat, he starts to speak whether or not there are people in the room, he tells his story, he says that at this very moment, twelve past two, his second daughter was born, and every afternoon at twelve past two I think of

her, and the guard goes on to describe his daughter's birth and how he met the children's mother who had a face like a Russian doll and the choices that led to their having children so early, his wife stayed home with the kids, he alone was responsible for the family finances, because he was a student it was a little tight, there was a lot to buy at first and his wife was awfully good at spending money but they had a good life, he never felt like their financial situation was a problem, but he started to notice that his wife wasn't happy, she would come home and talk about presents her sister had received from her boyfriend, she described her friends' all-expenses-paid vacations, she refused to eat cheese if it was moldy, even if he sliced off the mold and made sure it tasted okay, once when he came home he heard her talking on the phone with a friend and making fun of his inability to support his family, she complained about the crowded apartment, the neighborhood, the neighbors, she said her phone turned itself off and she was "infinitely tired of living like this" and the gallery attendant says that he never understood what "like this" meant because he thought they had a good life, he had never thought of it as a failure, but several weeks later his cousin asked if he wanted to earn a little extra money, it would be easy, his cousin just wanted to keep a few boxes at his apartment, his cousin never told him what was in the boxes and the gallery attendant never asked, he just took the money his cousin gave him and hid the boxes in a closet, his wife glowed as she stood in front of the mirror in her new dress, she proudly unpacked grocery bags full of organic bananas and kindly-slaughtered meat, when he came home with a new cell phone with a red ribbon around it she giggled the way she had when he proposed, those were happy days, the gallery attendant says and pauses for a moment, he will soon resume his story, it's not over, he just wants to dwell on his memories of that time, then he starts speaking again and says that his wife was worried when his cousin started dropping by with more

boxes, she said he ought to open the boxes to check what was inside them, she said he ought to call the police if there was anything fishy in the boxes, but the guard refused, he had made a promise, he's not the kind of guy who betrays someone's trust, when the closet was full his cousin's coworkers started carrying boxes up to the attic, his cousin paid him well, really well, his wife kept accepting the money even as she complained about the risks they were taking, she said his cousin couldn't be trusted, she said he had to think of his daughters and he thought that was exactly what he was doing, then his cousin traveled out of the country and three weeks later a couple of people came over and said that his cousin's boxes were their boxes, they forced their way into the apartment, they said his wife had to hand over her phone and go into the bathroom with their daughters, they taped him to the parquet floor with duct tape, they took out their tools, they turned up the volume on the TV, and when he woke up he was in the hospital, his cousin forgave him so it was really pretty strange that his wife didn't, by the time he got out of the hospital she had moved and now she's trying to get sole custody of their daughters and the only thing I want, says the gallery attendant, is for you to spread this story around, and if you ever meet my daughters, can't you tell them that what they've heard about their dad isn't true, their dad wasn't running any smuggling operation, he was just a small cog in a large machine, he didn't let them down just to make money, he was only doing his utmost to make sure they didn't have to be ashamed of him, and then the gallery attendant sits back down on his chair again and stops talking, the audience is still standing there, they look at the tree, the names on the trunk, the rustling leaves, and then they leave the gallery and go on their way, he says, and remains in his seat.

By Jonas Hassen Khemiri

Translated from the Swedish by Rachel Willson-Broyles

Standard Length of a Miracle

