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## Biography: The Hidden House

A faint sound of buzzing insects finds its way into the ear canal the moment the car door slams. The house is located on a cul-de-sac on a small island. Along the roadside, the older trees stand close together with metre-high hedges. It is summer. Planting makes it impossible to look into the houses or front gardens. The road's endless row of small houses vary in age, most of them clearly over 100 years old. The house hides almost at the end of the road, and it is difficult to find the entrance between an apple tree and flowering rose bushes. The home owner is almost as old as the house, and she proudly shows the way into the kitchen through a narrow living room with stacks of books, a piano that is way too big for the space, knick-knacks from a long life, and heavy furniture. There is lunch on the table, and a stray cat stands outside the back door, miaowing. The owner lives alone and feeds the cat occasionally. The house is dark and cool, even though it is the middle of summer. The smell of confinement and the scent of the elderly woman who lives there find their way into the nostrils and mix with warm meatballs, freshly picked tomatoes from the back garden, and elderflower juice. She looks inquisitively and questioningly at me, expecting me to take the initiative and begin the conversation. Feverishly I hunt for my well-prepared thoughts and questions, but amid the encounter with the woman and the impressions from her home, they dissolve and disappear. Instead, I think of the small, yellowed photographs of her mother and her colleagues in casual conversation, sitting on a garden bench with coffee on the table. Other questions race through my head: how do you talk to a woman you do not know and ask her to tell you about her mother and herself? How do you get a woman who is over 80 years old to talk about her life, her family and her career? Ask her to share stories that will provide insights into what it meant to work professionally as a woman at a time when not everyone could choose their own path.

It makes me think of a passage I once read:

Meeting somebody – as opposed to singling them out, judging them, and worst of all dissecting their psychopathologies. The question of subjectivity here demands that the biographer reflect on their relationship with the biographical subject. Why do I want to write about this person? What does the person tell me? In what way or ways do we resemble each other, and where do we differ? Do I identify with the biographical subject, or do I erect defences against them? Where does the risk of illegitimate projections enter the picture? How does the biographical subject's time and situation differ from my own?<sup>1</sup>

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1 "Mötet – i motsats till utpekande, dömande och i värsta fall psykopatologiska dissekeringar. Subjektivitetsfrågan här fodrar att biografen reflekterar över förhållandet till biografisubjektet. Varför

In this passage, meeting another human being is central to getting to know them better, but at the same time the author emphasises that it is also important to reflect on the encounter and on one's own position and role when one meets the person. My text is about meeting a woman in her private home – in her house. Before the visit, I thought about why it was important to visit and hence to meet her. What could a face-to-face meeting provide that a digitised conversation could not? What significance would my visit to her home have for what she would tell me? Before the meeting, I also thought about what it would be like to meet her. What kind of person was she? Would we even be able to talk to each other without things getting awkward? Would she trust me? Or would my visit hamper her desire to tell her stories? Meeting her was the right thing to do; after a while, we talked more freely and she told her stories, both about her mother and about her own career.

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vill jag skriva om denna person? Vad säger hon mig? På vilket eller vilka sätt liknar vi varandra och var skiljer vi oss åt? Identifierar jag mig med biografisubjektet eller försvarar jag mig mot henne? Var kommer risken för otillåtna projiceringar in i bilden? Hur skiljer sig den biograferades tid och situation från min egen?" Carina Nynäs, *Jag ser klart? Synen på den heliga Birgitta i svenska 1900-talsbiografier* (Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag, 2006), 500.