

Movement

Carola Mikaelsson ^a

^a Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Sweden

A scream of death shattered the stillness. The book slipped from her hands, skittering beneath the coffee table, yet she dared not reach for it. She sat taut, every nerve straining to listen. It was a prolonged, guttural wail that twisted her insides—a sound steeped in anguish and terror, the kind only torn from a soul staring into the abyss. Murder? Violation? Just beyond her door. She bolted into the hallway. Foolish, of course—if something happened, no one would miss her until Monday, when she failed to appear at work. But she had to know. She had to trace the origin of that cry, that dreadful summons from the dark.

Darkness settled, as if things weren't scary enough already. She trembled at thoughts of assault, violence, murder. But nothing outside showed signs that anything had happened. The dull grayness of the asphalt lay heavy, flanked by the glossy green leaves of the cherry laurel. The light curb stone by the sidewalk glowed faintly in contrast to the darker surroundings. She stood close to the house, eyes fixed on the scraggly bushes across the street, in case someone was crouching there, ready—but she saw only branches and leaves. The street lay silent. All she could hear was a faint rattling. A small rhythmic pulse that occasionally stretched out, then turned into several quick, rustling bursts in a row.

At the corner, she turned to check the side street. She didn't know if she wanted to see what awaited, but was driven by the feeling that someone might need help.

Over by the row of garages, the outdoor lights had come on, casting diamond-shaped beams down over the doors. The honeysuckle swayed gently, half dried and brown, but with a few cupped flowers still hanging on. No one was there either, but she figured out where the rattling sound came from: a silver-glinting deposit can rocked gently by the edge of the sidewalk.

She bent down and picked it up. The metal was still warm. She swung the can in front of her, it smelled sweet and artificial from whatever had been inside. This was what people drank nowadays. Energy drinks with fake berries and summer vibes. She brought it closer, inhaled. What if someone was watching her, saw her take it? Saw her sniff it? A dizzy mix of defiance and shame swirled inside her. She walked back, still holding the can. She couldn't bring herself to drop it—it had become her trash, her responsibility. She opened the closet in the hallway and pulled out a cloth bag. Then she dropped the can in and hung the bag on one of the hooks.

She sat on the couch, but was on edge. The book lay closed on the table. She had picked it up from the floor but couldn't continue reading—it was too demanding after what had happened. Her brain was already busy with the body's twitching. How could such a scream from the abyss fade into nothing? No blood splatter, no torn clothes, no lifeless body. Just dry asphalt, a few early autumn leaves, and the irregular rustling under the bushes. Then she had a strange thought. What if there hadn't been a scream? What if it hadn't happened, and she had imagined it all? Ugh, she

didn't know which was worse. She had an urgent need to talk to someone about what had happened and wished she had someone to call, someone to tell about the evening. Ever since her mother got sick, she had been alone, and when she died, the last person she had a talking relationship with disappeared.

She stood up abruptly. The rain hung in the air, but the tension pushed her—she needed to get out. This hunted feeling wouldn't let go otherwise, she understood that. Just as she was about to close the front door, she saw the cloth bag. Something to hold in her hand, an alibi for going out, a companion. Quickly, she unhooked it before closing and locking the door.

The next morning, she woke to the song of a blackbird. She put on workout clothes and headed out. The air was clear after the night's rain, and the ground still wet. Normally, she didn't like running in the morning because her body hadn't gotten going yet. She preferred a quiet breakfast in peace. Yes, to be honest, she didn't usually run at all, regardless of the time of day. It was that step-counting initiative at work that had gotten her started.

It wasn't about the number of steps, performance, or winning any leaderboard. During the presentation, the manager had been clear that it wouldn't be an individual competition. The reason, explained Marie from HR shortly afterward, was that in recent years, criticism had been raised against such competitive formats, with many in society speaking out for those who could be triggered by measurability and quantitative pressure.

"The goal is for all of us to do this together", Marie had said, nodding with satisfaction.

In the lunchroom afterward, the talk had been that if management truly wanted to donate money, they could do so without a step-counting contest—one the company even paid to join. Jonas from her department argued that they were being tricked into wellness activities that weren't reimbursable. And yes, she could agree it sounded like a punishment for the company, its severity dictated by the employees: "*the more steps we take, the more we give to charity.*" But whatever people thought of the contest itself, something had stirred inside her. No one had said outright what sums or which organizations were involved, which had sparked whispers and raised eyebrows, but she didn't mind. She wasn't as provoked as some; she mostly liked having a reason to get some exercise—and as a bonus, help those in need. Even though she could work out on her own, she struggled to keep it up for long, and she missed company—someone to cheer her on when motivation faltered.

The buildings lay silent and still, just like the roads and parking lots. A little after seven on a Saturday, few were out and about. Those who worked had already left; others were probably still asleep or lingering over coffee and the morning paper. And that was a relief, because her shoes squeaked embarrassingly loud. If she was going to keep running, new ones would be needed soon—these had definitely reached the end of their life. Not in miles, but in lifespan. The rubber was dry, almost hollow.

Without any particular route in mind, she rounded the station and continued along Storgatan. Her alertness to deposit cans remained. During her walk the night before, she had found seven of them, now lying together with the first one in the cloth bag at home. As she ran past the glassed-in bus shelter, she saw three inside, and another one in the bushes outside the municipal building.

The newly paved path tempted her northward, away from civilization. The scent of soil and fallen leaves was rich, and sometimes so strong it felt physical. By the river, she chose the old bike path, past the allotment gardens and over the bridge. The sound of her shoes echoed against the water's surface. Then she got an idea: she would turn empty cans into a shoe fund. If she collected them steadily while out running, the sum would gradually grow into enough for a new

pair of running shoes. She would pay for them entirely with deposit money. It would take time, of course—but that meant she'd keep up the training, on her way to another season of exercise.

After the sunflower patch, the terrain became hilly and her thigh muscles tightened so much she had to walk. She lost motivation, longed for breakfast, and turned back. She took the same route home. Only when she was near the municipal building did she realize it was the cans she had seen that had drawn her there. They were tempting, especially if she was going to save up for a pair of shoes. But it felt strange now that it was broad daylight. She didn't have a bag with her either—it was still hanging at home. Would she carry them in her hands?

She took an extra lap around the large building. When she was back at the front again, she confirmed that no one was in the area. Still, she pretended to stretch to gather courage. In the middle of a side bend, she broke the movement, leaned into the bushes, and fished out a used beer can. A garden snail's shell clanked against the aluminum. She shook the can with the opening down and managed to get it out. Surprised, she looked down into the metal and at the same time realized she was standing there, holding a beer can, completely visible. That broke the inhibition. With one can in hand, she might as well continue—the choice was already made. She jogged toward the bus stop and picked up the ones she had seen there. Twelve kronor closer to a new pair of running shoes, in less than a day. At that pace, a new pair would be hers within three months. Her fingers splayed stiffly. She hurried home.

The whole day had been full of movement, and everything ached. The floors smelled of soap, the trash had been taken out, the closet shelves were airy, and the books were sorted. She lay down on the couch, lifted her feet up, and thought she could spend the rest of the evening reading. At the same time, she knew she wouldn't stay there for long. Almost as if to prove it to herself, she counted seconds. She got to 27, then jumped up, threw on her jacket, stepped into her shoes, and grabbed the bag.

Five cans in just over half an hour. Not much of an hourly wage, but if you thought of it as getting paid for exercising, the equation changed. It was also satisfying to think that the exercise could reach its own break-even point—if the cans paid for the next pair of sneakers. She was pleased with that idea. And the step count for the day was approaching twenty thousand.

The workweeks that followed were made up of steps. In the morning on the way to work, during lunch breaks, and on the way home after the workday. A quickly prepared meal, and then out again. Every afternoon she brought the cloth bag, which was later emptied into a black sack she had hung in the hallway.

One colorful autumn day, when she came home from work, the sun shone in and brutally revealed the transformation that had taken place. She stood on the threshold and looked at it all. On the wall, shimmering slime trails from garden snails curled upward, settling near the ceiling. In several places, there were traces of ants and spiders she had discovered and squashed as they scurried away, and under the sacks, sticky puddles of sugary drops had formed. Added to that was the nauseating smell of snus from pouches that had been stuffed into the cans and now spread in the room temperature.

With two full sacks, she headed out. She had postponed it, imagining herself as a burden to the store staff who would probably have to change the container, how she would be seen as a bottleneck with a sighing queue behind her, registering everything they thought she had drunk. Or that she'd be mistaken for a grimy hoarder. But it couldn't be avoided any longer—her home was turning into a sanitary hazard.

Her arm kept feeding and feeding. The machine chewed and swallowed. And sure enough: a persistent beeping warned that the machine was full, and she had to wait for service before she could continue. When she finally got the receipts, they showed a three-digit amount, though not

quite as much as she had imagined. New shoes would have to wait—at this rate, she might be able to buy a pair during the post-Christmas sales.

At the beginning of November, the entire company gathered in the lunchroom to wrap up the step challenge. She had continued her walks, run loops in the evenings and on weekends, and wandered around the area during lunch breaks. Thirty—and sometimes forty—thousand steps a day had become routine.

Marie and Paola from the HR department began by saying they were amazed by the spirit that had emerged. They had learned that some employees had found new routines—yes, some had even developed new interests. The presentation was impersonal and overly enthusiastic, and no one seemed to listen until the manager stepped forward and announced the concrete results.

“Just over 15 million steps in four weeks. The average is about 500,000 steps per person.”

A murmur that actually sounded surprised and positive spread through the room. All the grumbling at the beginning seemed forgotten, and the manager practically glowed from the atmosphere.

“So you can probably figure out that this is far more than the health recommendation, which lies between 6 and 10 thousand steps a day—depending on who you ask.”

He chuckled heartily before continuing:

“We can actually add those numbers together and get closer, because we have an average of more than 16 thousand steps daily. Per person.”

How great that it had turned out well, she thought, and hoped they would immediately start a new round. Someone from the IT department asked if that was the case, and she silently thanked them since she hadn’t dared to ask herself. But the answer was disappointing. Marie from HR stepped forward:

“We won’t be initiating a new step challenge at this time. But please keep it up! Statistics actually show that a majority of those who participate in a step challenge continue with physical activity afterward.”

Paola took over and spoke at length about research-based challenges. She delicately touched one manicured fingertip at a time while listing health-promoting effects: stronger team spirit, lower sick leave, increased productivity and workplace satisfaction—and not least, inspiration and improved well-being for the individual. The speech ended with a smile that was hardly convincing. Then the manager added, almost as if to smooth things over:

“The results themselves have actually given us a new idea, which we’ll return to.”

On Monday, she walked to work even though the step challenge was over. She didn’t have an active commuter card since she had made it a habit to walk, and of course, it was a bonus not having to pay those extra hundreds every month—especially if she was going to buy new shoes soon. Besides, she had barely gone outside during the weekend, and the restlessness had grown strong.

She was lost in thought when Sofia from the finance department stepped out from a side street and ended up next to her with a cheerful “Good morning.” Only then did she realize she was holding a strong beer.

Embarrassment drained all volume from her voice, and her “hi” was barely audible.

“Are you heading to work? Want to walk together?”

She cleared her throat to answer but saw that Sofia had noticed the can. Damn.

“I have an errand to run. See you at work.”

To quickly escape the situation, she walked toward the store on the other side of the street.

Why had she picked up that damn can? It had happened automatically, without thinking—somewhere she had bent down and picked it up, and she had no idea where or when. She regretted the whole situation, every moment of it. If she had taken the can, she could at least have explained herself and joined Sofia. Now that she finally had someone to walk with. Sofia seemed so nice. And it was completely thoughtless—because even if Sofia hadn't shown up, what had she planned to do with the can when she got to work? Or the cans, if she had picked up more? Clank into the elevator with them, swing them in her hands down the hallway? Let snails slide across someone's briefcase, spread the stale snus smell around her? It was like advertising misery, whether it was alcoholism or collecting dirty cans.

She rushed into the store and stood at the deposit machine's scanner. Decided it would be the last time. The cans had worked as motivation for movement, but she could afford new sneakers now that she wasn't spending money on a bus pass. What she missed most in life was companionship. Someone to talk to, someone to cheer her on. Being seen as a hoarder or someone who drinks on the way to work wouldn't help her chances. And considering the sweet smell in the hallway and all the snail trails on the walls that came with the can collecting, she wouldn't dare let anyone in either.

Sofia was nowhere to be seen in the hallway, nor in the staff room at lunch. With a strange feeling, she walked home after the workday ended. Quickly, because the discomfort eased a little when she moved. The sun was high and there was almost no wind. She crossed the bridge, through the light gray newly built blocks, past the cinema and the sports hall. As she approached the convenience store she had fled to that same morning, she saw Sofia. This time, she wasn't going to mess things up.

She waved and waited for Sofia, who crossed the small square.

"Hi. Are you heading this way?" she said, nodding toward the intersection where they had seen each other that morning.

Sofia didn't seem to have any strange feelings. They talked about where they lived, and it turned out Sofia's apartment was near the station.

"I pass by there every morning and afternoon. At least I have during the step challenge."

The words flowed, and she talked about how hard she found it to maintain her exercise routine in solitude. The step challenge had broken the pattern.

"That wasn't what I expected. You've walked the most steps of anyone."

"What? How do you know that?"

"You didn't know?"

Sofia explained about the lists that apparently had been available to follow, even though it wasn't supposed to be an individual competition. She felt stupid when she realized most others knew how it worked. Stupid and alone.

"You've impressed everyone. Not least the manager and HR. I've been in meetings with them most of the day."

She didn't know why Sofia was telling her this, or what she was supposed to do with the information, but at least it explained why she hadn't seen Sofia during the day. Maybe she hadn't ruined her chance after all.

Before they parted, she managed to say that she hadn't been drinking beer that morning, that it wasn't hers. Sofia interrupted her explanation with a cheerful laugh:

"Of course I know that. I've seen you collecting cans several times—I can see the station from my window. Sometimes I've thought about rushing out but..."

She waited for the rest.

"I thought maybe you wanted to do it alone, since you often run and all. I mean, that you're more dedicated. I'd just be dead weight."

She couldn't believe it. That someone saw her as dedicated, someone they didn't dare join. Sofia looked at her curiously:
"Are you collecting cans for some organization? Or with one?"
"Uh... it's more of a movement."

She had a lot to process and took a detour instead of going straight home. How was she going to fix this? She hadn't meant to lie—it just happened. A movement, what kind of movement? She would need to tone it down, but what would Sofia think? Now it was the second time she had drifted away from the truth. Exactly the opposite of what she actually wanted and needed.

When she got home, she immediately grabbed the garbage sack hanging half-full in the hallway. She had almost forgotten about it—that's how definite her decision to stop collecting had been. She went to the store again, returned the cans with force. Goodbye can, goodbye collecting, goodbye everything hidden in the dark. It was like a cleansing process, a reckoning. She put the money in her wallet with a ritualistic feeling: the last seventy-two kronor from this chapter of her life.

She was about to wrap up for the day when Paola from HR knocked and asked to come in. After some small talk came a completely unexpected question.

"Health coach? Me?"

Paola wasn't discouraged and explained what it meant: a person who inspires movement and exercise. Cheers others on and motivates them. As if it was the role itself, not the person being asked, that mattered.

"Take a couple of days and think about it."

On the way to work the next morning, she told Sofia about the unexpected offer, who wasn't as surprised.

"But I don't know how to do that. I've only walked because of the step challenge—something we did together."

"Start from that. Focus on what you find fun and rewarding yourself."

It sounded so simple when Sofia said it, but she felt lost. Maybe Sofia saw that, because she added:

"I'll join, whatever it is."

There was so much to think about, many tangled threads pulling in different directions. The step challenge was over, and now she would have to maintain her exercise routine on her own. She had implied she was part of a movement. She really wanted to keep Sofia now that she had finally found companionship. And then there was the question of becoming a health coach. Sure, the threads were connected, but something still felt off. She found a notebook and sat down at the kitchen table. Wrote a list. Looked at each part individually, drew pluses and minuses, made lines and circles.

The next morning, the alarm rang extra early. She got ready and headed out with a bundle of handwritten papers. The station, the municipal building, the bus stop, the convenience store. Once at work, she went to the HR department and knocked on Paola's door.

"Thanks for the trust, but I'm saying no."

Paola looked up from her computer.

To avoid being persuaded, she quickly added:

"I don't want to be a health coach. That's all."

Then she went to Sofia to tell her about her plans.

After a couple of weeks, the time had come. She had set the first meetup for ten o'clock on a Sunday. During the weeks of the step challenge, she had discovered a perfect loop of about fifty minutes. Now, the start and finish were placed at the town square, and the route wound through a grove and around a pond—exercise and nature in one.

She was really nervous. What if no one showed up?

“If that happens, you and I will go,” Sofia had said.

But she hadn't needed to worry. Four people were already at the square when she arrived, and while they greeted each other and chatted, three more joined. In total, nine people went on the first Companion Walk, and Sofia was one of them.

A light cloud cover dimmed the sky, and the sun shining through was gentle. The leaves burned in yellow, orange, and red. Out by the pond, the grass was dewy and still lush green—it smelled of life and renewal. It couldn't have been better. During the walk, they shifted into different groupings, and she talked to every single person who had come. When they returned to the square, they stood and chatted for a long time before heading off in different directions. It was decided they would meet again next Sunday, and bring some snacks so they could stop by the pond.

Sofia joined her side.

“I've got laundry after lunch, but do you want to meet up this afternoon? Maybe have dinner at my place?”

About the author

Carola Mikaelsson works at the Creative Writing Program Författarskolan at Lund University as a teacher and supervisor, and is trained writing educator with a couple of decades of experience in literary composition with and for private individuals, schools, organizations and publishing houses. Their writing spans both poetry and prose and often revolves around boundaries and non-normative aspects.