

ALWAYS THE LAST TO LEAVE THE PARTY

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Short Fiction

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It was Sunday when I first noticed there were fewer people in Stockholm. I went out to grab a coffee and I was crossing Surbrunnsgatan, at the corner of Roslagsgatan. The wind always blows up Surbrunnsgatan and I instinctively turned my head the other way, so that I was looking directly at the park, at the overpriced restaurant that never has any customers.

Why aren't there more people in the park walking their dogs? I thought, the wind tugging at my jacket.

I turned my head back in front of me and looked forward to my coffee – half milk, no sugar, that's the way I always get it.

I would've called Annika, but we broke up a couple of weeks ago. I'm still not sure what the break up was about. She stopped returning my calls and then one day she sent a text message to my cell phone:

Brad + Annika = 0.

She writes for "Amelia," the Swedish magazine for women in their thirties. I

used to accuse her of never getting to the point in her writing. Now I wish I could take back my criticism because it obviously wasn't accurate.

I would've liked to call Annika, because if I told her there were fewer people she would've laughed and said I was letting my overactive American imagination get the best of me.

And then we would've had sex later that night.

On Monday I went into the corner *tobak*. The Turkish owner got my Marlboro Lights and sighed when he rang up the cash register.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said. "A strange question."

"Why not?"

"Am I going crazy, or does it seem like there are fewer people in the city?"

He glanced out the front window. "You're not going crazy."

"What's going on?"

The owner shrugged. His eyes went from the window to my pack of Marlboro Lights. "Matches?"

I was running a fever Tuesday morning, so I called the office and left a voicemail message that I wouldn't be coming in. I expected at least one call during the day, because we had a big deadline coming up, but no one rang me. Not even a text message on my cell phone.

I ate some soup and a cheese sandwich while I watched Oprah. Then I watched Dr. Phil. He was doing a special show about women who love too much. I've noticed sometimes the Swedish subtitles aren't very precise, especially with Dr. Phil.

I wish I could have called Annika and asked her what a better translation for *self-actualized* is. The way they translated it, it wasn't clear who was doing the actualizing and to whom.

I walked all the way to the office on Wednesday because the bus never showed up.

I knew I was going to be late so I walked fast, so fast I only had time to nod at the Turkish man staring out the window of his *tobak*. He didn't nod back.

I walked so fast that I didn't notice how empty the streets were, or how I didn't have to weave in between women with baby carriages and the young men handing out the free newspapers.

I do remember noticing that the wind didn't seem to be blowing so hard along Surbrunnsgatan.

I don't have a key to my office. I used to think it was because I was a foreigner and they didn't trust me, but no one has a key except my boss Nils and his assistant Karin. I guess they had a meeting several years ago, before I joined the company, and it was decided that nobody else wanted the responsibility of a key.

I tried to find the janitor for our building, a middle-aged man from Somalia. He's in his fifties but he looks like he's about thirty. I think he stays young because he never smiles or frowns – I'm convinced this small frugality of emotion has all but stopped his biological clock.

I found him changing a light bulb in the hallway on the second floor.

"Is it some kind of holiday?" I asked him in Swedish.

He looked at me blankly. "I don't know," he said in English.

He screwed the bulb one last turn and we both jumped a little, startled by the sudden light.

"But then again, they never tell me anything," he said. In Swedish.

I wrote a note and left it on Nils' desk.

Did you all go golfing? Ha, ha. Call me on my mobile when you get back – don't we have a deadline today?

I was going to sign it "Brad" but then I realized it was pretty obvious. I'm the only one in the office who leaves notes in English.

There was no one in the subway station, not even an attendant at the booth. The information monitors were dark and the air down by the tracks was absolutely still. I waited for a moment, listening for the faraway hiss of the trains. There was only silence. And the strong smell of urine near the elevator.

I stared at the billboards for the new men's line at H&M. The department store was using Peter Stormare as its spokesmodel and he was wearing various garments with the same blonde goddess on his arms. I liked the ad for a raincoat the best – the goddess had her head arched back and she looked like she was moaning.

I wondered why H&M used Peter, because most Swedes don't think much of him. They think he's sold out his Swedishness to America, that all he does now is play over-the-top nutcases with unassignable "European" accents.

I wondered why H&M didn't use Stellan Skarsgård. Swedes love Stellan because he still lives in Stockholm and does interesting Swedish films in addition to his Hollywood roles. Stellan buys his *präst* cheese at the local deli in Södermalm and no one accuses him of selling out.

I walked into my neighborhood grocery store. No one was inside. I picked up a loaf of bread, a tin of coffee, a couple of *kanelbullar*, and a half-kilo of oranges. I left a hundred kronor at the checkout stand and wrote a note that said they owed me about twenty-five kronor in change.

Then I changed my mind and took back my money. There's one checkout girl who always overcharges me and I'm convinced she knows I won't correct her because my Swedish is so bad. She knows I grow anxious and sweaty, with a huge line of annoyed Swedes behind me staring at my shoddy wallet and the way I stuff the kronor notes into it like they were play money. She knows I don't want to cause a scene, and she uses this against me every time.

So I didn't feel bad leaving without paying. I even helped myself to a big chocolate

bar, this month's "Amelia," and a pack of Marlboro Lights.

I saw a woman walking from my apartment building to a car parked on the street. Her arms were loaded down with something heavy.

When I got closer I could see that it was Nina, my German neighbor. Nina moved from Munich about a year ago to live with her Swedish boyfriend Håkan. We all seemed to get along fine, I guess, but I never really clicked with her. One time I told Annika it was because Nina and I never laughed at each other's jokes. When I told Annika this she rolled her eyes and asked me why Americans need to be liked by everyone.

Nina saw me walking up to our apartment building. She dumped an armload of clothes into her BMW and hurried around to the driver's side.

"Hey Nina!" I yelled, trying not to sound desperate.

Nina didn't look at me. She opened the driver's-side door and got inside.

"Nina! Wait a minute."

She was about to put the car in gear when I knocked on her window. Nina looked at me – like she was disappointed or afraid of me, I couldn't tell which – and motioned for me to get out of the way.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She looked annoyed. "Back to Munich." She paused, then her expression melted into one of fear as she glanced up and down the street. "Before things get any veirder. Now move please."

"I'm not moving until you get out of the car and talk to me."

Fine," she said through the window.

Then she drove over my foot. I'm not sure which way she ended up driving, because I was curled up on the pavement with my eyes closed, like I was praying.

Dr. Phil was on. It was a special show about women who marry death row convicts.

The women marry these guys after a very brief courtship via mail, then quit their jobs and move to the towns where the prisons are located. I'm not sure who I felt more sympathy for – the women or the inmates or the realtors who found the women new houses.

My foot hurt and I took three Excedrins. My mom sent the Excedrin from Denver about five months ago – as if Sweden didn't have adequate pain relief medication. My mom's been a little off Sweden, ever since I told her it was common for fathers to bring their five, six, even seven year old daughters into men's locker rooms to change.

Dr. Phil was still on the TV while I sat on the ledge of my kitchen window and stared down at the empty street. There was an H&M billboard across from the video store. I didn't like this particular one – Peter models brown corduroy pants with a white sweater, and the blonde goddess looks pissed. Not pissed-at-Peter pissed, but pissed-at-you, the viewer, pissed.

I'm sorry, but you have to get real if you want to be on my show.

I heard Dr. Phil say this, followed by wild applause from the studio audience.

I wondered how they translated that particular sentence. It probably came out something like *forgive me, but you must become factual if you want to attend my television program*. Or some shit like that.

I'm not sure when my phone and cable stopped working, because I drank two shots of brandy in addition to the three Excedrins and I passed out. In spite of the alcohol and aspirin, my foot was still killing me when I woke up around ten at night.

What woke me up wasn't even the pain from my injury – it was the darkness in my courtyard. My bedroom window overlooks the courtyard in the back of my building. Light usually spills from the all the apartments onto the trees and the granite bird bath, and if I position my head just right I can usually see the leaves of the tallest birch.

I'm not sure when I realized the courtyard was dark because, like I said, I was asleep. But the darkness woke me up, like someone had poured cold water on me.

I tried setting up the rabbit ears, but I couldn't get anything on the television. Not

even BBC World.

My foot felt better on Thursday morning, so I walked up to Odenplan. I went past the *tobak* and the Turkish owner was outside sitting on a chair. We pretended we didn't see each other, even though there was no one else on the street.

I eventually came to Molly Malone's and found the front door propped open. I could hear music playing, an old Elvis Costello song. I rushed inside.

There were about five or six guys sitting on the barstools. Everyone turned around to look at me, like one of those great moments in a Western. Then they returned to their beers without so much as a hello.

Mel, the Australian owner of Molly Malone's, stood behind the bar. Mel and I had met at a Midsummer's party two years ago. His Swedish wife Helena seemed nice enough, but Mel was a bore. Throughout the evening he complained bitterly about Swedish bureaucracy, how it was strangling his business. Then he told me not to bother learning Swedish because it was a waste of time – all Swedes speak perfect English, so he didn't see the point.

Mel started filling a pint with Guinness when he saw me.

"How goes the war effort, young Bradley?"

"Fine," I said. "I suppose. Considering."

I sat down and Mel handed me the beer. I pulled out some money, but Mel pushed the bills away.

"This one's on the house."

"Thanks." I took a long sip and tried to think of small talk. "So. How's Helena doing?"

Mel shrugged. "Don't know. I haven't seen her."

"Oh." I took a gulp of my beer. "Does anybody mind if I smoke?"

"Absolutely fucking not," Mel said. "We may be living in a fucking socialist nanny state, but it's still my fucking bar. Smoke!"

I lit my cigarette and stared at the other guys. I recognized one of them – an Irishman who works for British Airways or Ryanair, I'm not sure which. The Irishman suddenly stood up and stared at us defiantly.

“Oh, for Christ's sake. Enough of this pussyfooting around.” The Irishman wiped his sweaty brow. “Can't you see what's going on, Mel?”

Finally, I thought, someone's going to answer the question. Finally. Someone's going to tell us what's happened to all the Swedes.

I held my breath.

Mel leaned across the counter towards the Irishman. “And what would that be Tim?”

The Irishman pushed his glass towards Mel. “My glass is empty. Who does a guy have to blow around here for a little service?”

The other men and Mel laughed. I thought it was funny at first, then I stopped laughing and just stared into the mirror behind the bar, the one that reflects the street through the windows.

My cell phone was still working. I tried calling Annika, but the calls kept failing, so after about five attempts I sent her a text message. I told her I liked her article in this month's “Amelia” – it was about calculating your emotional I.Q.

I didn't sign the message “Love, Brad” or anything, even though that's what I wanted to write. I didn't want to get too heavy on her, or sentimental. She wouldn't like that, not one bit.

Instead I ended with *what do u think my emot iq is?*

While I was walking towards the harbor, towards Östermalm, I noticed that someone had taken down all the H&M ads with Peter Stormare. They had been replaced with billboards featuring Stellan Skarsgård and his actor son Alexander.

What a good looking family, I thought. Good looking and happy. You can tell it in their eyes.

I walked past the designer stores in Stureplan. I walked past the boutiques and the florists and the 7-Elevens. I walked past the Sturebadet Spa, when I suddenly heard a woman's voice.

“Hallå! Du! Snälla, vänta, tack!”

I turned around to find Queen Silvia running towards me. She was wearing a cream-colored linen pants suit and looked incredibly tan.

She also looked frantic.

Silvia seemed a little relieved when she discovered I spoke English, and even more relieved when she discovered I wasn't just a tourist. It turned out the Queen of Sweden had been in a tanning bed and when the timer went off she found that everyone in the spa had disappeared.

“Do you think I'm burned?” she asked. “I probably actually was in there only five minutes too long, but how was I to know everyone left?”

“I think you look great.”

“*Tack.*” Then she smiled, and it wasn't one of those posed, I'm-the-Queen-of-Sweden smiles she gives for the paparazzi. “I mean, thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

We found Silvia's limousine parked on the street by Sturebadet, but the doors were locked.

“I don't suppose you have an extra set of keys?” I asked her.

“No. My purse is essentially empty.” She opened her bag to show me – it didn't even have a wallet, just some Tic Tacs and lipstick. “I don't even have cab fare.”

She seemed to think this was funny.

“Not a problem. We’ll think of something else.”

I’d agreed to help Silvia get back to the royal castle out at Drottningholm. I looked at the shoes she was wearing and silently ruled out walking – it had to be at least fifteen kilometers to the castle.

“Maybe we could take the subway,” Silvia finally said, trying to be helpful. “That would be a fast way to get home.” Her eyes lit up. “Yes, it would be fast and it would be an adventure, I think.”

I didn’t want to be the one to tell her that the subways weren’t running, so I agreed to her plan. We headed off to T-Centralen.

There was no one in the subway station, but I did find a train parked at the platform.

“I think we’re out of luck,” I finally said, after Silvia came out of the ladies’ restroom with a brave look on her face.

“Oh dear.” She walked up to the train and touched it lightly. “Do you think it’s terribly hard to drive one of these?”

“Hard, yes. Have you ever ridden on one when a driver’s in training?” I mimed being thrown about.

Silvia smiled demurely. “No.”

“I used to wonder why Swedes never rode the subway with a coffee in their hands. Then I understood.”

Silvia laughed a little too hard. It was clear she didn’t understand at all.

It’s actually not that hard to drive a subway. The control panel’s pretty simple and straightforward, a little like a video game. The trick, we discovered, is to be very, very gentle with the clutch-like lever that controls the speed. It’s like shifting gears on a ten-speed, but even more delicate. Much more delicate.

I turned on the PA system and announced that our next stop was Drottningholm. Silvia giggled and swept a strand of hair from her face.

We passed the Hötorget station at a fairly brisk clip. I saw the Turkish guy from my neighborhood *tobak*, standing on the platform, very close to the edge.

I was afraid he was going to throw himself onto the tracks, but he merely waved at us. Silvia waved back with a confused look. A moment later:

“Who was that Arab man?”

“Someone I know.”

“Oh.” Pause. “He looked like a nice man. Is he?”

“Yes. His cigarettes are never stale.”

We passed the Fridhemsplan station. I saw Mel and some of the guys from Molly Malone’s waiting at the platform. They waved at us like drunk hitch hikers trying to score a ride.

I would’ve stopped for them, but like I said, the clutch is a little sensitive. You kind of have to plan for these things in advance.

We passed the Kristineberg station. I noticed Silvia looked pensive.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You can tell me, you know.”

“Tell you what?”

“Oh please. I know what everyone says behind my back.”

“I’m not sure I do.”

She stared out the front window, with her chin held high. “That I’m a – well, that I’m a German from South America.”

“But you are a German from South America, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m a German from South America! But that doesn’t automatically mean my father was a Nazi!”

She pounded the console so hard that my hand let go of the clutch. We lurched to a stop and both of us fell to the floor.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I helped her back up.

“Yes.” She stared into my eyes. “Hold me, Brad. Hold me, please.”

She rested her head against my neck. “Hold me like there’s no tomorrow.”

So I did.

“You have very good-looking children,” I said to Silvia once we started on our way again.

“Thank you.”

She grew quiet and I regretted my comment. “We don’t have to talk about them if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s not that. I worry about Victoria sometimes.”

“It must be hard for her to be the Crown Princess.”

“It’s hard having Madeleine as a younger sister.” Silvia reapplied her lipstick.

I knew what she was talking about. Everyone in Europe thought Madeleine was the hotter of the two princesses. Madeleine got most of the tabloid coverage – when she dated someone new it was front page. When Victoria visited a dairy farm, it was page eight, bottom column.

“Victoria seems like she’s got a really good head on her shoulders,” I said.

Silvia smiled sadly. “You Americans are always so diplomatic, aren’t you? That quality drives my husband crazy, because he says you never really know what an American thinks of you. But I like it.”

She kissed my cheek. “I like it a lot.”

We had to walk the last leg to the castle, so I broke into a Stadium store and stole a pair of New Balance walking shoes for Silvia. She carried her expensive pumps in one hand and held my arm with the other.

Even though she was nearly as old as my mother, I thought she looked amazingly sexy. I considered whether to tell her this or not.

“What’s your dream Brad?” She looked at me with her piercing brown eyes.

“What’s your passion, your goals? I’d really like to know.”

“My dream is to one day own my own business,” I said.

I waited for her to laugh or roll her eyes – just like my mother. I waited for her to tell me I was only a dreamer, that I didn’t have the kind of common sense needed for business because my head was always in the clouds. I waited for her to bring up my every personal defeat, from my failure to sell enough candy bars in Cub Scouts to my breakup with Annika.

Instead, Silvia stopped walking and put her hand on my cheek with compassion.

“What kind of business? Tell me, because I can see you’ve never told anyone this dream.”

I sighed with relief and felt my pulse start to race.

“I want to import American food products. You know, not the crap they import now, but really good stuff.”

“Fantastic.” Silvia started walking again, but her attention was completely focused on me.

“I want to become rich and then when I’m rich I’ll marry a beautiful and brilliant Swedish woman and we’ll have a lot of kids and raise them to be bilingual and bicultural.”

“Yes. Of course you will.”

“And my wife and I will grow old together and spend our time up in the north of Sweden, or maybe southern Florida, or maybe both. We’ll be so happy together, and our kids and our grandkids will adore us, not because we’re rich but because we’re fantastic and we raised them to be bilingual and bicultural – the best of both worlds! – so they’re neither spoiled and fat

nor cold and reserved.”

“Bravo!”

“And when we die, we’ll be cremated. Our kids will take our ashes and spread them over Sweden and the U.S., from a plane high up in the clouds, so our ashes spread like mist over the countries. And because the plane will be so high up in the stratosphere, some of our ashes will stay in the atmosphere forever, circling the globe over and over and over. Like Krakatoa.”

I paused for a moment. “That’s my plan. More or less.”

“But this is not just a dream, it’s poetry! If I weren’t so tired I might break into tears, it’s so beautiful.”

“Thank you.” We continued walking. “Do you have a dream, Silvia?”

“I want to grow old out of the public eye. Like Garbo.”

“You *are* like Garbo,” I finally said, shyly.

“*Tack.*”

Then she added: “The other thing I like about Americans is the way they can compliment without meaning it.”

Then she kissed me on the lips.

We stood in front of the castle. It looked dark and quiet. Lake Malären was dark and quiet too – not even a ripple on the surface of the water.

“Are you sure you want me to go?” I asked.

“Yes, I’ve taken too much of your time.”

“But – “

“Look, I think I see a light on in Victoria’s room.” She kissed me on the forehead with a wistful look. “Go, Brad. Go and make your dream come true, and when it comes true send me a little postcard and simply write *it came true*. Will you do that for me? *It came true.*”

“Yes. Of course.”

I watched her walk towards the castle, her figure disappearing in the gray twilight of dusk. I suddenly heard my cell phone buzz – I had a text message.

It was from Annika.

You don't get it, do you asshole?

Then the light in Victoria's room went dark, just as dusk ended and night fell completely. Just as a faint breeze blew across Lake Malären. Just as a swan wailed sadly for its mate.

Just as my cell phone died.