

GOODBYE GOTEBOURG

The Breakup

"You're emotionally dead to me."

Said without malice, the words hung in the darkened room like a black hole, sucking in every ounce of energy and most of my grey matter.

What was there to say? In previous moments of dissolution my wife and I had always tried other words (or lovers) to try to devastate the other...but these words caused my breathing to stop. They took our relationship out of the previous ten years of compromised cohabitation and into a dark new reality that had always hovered just below its surface. The sad part was that SHE uttered them. I never had the chance. Or perhaps couldn't have said them anyway...you know, men.

So, as I lay there, glistening with my last foray into her body, I felt more than my dick go limp.

"You're not serious?" I ask, frightened that both she was and that she wasn't.

There was no response.

"You really don't mean that, do you?"

She lay dead as stone next to me; her arm a whisper from mine.

We didn't move for a long time. Didn't need to. It was over.

In Sweden

"Hey man, where the fuck you headed?" came the voice from the speeding Fairthorpe Electra loaded down with bags of laundry, as I stood on the road hitching out of Goteborg.

It was Wayne. A sailor from Iowa. He was visiting his Swedish sweetie and she had cajoled him into doing the laundry. And on the way he saw me and stopped a few yards ahead.

"What's up, man?"

"Headed up to Oslo," I told him, walking over to the strange little English sports car.

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"Hmmm...yeah...well listen, man. I'll take you out of town. There's really only one road north in this blockhead country."

Wayne looked the archetypical Viking: big, broad-shouldered, with red hair and beard. And he was looking for some amusement. So I hopped in.

"How long you been in this asshole country?" he wanted to know.

I told him my saga as quickly as possible, figuring the outskirts of Goteborg were just moments away: "A few days. Came in from Jutland on the ferry. Been sleeping in a bush on Karl Gustavsgatan."

"A bush!" he roared, his bushy head thrown back so far as to nearly hit the rear end of the little car. "Shit, man, my chick's place is on Karl Gustav..."

"Got a bush outside?"

Wayne was amused. And he decided right then-and-there to drive me to Norway.

On the way to the border - some 200 kilometers north of Goteborg and the laundry - Wayne and I drank some beer, smoked some American cigs, discussed his girlfriend Gunilla, his girlfriend's sisters, brother and parents, and how he, despite his love for her, just couldn't keep his dick in his jeans when he wasn't with her.

"I mean," he ranted in his reedy voice, "have you talked to these blockheads? It's yo..yah...all the fucking time, man...that's all they ever say! I mean they're fucking exasperating, man! The women, sure, they're beautiful, but the fucking guys? Dolts...All that yo, yah, tock bullshit...good Christ what assholes!"

Wayne and Gunilla had met in London a few years earlier and quickly fell in together. And since Wayne was away at sea most of the time, he really had no place he called home, so Gunilla's place on Goteborg's main drag was it. From the conversation I figured that Wayne just hung around while Gunilla worked. He was bored. He had made no friends in all his time in Sweden - maybe a few ex-patriot Americans - but no one that he could just sit around and shoot some shit with. In that way I guess I was a god-send.

So, as we approached the Norwegian border, Wayne made me a proposal that, as it has turned out, has, if not changed my life, at least set me off into a world of reverie that had me - thirty years later - sitting in a dark movie theater with tears running down my face.

"Listen, man, when you get back from Norway call me and you can stay with Gunilla and me. It's OK. Stay as long as you want. And I'll even hook you up with her sister. Her name's Anne-Marie. She's very beautiful. Golden blond hair. Golden skin. Perfect white teeth. Unbelievable body...she'll like you."

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What did I know? I was just floating along. Married and taking a vacation from that responsibility, my biggest desire was to get up to the fjords in Norway. Other than that my plan was to meet up with my wife later in the Summer. In Luxembourg. Then travel to England to visit friends. Maybe on to Wales and Ireland. Then back home to the little farm-house we rented in upstate New York - the farm-house with the upstairs bedroom that we lay naked on the bed in when she told me that I was emotionally dead to her. That farm-house.

"What do you want to do?" I asked her in the darkness.

"I can't stay here," she said. Not coldly, but from miles and miles away.

"Do you want me to move out?"

"No," she said, she would move to her friend Joan's in the City. "You stay here. You have all your paintings here. This house has been good to you that way."

So I stayed. I couldn't paint. Couldn't function. I went to work, but it was all vague. Diffused. I would come home and sit in my studio and just stare out at the Winter, thinking of nothing much. Couldn't paint. Couldn't function. And Christmas was coming. Then came a letter from Sweden.

"Sorry to hear about you and the Missus," wrote Wayne, "but we've got a proposition. Why don't you hop on a plane and spend Christmas with us? Gunilla said she'll make a turkey with all the trimmings. And of course Anne-Marie will be there too."

I had gone back to see Wayne after my trip to Norway, met Gunilla, and of course Anne-Marie. We did hit it off, but I was married and she had a boyfriend in Paris. "She's not serious about him," Wayne told me, as Gunilla, overhearing him, sighed in that particular way of Scandinavia. So we, the four of us, went on a picnic or two, went to visit her very uptight parents out in the suburbs, took in a movie downtown, and then the night before I was to leave for points South, I found myself in a pull-out bed with Anne-Marie in Gunilla's kitchen. Lots of kisses. Some feels. We were both naked to the waist when Wayne walked in looking for something to eat.

"Shit!" he said, then quickly turned off the light and backed out of the kitchen.

Anne-Marie was a little freaked out. "What will Gunilla think of me?"

I certainly had no answer to that. In fact I had no voice at all. I just lay there looking up at the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. It was an honor to be in bed with her. Sex was too much to even think about, let alone ask for. She got dressed, smiling as I watched her. "I'll take the bus home," she whispered. And she kissed me very softly, oh so tenderly, with great care, on my mouth. No tongue, just soft fleshy lips, a shade darker than pink, her brilliant white teeth just visible between them.

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I couldn't say a word. Nothing at all. I just watched her slip out the door thinking I'd never see her again. The next morning Wayne apologized, saying he didn't know she was in the kitchen with me, let alone in bed with me.

"Did you ball her?" he asked, grinning.

I told him the truth. It seemed to disappoint him on one hand; on the other it seemed to make him feel better that I didn't. I didn't see Gunilla, she had already left for work. Later that morning Wayne dropped me off on the road South, toward Malmo, and gave me the phone number of Lisbeth, a girl he had fooled around with in Copenhagen.

"She'll put you up...maybe get laid, too," he laughed. Of course I looked her up. Didn't get laid. Wayne told me that he might come to the States. He hadn't been there in couple of years and had become "re-interested". Told me he'd look me up when he did. But that was the last time I saw him for awhile. We exchanged letters. He was all over the place; sailing to South America, the Caribbean and back to Europe. And Goteborg. Anne-Marie was spending a lot of time in Paris with her boyfriend. She sent me a postcard. All I had to do was close my eyes and I could see her leaving Gunilla's apartment that morning. I did that over and over for a year, until I left for Sweden again that week before Christmas.

I landed in Luxembourg in a blizzard. I was on one of those \$186 Icelandic Air round-trips-with-unlimited-return that was so prevalent in those days. The plane, though, was seven hours late and when we landed I was delirious. Of course, Wayne was waiting. And he had plans; man, did he have plans.

"Look, Rich, there's this boat that a group of us are working on in Ystad harbor, southern Sweden, area called Skona, the people are more like Danes - thank fucking Christ - and well, why don't you come along with us?"

"To where?"

"We're sailing down to the Canaries for the Winter. Leaving in February. Then its on to the Caribbean. Then who knows?"

Wayne was a rigger. His thing was splicing ropes to make those incredibly strong and durable lines that basically held the sails to the ship masts. It was his dream to sail on a ship like that, the modern merchant variety no challenge to someone as well-versed in the life of the sea as he was.

"What about Gunilla?" I asked, but who I really was asking about was Anne-Marie. I just couldn't say her name.

I had decided to go with the flow on this trip. Not much different than any of my other ventures out into the world, but this time, feeling like an open wound, I thought the tack to take was complete and total surrender to the moment. A kind of holiday Zen.

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"She's coming to the Canaries later...so, whatta you think?"

"Sounds good to me," I heard myself say.

With that, Wayne roared his delight. Smacked me on the back as we hurtled threw the dark, snowy Luxembourg night in Gunilla's green Volvo. And to celebrate my coming apprenticeship-at-sea, Wayne decided to stop at all and every bar on the way to Copenhagen in an international pub-crawl of major proportions.

We stopped the first night in Bastogne, Belgium, an eerily-lit tank from Patton's Third Army blitz across Europe sitting toad-like in the main square. The only bar open on the brutally cold, windy Winter night was one frequented by prostitutes. And with both of us drinking heavily to celebrate our pending voyage to warmer climes and ports unknown, we settled in with a couple hookers. Mine was skinny, with dark hair and what at one time in the not so-distant-past was a pretty face; Wayne's had immense breasts and enough paint on her face to obscure not only her age, but her species. Suddenly depressed - and drunk - I passed out on my ladies' lap, but just before I did I thought I heard Wayne say to his: "Let's go upstairs."

I woke up in a strange room with Wayne asleep in the next bed. Neither of us could remember much of anything. Wayne could only recall "some immense tits" smothering him to near-death, and him liking it.

The next night was in Delft, Holland, where I had stopped the year before on my way up to the fjords in Norway. The trip where I met Wayne. That time I had met a woman named Marlene at the main canal and she had invited me back to her commune near the university. I tried to call her this time around, but there was no answer. So Wayne and I got plastered again. I had a breakdown of sorts, tearily recounting my plight of the unloved. Wayne was sympathetic, but he had his own problems.

It seems that Wayne was diddling the girlfriend of some guy on the boat. The guy knew and didn't mind. "Are you picking my flowers?" he asked Wayne, a big smile on his face. Wayne was freaked out that Gunilla would find out, especially since she knew both of them and socialized with the girlfriend in Goteborg. But particularly since it shattered Wayne's redemptive moral code of never fucking any woman that lived in the same town as Gunilla. "I mean it's right under her nose," he said, with an incredulity that bordered on pathology.

"Don't worry, man," I told him, "Gunilla really loves you and would forgive you anything." I really had no idea if this was true, but I sensed it. Gunilla, unlike Wayne, was loyal to a fault.

He looked relieved, but my mind started to see this trip as potential disaster, with me, once again, looking elsewhere for rational behavior, and wondering if I was going to be present at not just the end of my long-term relationship, but Wayne's as well. Then

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Wayne uttered the magic name..."Anne-Marie is going to be there for Christmas. She and the Frenchman are on the outs."

I tried not to say anything. Not to think about Anne-Marie. But I was deeply relieved. Even if nothing would happen romantically I knew that she and I would have some good times.

We hit Copenhagen and stayed first with a Communist school teacher that Wayne had schmoozed on one of his previous excursions. The guy had copies of the English-language Pyongyang Times - the weekly edition of North Korea and its Supreme Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung. Every article in all the papers was about Kim, with photos of Comrade Kim meeting with this or that trade union from...(name the country)...every photo was the same. Every story the exact same words. Wayne and I cracked up looking through the weekly Pyongyang Times, but the school teacher saw no humor in this regard. In fact he was totally humorless in all regards. So Wayne and I moved our base of operation to Lisbeth's apartment in Copenhagen's center.

Wayne had fooled around with Lisbeth the Summer before I met him and stayed with her a couple of times after I left Sweden the first time. But unlike when he, or I, stayed with her, Lisbeth's nubile 16-year old sister was living with her when we returned. He quickly moved in on Lisbeth and I became a fifth-wheel on that romantic cart. So, for the three-or-four nights we stayed with her, Lisbeth enlisted a couple friends to provide me some companionship. One was a good-looking redhead that never talked; the other a goofy-looking girl with thick glasses that never stopped talking. The only thing to relieve my growing despair was Lisbeth's sister, who would give me small flirtatious glances and laughed at most everything I said, funny or not. And one night when Wayne and Lisbeth and the friend who never stopped talking were out at a movie while I slept, the sister came out of her room and sat down next to me on the couch. She couldn't sleep, "knowing you were out here," and she stroked my face. Held my hand. We kissed. But nothing much else happened. I told her I was madly in love with her and she laughed. When we heard Wayne, Lisbeth and the friend who never stopped talking at the door, she rushed back to her room. All night I just lay there, staring at her door.

We left early the next morning, catching the ferry to Malmo, and then the drive down to Ystad. I missed Lisbeth's sister...she had already left for school.

The boat in Ystad was a two-masted schooner christened the "Unicorn" by its rakish captain, a thirty-something French-Canadian named Jacques. Jacques, his wandering American wife Barbara and a fifty-ish Finn named Perti had scraped enough money together to buy a hull in Norway, have it hauled down to Ystad and were in the process of fitting it out. Jacques, a hustler in the fine sense of the word, had finessed an engine from a company in England, creating a bogus foundation called The Windjammer Society. Barbara was providing funds to keep things going. And Perti made all the iron fittings in his smith-shop on the pier. News of the boat had spread across Europe and drew an international crew of young sailors wanting the experience of building a boat, and more able-bodied seamen - like Wayne - who had the dream. Me? I was just along for the ride.

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And what a ride it was. Work all day out in the freezing air, then party every night with the local girls to warm us up. There were a couple Swedes in the crew named Anders, one the mate that Wayne was cuckholding; a gypsy named Andre from who knew where, who took care of the engine; a Brit named Richard, who smoked dope all day; two Danes, Tomas and Bjorn, who were kind of quiet; and a German named Klaus, who thought I was humorous, but could never figure out what I was doing on the boat.

Jacques' wife had fucked them all. Her "perk" I guess for providing funds. But not Wayne or me. She seemed to prefer the European model. Her libido was a source of tension on board, but Jacques enjoyed being captain so much that he just let it slide. And after three days of working and drunken yo-ho-hoing, it was time for Wayne and I to make the drive up to Goteborg and Christmas with Gunilla and Anne-Marie - and as it turned out, their sister, brother and parents.

The drive up was quieter than usual. Wayne definitely had something on his mind.

"You worried about Gunilla finding out you've been fucking Anders' girlfriend?"

"I don't know, Rich, but I think maybe Gunilla and I are coming to the end."

Great! I thought. Just perfect for my mental state. And as we zoomed up the Swedish coast and into Goteborg the night before Christmas the gloom in the car was palpable. We got to Gunilla's apartment on Karl Gustavsgatan and she wasn't there. Oh, shit, I thought. There was no note.

"I guess this is it," said Wayne, slumping down on the same pull-out bed that Anne-Marie and I had occupied the year before. He was ashen. We both rolled cigs from his tin of Drum.

"Look, man," I told him, "you called her from Copenhagen. That was four days ago. Did she sound OK?"

"A little vague."

"What does that mean?"

"Like she was hiding something or didn't want to tell me something."

"So?"

"I tried to call her from Ystad a few times and there was no answer."

Maybe he's right, I thought, maybe Gunilla is doing to Wayne what Wayne does to her. We sat and smoked a few more cigarettes. And then the phone rang. It was Gunilla. She had been staying at her parents for the past few days with her sisters and brother. Getting things ready for Christmas. It was family time. And Wayne was in love again.

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When we walked into the parent's house later that night Anne-Marie was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. She was wearing a little apron and looked at me and smiled, her face lighting up. Gunilla rushed over and gave Wayne and me hugs and kisses. Anne-Marie stayed in the doorway, looking at me and smiling. We couldn't take our eyes off each other. Then she walked over to me, smiling and laughing, twirled my hair in her fingers and gave me a sweet kiss at the edge of my mouth. I almost got an erection.

That whole Christmas week is now a blur...more felt than able to recount in detail. It was Anne-Marie and more Anne-Marie - to see "The Godfather" and us holding hands and her calling me her "meatball"; teaching her the lyrics to "Give My Regards To Broadway", with her thinking that "Harold" Square was a person; walking late nights in the park in the center of Goteborg, all lit up for the holiday; drinking hot chocolate and rolling in the snow; and talking and talking and making out all the time - all the time - and coming so close to making love to her that I could barely breath. I had fallen in love again.

One night I told Wayne that I wasn't sure if I was going to stay with the boat in Ystad after Christmas, and then go to the Canaries. "I'm in love with Anne-Marie," I told him.

He was disappointed. "Rich...this is the opportunity of a lifetime."

"That's how I feel about Anne-Marie," I said, probably fixed in a state of quixotic delusion.

"You're not thinking clearly, man. I mean Anne-Marie is great and all that, but you're just getting over the breakup of your marriage and she's still sort-of involved with the Frenchman."

"I'll take my chances," I told him, wondering if perhaps he wasn't right and more pain was in store.

We all went down to Ystad for New Year's and a raucous, if not bittersweet party on the Unicorn. Bittersweet because I told Wayne that I would be going back to Goteborg with Anne-Marie and Gunilla, and that Gunilla had offered me the living room for awhile; and raucous because Anne-Marie had jumped from the boat into the frigid Baltic to retrieve our sleeping bag that I had errantly tossed overboard in a drunken and hashish-induced fit of exuberance. That night, in the dining cabin, with a few other revelers sleeping it off nearby, I tried to make love to Anne-Marie.

"Not now," she whispered. And she snuggled into my chest. No, it wasn't until we returned to Gunilla's apartment that we, on the floor in the warmth of a little ceramic stove, that we finally found ourselves entwined. It felt unexpected.

"I wanted to wait," she whispered.

"So did I," I heard myself say. And for the first time in my life, I probably meant it.

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Gunilla drove down to Ystad to visit Wayne the next weekend, and Anne-Marie and I stayed in her apartment. It was a weekend of Roman proportions: me lazing about, Anne-Marie feeding me, fucking me, loving me, acceding to my every whim and desire; listening to Gunilla's only three music tapes ("Sweet Baby James", "Santana" and "Sly and The Family Stone") over and over. I did a great drawing of her, a beauty where she slept naked at the foot of the pull-out bed, her head tucked so serene into a scrunched-up pillow. It was truly the best of times.

Gunilla returned from Ystad very depressed. Anne-Marie and I heard her crying in the kitchen.

"Ah, the lovers," she said, smiling through the tears. She explained that "Wayne is so sad down there. He and Jacques really don't see things eye-to-eye. Wayne is serious about this. It's been his dream forever, but Jacques is...." and Gunilla sighed that Scandinavian sigh - like catching her breath - that I've heard no other place..."and I think I misses us."

I felt guilty. Wayne was my friend. He wanted me to share his dream. I mean, the guy drove all the way to Luxembourg to pick me up and waited there all day for my plane. I could have gone back to Ystad to visit before the boat sailed for Germany, but I didn't. My head was just so full of Anne-Marie.

Gunilla went down to Ystad once more and she and Wayne called Anne-Marie and me from there. The Unicorn was sailing across the Baltic to Kiel the next morning.

"You pissed at me?" I asked Wayne.

"Shit no, Rich. I woulda done the same thing. Have done the same thing." And he laughed. "Anne-Marie's a great chick, man, and we're like brothers-in-law now...you have obligations." And he laughed again.

Obligations. Every day with Anne-Marie was dream-like. I was in a trance. Our routine was pretty simple: Anne-Marie would stay with me until one or two in the morning - Gunilla, who was an occupational therapist, was tired when she came home and we always made dinner for her and talked until she turned in. Then after some bed-time, I would drive Anne-Marie to her parent's house in the Goteborg suburbs - I didn't question why she didn't stay all night, it was just the way it was. It seemed to be some kind of respectful ritual for Gunilla. Or maybe her parents. Anne-Marie worked mornings as a nurse's aid and would show up at Gunilla's around noon for lunch. Then, after some afternoon sack-time we'd go out somewhere: a walk, to the museum, the park, shopping for food, our arms wrapped around each other, kissing constantly...the Lovers. Like Wayne said, I had obligations.

In early February my money ran out. I still had my return ticket home. So I was presented with a couple options: stay in Goteborg and find a job or hitch back to Luxembourg and fly home.

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In the month-or-so since I had left the States I had thought very little about it. Just blotted the place from my brain. Being with Anne-Marie made it easy. She wanted me to stay. Learn Swedish. She'd ask around to get me a job. Live with her somewhere. But she understood that I had to return home for awhile. Straighten things out. See what was left for me there. And then she would come over in the Summer and live with me in the little farmhouse "in your crazy America" - as she called it.

My last night in Goteborg she finally stayed over.

"I just wanted to make sure," she told me as we lay on the sofa in Gunilla's living room.

"I know," I said, but I really didn't. I fell in love with her a long time before, but she had to be sure.

"Not only compatible in bed," she said, "but if we could be a real couple. Love, nothing else, Rich. You do understand?"

"Of course," I told her, but I don't think I did...then. I don't think I thought of anything at all with any kind of depth. I existed there in Gunilla's apartment in Goteborg just to see Anne-Marie every moment I could. To love her as much as I could. I think I knew that I would go home sometime, but I never thought of leaving her. Putting 4000 miles between us. It just didn't register in what was left of my brain.

That last day in Goteborg was terribly sad. We lay in bed together all day. Not making love, just holding each other. She tried to cheer me up: "What shall I do for Rich?" she giggled. "Shall we try some new kind of sex?"

I couldn't respond, everything was limp.

"I know," she said, laughing, and she snuggled into my armpit and began singing - "Give my regards to Broadway, remember me to Harold Square..." and I broke up. Christ, was I in love.

Going Back

"I'm having a baby."

The words buckled my knees.

"I was hoping we could put everything behind us and start again," said Patti, as we walked in the field behind that little farm-house in upstate New York.

I told her about Anne-Marie.

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She listened with a frozen smile.

And Ann-Marie and Sweden suddenly felt so far away.

Gunilla drove me to the boat for Germany that last night in Goteborg. Anne-Marie sat in the back-seat, silent. I tried to make conversation with Gunilla about Wayne. I got my ticket with the last of my money. The boat was leaving in just a few minutes. There was little more I could say. Anne-Marie wouldn't look at me. She sat stone-faced staring down at the floor. Gunilla gave me some money that she and Anne-Marie had pooled. "In reserve," she said, holding my hands. They knew I was completely broke and that these funds made it possible to take a train from Hamburg to Luxembourg instead of hitching in the cold. I tried to say goodbye to Anne-Marie, but she couldn't look at me. Tears fell from her eyes onto her soft, soft cheeks. "I'm not good at this, Rich," she said. "Neither am I," I told her, kneeling in front of her. It was time to go. "I love you," I told her. She didn't look at me, just reached out her hand and touched my face. The horn sounded - it was boarding time. I hugged Gunilla. Kissed Anne-Marie, who was sobbing. And ran up the ramp to the Goteborg-Hamburg overnight ferry. I was trying not to think. Think of what I was doing. I hustled up to the upper deck as the ferry started to pull away from the pier. Found a chair in the corner, Laid out my sleeping bag. And sat. As the ferry started moving away from Goteborg it finally hit me. And hard...I'm leaving Anne-Marie...I'm leaving Anne-Marie!...Am I fucking crazy?!...I went to the window that looked out over the dock and there far below was Anne-Marie and Gunilla. They were looking for me. Searching the windows on the ferry. I started waving frantically to get their attention. And as the ferry pulled away they saw me. I began writing messages in the steaming windows. Messages of love. And hope. Anne-Marie blew kisses and held her hands over her heart. Gunilla waved and blew kisses, too. Finally, I just stood there, hands pressed to the window, and cried uncontrollably, as Anne-Marie and Gunilla and Goteborg and Wayne and everything else over the past month got smaller and smaller and finally disappeared into the black Scandinavia night.

When I walked up the dark, Winter road to the farm-house I could think of nothing but Anne-Marie. Even when I looked in the window at my friends who were house-sitting and also saw Patti, nothing registered but Anne-Marie. Only Anne-Marie. I was unexpected. They were sitting around the kitchen table discussing something. My wife looked sad. The next day I knew why.

"Is it mine?" I asked of the slight swelling in her belly.

"I'm four months..." and she trailed off. Four months before was the night she told me she was emotionally dead to me. The last time we made love was the moment of conception. It seemed like a cruel joke. A cosmic ha-ha at my expense.

"But you're emotionally dead to me, right?" I said without sarcasm. I just wanted to know what she was feeling.

"Things change."

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"Because you're pregnant?"

"No...even before I realized that I had made a terrible mistake."

I can't do this, I thought. I'm in love with Anne-Marie, not with Patti. And I homed in on that feeling, that single fact of my then life: I am in love with Anne-Marie. Anne-Marie...Anne-Marie, she was all I wanted to think about, to see, touch, feel next to me, but instead I was being dragged back into the past.

"Christ! you broke up with me!" I said with more anger than I truly felt. What I was, was crushed. "Did you know you were pregnant before I left for Sweden?"

"I had thought I might be. And I thought of telling you. But you were leaving and I knew that I broke your heart and that you needed time away to think about everything...I figured I'd wait til you came back."

"And if I didn't?...I wasn't going to."

"Then I would have had the baby and got on with my life. I would have told you, but not like now; not thinking and hoping that we might try again."

At that moment I felt that there was no way that I could let that happen. No way I would abandon this baby. But I resisted.

"Look, I'm really in love. Anne-Marie's not here, but she's coming over in June to live here with me...I don't love you anymore. I'm sorry."

Patti moved to her family home on Long Island a few days later and I began a tortuous descent into a hell of my own making. I would write Anne-Marie and tell her what was happening. What I was thinking about everything. She never doubted me. Never asked if I still loved her. She only hoped that she could see me again. "That I must do, Rich," she wrote to me over and over. The letters got more and more intense, with me professing my undying love like the crazy man I had become and her reassuring me that everything would be fine once she came over. I got periodic calls from Patti assuring me that everything was alright, that she would raise the child by herself and that I could be as involved as I wanted to be. My emotions were stretched taut. Guilt from family, friends, "but you've never met Anne-Marie," I would say to them, pleading for understanding. "And besides, I wasn't the one who ended things," I would add, looking for some kind of absolution.

Then one day in May Patti showed up looking as pregnant as humanly possible. She wore a long white dress, was deeply tanned, and with her long auburn hair tied back, looked incredibly beautiful. There was an ease in our conversation, resuscitated from long ago. The same reference points. The same off-kilter outlook toward life. And I fell in love with her again. Right then. Anne-Marie and Sweden started to bleach away.

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I sent Anne-Marie a letter telling her how I felt. Telling her it was probably better to wait to come over until the baby was born. She was understanding. And signed off with her love. But I had made my choice.

The baby boy was born in early July and a week later I sent Anne-Marie a letter describing the birth and how I felt watching it. She wrote back and said that it was obvious that I should stay here with my wife and son and that she understood my choice: "I probably would have made the same one."

Henry and The Painting

"Mommy and I are just going to live apart for awhile, until we can figure out what we all want to do," I told my little boy on the porch of the upstate farm-house. He had just turned six. It was the saddest day of my life.

I drove them to their new house. Helped unload the bags. Showed my son his new room. And when it came time for me to go he just buried himself in his pillow and cried. It was terrible.

I buried myself in my painting. And for the first time in years allowed myself to think of Anne-Marie again. Actually the two connected when I found the pad with that drawing of her laying naked at the foot of the pull-out bed in Gunilla's kitchen. I had burned everything else: letters, photos, momentos and anything else that would make me think of her. For some reason I saved that notebook. And I turned the drawing into a four-foot by six-foot painting, the Goteborg-Hambureg ferry hovering behind as I, turning away and hefting my backpack as my hand extended toward her, bid her "adjo" - farewell.

One weekend my friend Jim came to visit. He knew the entire saga. I showed him the painting.

"It isn't hard to see that you and her have some unfinished business," he said, smiling at the painting.

"Like what?"

"Look at it, Rich," and he gestured toward the canvas. "I mean why don't you contact her and see what's going on? See if she still has feelings for you...you know...like this," and he pointed at the "me" in the painting - a mix of resignation and hope, caught in mid-step away from her, my hand just hanging above the curve of her hip, pleading for help.

"But it's seven years ag."

"What difference does time make, man?...Christ, Rich, I think any woman in the world would be thrilled to know that someone out in the world was thinking of her so intensely,

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especially seven years after. What can you lose? She's not there? She doesn't answer back? It's probably a good idea to write her and just tell her how you feel. Really, man, what can you lose?

Nothing, I decided, and wrote to Anne-Marie in care of her parents. A few days before Christmas I received a letter from Sweden. It was Anne-Marie. Her handwriting. It sent chills through my body.

"Rich," she wrote, "I have been waiting for that letter from you for 7 years. I can't tell you how relieved I felt. Just finally a sign that what we had together really had meant something to you too. Often I thought of myself as naive, stupid - I just cried when I got your letter, but I cried with happiness and relief. Not been able to cry like that over you since we parted. I got to tell you this, Rich, because I wanted to write you so many times, and I did, but threw the papers away, I couldn't intrude in your life. I didn't have no right to do so. I have not either found any peace within myself regarding you and me. Everything 'ended' so abrupt for me and it was really bad. Of course I wanted you to be happy, and you made your choice. But it took me almost two years before I even wanted to kiss anyone again. Still I don't feel free to love as much as I want to love. Completely. Rich, I want to see you to get over it. I want to see your insane America so I can understand something of what it is like. Will you meet me at Kennedy Airport and we talk over days and nights? I see you are at the same address. I have had six at least since then. Your letter luckily got to Ulveliden. It could just as well never have reached me and then we would have screamed out at 80 years, but still with a whole ocean between us...I'm so glad you finally wrote, just this letter made it so much easier for me. Everything. I don't know what it is between you and me, just feel it was something deep. And I don't know what you and I are now, but I want to get over this memory, or to love someone else. I'm still a lunatic I guess and I guess I always will be. In so many ways I'm doubting and hesitating over things, but in one thing I am quite clear, and that is whatever it will be like, I want to see you again. I don't have much money but I think they have some fairly cheap planes over there now and I could be with you for a week or so. Can you meet me? I wanted to go now, but it's not possible. Maybe February...Anne-Marie"

If there is a god, I thought as I finished Anne-Marie's letter, he or she has just tossed me a beautiful bouquet. And given me another chance. A second chance at loving Anne-Marie. I couldn't believe it. It was like some fairy tale, this story of love, love lost, then maybe, just maybe, love regained.

I wrote back immediately to the address on the back of her envelope. And wrote "COME OVER" in huge letters on the back of mine. Told her I'd send her any money I could scrape together. I was adled, frantic with desire, and hope. February, she said February, I kept saying to myself. Man, if I can just hold on until then.

January came and went and there was no letter from Anne-Marie. I wrote Gunilla at Karl Gustav - no answer back. Wrote to her parents again - no answer. Tried to get her phone number through international information - nothing. No Anne-Marie or Gunilla in the Goteborg phone book. February passed without a word. So did March and April. I

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continued writing to her parent's address thinking she might have moved back with them. I was utterly confused. Could think of nothing else but her letter. How could she write a letter like that and then not write again? I felt hopeless. It was as if my new-found god had decided to torture me for all my past transgressions - "So, you think that it's that easy, eh Rich my boy? You think that just because you want this so badly that you just should have it?"

But why do this to me? I yelled at the capricious old bastard. Why give me hope and then cruelly dash it?! What's the fucking point?!

And like with Anne-Marie somewhere in Sweden, there was only silence.

But there was to be a reprieve.

Out of the blue, my friend Henry told me over dinner one night that he was going to visit a friend in Norway in June, traveling by train from London, through Paris to Copenhagen, up the Swedish coast to Oslo.

"Can you stop in Goteborg," I asked him. "It's on the way."

He knew the story. "Sure," he said, "what do you want me to do?"

All I could think of was the painting of her. And whatever might have happened to her not to write back to me, have the painting be a jump-start to her Rich-memory or a true farewell. I was desperate.

Henry agreed, so I rolled it up in a long tube and a couple weeks later, he - and it - flew to London.

In late August a mutual friend told me that Henry just got back. I wondered why he hadn't called me. when I called him, his wife Laura answered.

"Henry didn't call you because Anne-Marie said that she would," said Laura.

My heart leaped through my throat. "He saw her?!" I nearly screamed into the phone.

There was silence on the other end. Then..."Rich, I'll have Henry call you."

Fuck the phone, I thought, as I ran out of the house, jumped into my car and drove the hour to Henry and Laura's. They were waiting for me on their front porch.

"Anne-Marie asked me not to tell you..." said Henry.

"Tell me what?"

"She said she would call you."

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"She hasn't Henry...when did you see her?"

"In June...I'm really surprised that she hasn't written you. She said she would."

"So, what's up, Henry?"

As Henry began his long-and-winding tale about bringing the painting in the tube to Anne-Marie I felt as if I was having a breakdown. They were both trying to be very gentle with me, but I was close to going over the emotional cliff.

"The painting made me quite a celebrity in all the train stations throughout Europe," said Henry, smiling. "Everyone I met asked me about this long tube I was carrying and when they found out that I was this messenger of love they would smile and usually treat me to a meal. Everybody was touched by it. And when I lost it in the Gare du Nord..."

"Lost it?!"

"I left it on a bench when I went to get my ticket to Hamburg and when I came back it was gone. I told a policeman about it - the story and all - and had them make an announcement over the p.a. system that if anyone mistakenly or accidentally picked it up would they return this 'gift of love' to lost and found. Well, somebody did and they called me over the loudspeaker just a couple minutes before my train was to leave for Germany."

"Would you have left without it?"

"I don't think so...but after what happened in Goteborg it probably would have been better if I did."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I get to Goteborg and call all the numbers with her last name. Finally, I get her sister..."

"Gunilla?"

"No, the other one...she used to live in France."

"Lena."

"And she says she'll get in touch with Anne-Marie and have her call me back at the phone booth in the station. A couple of minutes later the phone rings...it's Anne-Marie. I tell her who I am - 'A friend of Rich' - and why I'm calling her - 'bearing a gift' - and that I'm your emissary of sorts.

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" 'From Rich,' she says, and then goes silent. 'Listen, Henry, I'll come to the train station to see you. What do you look like?' I tell her I'm carrying this gigantic tube so I'm hard to miss. A half-hour later I see this very beautiful and very PREGNANT woman walking through the station...it's Anne-Marie."

I was struck dumb.

"She asks how you are, I tell her you're frantic about why she hasn't written. 'Please don't tell him about this, I will,' she makes me promise. Anne-Marie takes me back to her sister's house for lunch and no one mentions you at all. Then her husband...yeah, her husband - a teacher - shows up looking very uptight. And after lunch and all the pleasantries have been said about my trip - again your name never comes up - it's time to unveil the reason I'm there at all. I was nervous, thinking about not showing them the painting, but her husband breaks the ice - 'So, let's look at this gift from one of Anne-Marie's long-lost admirers.' He takes the tube, pulls out the painting and rolls it out on the floor. There is total silence. I feel like crawling into a hole. The husbands, trying his best to be gracious in the face of another man's profession of undying love for his wife, say, 'Well, very nice,' and proceeds to roll it back up and shove it back into the tube."

"Somehow I don't think the painting will see much wall time," said Laura, trying to smile, as Henry grimaced.

"Anne-Marie took me back to the station and told me that she would call or write you and explain everything. That she knows you would be hurt, but..."

"It's alright, Henry...thanks for doing this," I assured him from some deep inner space where resignation resides. I hugged them both and drove home. Christ, I thought on the way back to the farm-house, the sublime irony of all this.

A Movie

It was just a night out. Nothing special, just a movie I had heard about and wanted to see. It was director Cameron Crowe's coming-of-age autobiography where he, as a precocious 15-year old, had been sent out on the road with the Allman Brothers for Rolling Stone, and how he got deeply involved with the band and all the perks - girls and drugs - that went with it. Early 1970's stuff.

So I hopped in my ratty old Nissan and drove to the local theater for the 7 o'clock show. There were few people in the place as the lights went down to see "Almost Famous".

And like some apparition, a face from my past appeared on the screen. Penny Lane she was called. I sat there overwhelmed. In awe. Barely breathing. Tears rolling down my face. The mouth was the same. The shape of the face. The sleepy eyes. Every smile, every glance...was the same. It was the face I last saw the night I took the ferry from

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Goteborg to Hamburg. It was Kate Hudson, but everything about her said Anne-Marie. Only the hair was different, curly blonde where Anne-Marie's was straight, but that was the only difference. It was doppelganger time, only 30 years later.

When it was over and the lights came on I sat there in a trance. I tried to tell the few people in the theater that Kate Hudson looked just like my long-ago Swedish girlfriend, but the feelings inherent in that realization were not transferable. I babbled anyway, trying to say things I hadn't said or thought for a very long time. Back in the car I sat for a long time, not trying to think of then. That time in Sweden with Anne-Marie, and Wayne and Gunilla, Karl Gustavsgatan, the Unicorn, the farm-house, the painting, Henry, my first wife...all of it, but those lost emotions washed over me anyway. And as I sat in my car in the dark parking lot on a clear, crisp October night, I seemed no longer sure of anything at all.

Wayne

"Rich, it's a literary masterpiece, goddammit!" wrote Wayne after I sent him the story - I hadn't seen him in 20 years. Found him on the internet.

"Had me roaring with laughter, then almost blubbering. Really took me back, all right. Seems like such a short time ago, but it was half our lifetimes ago. Sometimes when I recall little vignettes of mt life in earlier days I seem like some guy I used to know that I haven't seen or heard of in decades. It's no longer 'I am that man', or 'I was that man', it's more like 'Hey, I used to know that guy'. I've got to start writing it down before senility sets in.

Artistic license be damned. I think you hit pretty close to the mark. The most egregious error has to do with the Unicorn. No self-respecting sailor of any substantial character would cross the street to sail on a vessel as pedestrian as a three-masted schooner. The Unicorn was (or was going to be when I finished with it) a Brig. A two-masted square-rigger for Christ's sake!

Also, except when I found myself in various little jungle ports in SouthEast Asia, with swaying palm trees and little grass shacks filled with nubile cuties who would be thrilled to while away the time with a horny sailor for a few days in return for a couple extra fish-heads in their rice bowl, I never had much to do with ladies of the trade except for a few laughs at the bar.

Your writing is beautiful, Hoss. Descriptive. It paints a picture and takes you there. The most touching for me was Gunilla returning home after leaving me on the Unicorn in Ystad, so sad that I was unhappy trying to realize a dream, and being held back by a charlatan like Jacques, who would rather jerk-off than actually do it. When is the last time a woman cried over YOUR unhappiness? Christ, man, she was the best woman I ever had."