

Leaving For Prague

The compartment rocked in the purple light of dawn, and I became aware of our speed. I'd just woken on board a night train returning from the Norwegian Arctic Circle, bound for a small rural village in Sweden. My bed made up the sixth part of a six-bedded couchette, and I was the only person in it not a member of the Jensen family, a quiet and contented group who viewed me with some skepticism after my night of drunken revelry. As I sat on the top bunk, keenly aware of every jostle of the train and with my head in my hands, I tried desperately to let go of the thoughts that caged me: I was heading back; I was going to see her again.

Linn and I had last seen each other two weeks before, in an alcove of Stockholm's central station. It was an unfortunate meeting, full of unexpressed thoughts and regretful words. I told her, and believed, that I wanted nothing to do with her. And such was my intent until yesterday, when I'd gotten word from her cousin, Emil, that she would be visiting. I knew then that I didn't want that day in the station to be the end; that I didn't want to argue anymore, but to just say goodbye the way lovers should. But could I do it?

Emil and I had become close since I'd met the two of them in Italy the year before, and through all the past months of courting between Linn and I, he'd been there to talk to. He picked me up from the village station around noon in his ancient Volvo, and handed me an envelope addressed "Benjamin". The hand writing made my pulse jump, and I stared for a full minute as we drove on before I turned it over and opened it. Although the note was short, she'd been arrogant in her assumptions and true to character, and had signed it with a name that no longer applied, "Sunshine". I steeled myself against the feelings that would surely rise when I saw her.

Here it was, she whom I thought I would never see again, all but daring me to come out and play. "You know where to find me", she'd written, and well I did know, and knew that that would be where it would be decided, where our relationship would probably end.

I reflected on this as I stood in Emil's bathroom, getting ready; the coarse stubble on my chin and the lines under my eyes giving hint to my inner struggle. I reflected on the fact that Linn was three years younger than I, that I had passed a glamour magazine earlier that day with her picture on the cover, that she would never truly let anyone in.

The place I could find her was at her family's farm; small and quaint in its location, it had been in their possession for over a half a millennia, and was where Emil had spent his childhood. It's easy for me to remember the details of such a place, of such a day in my life; the healthy farm smell, the walk between the house and the hedge, the midnight sun. However, I can't remember it as a whole, I mean clearly remember it. Such a day is segmented in memory and rough around the edges from too much handling; spread out and collected again too many times to possibly be in the right order. But I'll never forget the way she stood in that doorway as I came up; the kitchen light catching her form from behind and obscuring the smile that I knew was there.

Linn likes things her way, and I knew as I walked in that tonight would be no different. She would have already set the stage and practiced her lines, prepared her defense; for a defense she had not really given me yet, only some lame e-mail eluding to the fickleness of fate's choice, her only explanation for breaking my heart. Linn wasn't aware that I knew what she'd anticipated, and I'd resolved not to get into it. I was done trying to fathom her point of view, and she was at a loss when I greeted her with a calm smile, rather than resentment. I could see her falter.

I led her out into the light rain and the two of us walked in silence toward the barn, where we could find a dry place to talk. And talk we did, for hours and hours as the sun sank low but would not set, as it rose again. Why I had come to Europe to see her, why she hadn't waited for me, our dream of marriage; we discussed it all. And I saw again in Linn the girl I'd fallen in love with. I saw her as she was in Italy the year before, bright and beautiful and full of life. I longed to give in to her, to admit that I needed her, even as a friend; but it was too late for us. I knew that such a woman could never be called my wife, and that I would accept nothing less. I would leave for Prague in the morning.

October 24, 2002