

Grace

by Leslie Sack

The warm air dried the tears off my face. At that moment I began to realize how long a year is. The neighborhood cat scampered out from underneath the wooden steps. I finished smoking my last cigarette before I went back inside. The smell of the smoke lingered on my cotton scarf and mixed with my Paris perfume. I was ready to travel — to move on. I thought back on my year and was proud to not have the possibility of suicide on my mind any longer. The people I stayed with had given me more love than my own parents had in a long time. Finally it felt okay to be with other people and to share myself. Why don't I remember those long winter nights of playing solitaire and lying on my bed listening over and over to the song that my friends made for me before I left home?

I would knit while she would weave at her loom. She would make coffee and we would eat cookies and talk some more. The couch was red wool and itchy on my back when the sun came streaming in. The smell of coffee stayed in the air whenever she reopened the thermos lid. I drank so much that my cheeks would quiver. I shared my anxieties about the future with her and accepted the warmth that she felt for me.

Jan Frode's glasses kept sliding down his nose and he kept pushing them back up with his wrist. Camel cigarettes were kept in his front shirt pocket. Engineering school wasn't fun for him because he knew that teaching children would be more fulfilling to him. He and Torkel studied together but it was always Torkel that stayed up past midnight to finish his three page long physics questions. Torkel's face was age sixteen and his seriousness equalled that of a fifty-year-old professor, but his body and devotion were alluring to me.

I laughed at the jokes I didn't understand. I couldn't figure out why they always had to make fun of the Swedes. Torkel and Jan Frode hadn't arrived so I helped tear off the half frozen shrimp tails and heads. I gulped down the extra saliva that came into my mouth and swallowed more wine. The three of us took off our shoes, turned up the stereo, and danced the jazz routine we had learned the day before.

Torkel's brown eyes were staring across the room but I kept speaking to him. My mohair sweater was making me sweat and I had to restrain myself from putting my arm around him. Merete smiled and then laughed as she filled his glass for the fifth time. My cheeks hurt from smiling too much.

I glanced at his tan wrist, at the loose fist he made, and felt the orange glow of the dawn. He hadn't touched me once. My prayer to disappear wasn't answered so I decided to hide away in the bathroom. As my feet touched the cold wooden floor my arm hairs stood on end and I sucked in my stomach. My blood pumped and pushed until fast breaths came. The flash of white light forced me to see my reflection of confusion in the mirror.

We ate the bon voyage cake with our hands. I knew that I would miss sitting on the couch. I stared at Torkel who was staring out of the window. Jan Frode pulled out a cigarette and walked out of the compartment. I turned on my walkman and listened to Christopher Cross sing love songs.

She sat next to me with her feet on the seat and hugged her knees. I nodded, "yes". I mumbled, "yes" and I nodded, "yes". She wasn't sure she could stand traveling with her lover for a month. I crawled up and slept on the baggage rack next to the ceiling.

I couldn't tell which direction I was facing or how I could get out of the train compartment. The darkness pressed in on me. I felt Jan Frode's hand on the vinyl armrest next to me and Torkel breathed in time to the music in his dream. There were no rocking motions or clicking sounds to calm me. I didn't want to put my head on Jan Frode's shoulder. The heat became increasingly stifling; my lower back ached and the train seat pressed hard against my butt. I lay down on the floor — the air felt cooler but the floor was harder and dirtier than my seat. I dreamt that a man was chasing me through the train.

We had taken turns carrying the three foot long french bread so by now about a foot of it was already eaten. The warm Camembert cheese and bottle of cheap French red wine were in my shoulder bag. It felt good to sit down in the grass, drink the wine from the bottle and eat mouthfuls of bread with chunks of broken off cheese. It was the best part of the day. As we walked out of the park, we watched a man doing tai chi next to a statue of the three graces.

They watched the soccer game on the television in the hotel lobby. The cafe I walked into served only espresso. The machines made a whirring sound, like the rhythm of ceiling fans. I sat down outside and peered in at the white counter. The dark haired mens' bodies floating above it. The dark haired servers were making a dance of rotating progression; they started at one end of the counter and turned twice before they handed the foaming, steaming, untouchable cups to the inattentive customers. My white pantsuit blended into the fence-like white painted chair. As I turned to look at the people sitting next to me, my legs touched the steel of the curved table leg. The lady next to me had no arms.

Four Italians were looking into our compartment, wanting to have seats. None of us had taken Italian, but I knew some Spanish. The curves of the mother's long black hair with streaks of gray, her voluptuous figure. It was obvious that her six-year-old daughter would look the same way in about twenty years. While the mother slept, the girl made us laugh when she imitated her mother's grunting. Julio, the ten-year-old son, was trying his best to keep the family pride alive by attempting English words. His father smiled from beneath his mustache and bald head. I pulled out my sketch pad so that we could communicate with the children. The devious girl drew scribbles of sailboats and happy blue ball-point faces, the boy drew a car and the rest of us drew dancers, peace doves and people falling down.

The sun was setting as we walked on board. It felt like we were defecting; we had our passports checked and had to sign two official looking papers. White stark lights. No carpeted floors. No scenic lookout from inside. Bare soft brown plastic floor all around. Rotating brown chairs that are only comfortable for fat ladies with no butt bones. We drank beer and ate the crushed apple streudel. The back deck had a view of the water but there was barely space left; bodies were strewn everywhere, like living corpses. I marked out my territory by crawling in a square on the black steel deck. My sleeping bag became wet from the gathered mist. I imagined myself sinking into the depths of the indigo sky as I listened to Christopher Cross whine about love in a beautiful setting. I felt a body next to me move.

The cab driver couldn't speak English. We didn't let him know that we didn't have enough cash to get us to our destination. He yelled profanities at us and demanded money. We were rescued by a handsome middle-aged Greek man smoking a cigar — he wanted to rent us a room.

A "strenuous" schedule: get up, go to the grocery store, eat jam, bread, cheese, and warm seven-up, walk two miles downhill to the green clear water, drink carbonation and stare at tanned nude bodies, float in saltwater, fall in the waves, make sandcastles, walk up the hill, shower, slab on lotion, nap for an hour, dress in clothes that wouldn't put our sunburns in pain, walk to the main restaurant drag, eat Greek salad and pasta, drink huge beers, go out dancing, pass out in the hotel room. Repeat.

The brown dirt road had Swedish tourists driving past rented mopeds. Some days we sang Norwegian folk songs but today it was just the slaps of our thongs and the taste of dirt from the clouds of dust. I continued to sweat.

Jan Frode and Torkel didn't take off their swimming suits so I felt strange about taking off mine. I would roll the top down while they had their eyes closed and then slip it back on when we would go up to get a drink. Only Jan Frode would look at me in the eye when I was caught with my top down.

They didn't know that I had taken their picture; their tanned bodies glistened with oil and their faces were placed in frozen smiles. They lay side by side with their straw mats underneath them and their pseudo-polo tee shirts were tucked under their heads. The white sand caressed the shape of their arms and legs. Their breathing was as peaceful as the sound of the waves.

My sunburn didn't turn brown; it just made me feel like a living heat wave. First, lotion on the legs; next the chest and arms; followed by the face and, finally, the impossible back. I didn't ask either of them to help me; they rubbed each others' backs.

Two sixteen-ounce bottles of dark beer went well with the rich pasta in cheese and tomato sauce. The Greek salad was too small but looking down on the ocean and the rooftops filled me up. My coherence declined with the last rays of day. It was annoying to have to keep going to the bathroom; I was wearing my white pantsuit. The three shoulder buttons got smaller as my hands seemed twice their normal size. I kept twirling a copper coin between my thumb and forefinger and I had a cigarette for the first time since we had started out on the trip.

I listened to the sound of my heels clicking on the pavement. We sat in the middle of the street holding hands and looking at the stars. My forehead wrinkled as I squinted to block out the excess light. My neck muscles ached from bobbing my head while I was dancing. The words "let's have a good time tonight, let's party all night tonight" wouldn't leave my mind. I could still taste the vodka and feel the heat that had surrounded me on the dance floor. Jan Frode told me about his family and his frustrations with love. He told me that he had noticed my love for Torkel. I nodded. He mumbled some words that I couldn't understand and then kissed my lips.

I tried to concentrate on the ticking of the clock. My head was spinning. The wall to my left had never seemed so friendly. I said, "I wonder where he is." Jan Frode didn't answer; he had asked me the same question two minutes earlier. I couldn't force myself to breathe deeply and pretend that I was falling asleep.

Torkel said he couldn't remember how many bottles of oozo a Swede had bought him. Jan Frode was silent. The eggs slid down my throat and I kept putting honey into my tea so that I wouldn't have to look up. A chunky American girl said "Hi Torkel" as she walked by.

I had to wait half an hour before my train left so we went into the cafeteria for some coffee. I stared at my palms and kept feeling the warmth of the cup. Torkel barely hugged me and Jan Frode put his arm around me as he reassured me that I would have a good trip. I bought a postcard with a picture of a man holding a dove in his hands.

I concentrated on looking up words I didn't know. My red pocket dictionary was beginning to fall apart; the white cardboard was showing through and pages from the middle were falling out. The batteries in my walkman were dead. A man in a pin-striped blue suit looked into my compartment.

His lover stood on the platform and he leaned out of the window. He brushed his hand lightly across her right cheek. She bit her lower lip and lowered her eyes. Her flowing blonde hair encircled her stiff body. His shoulders pulled at the seams of his coat as he reached out to try to kiss her. They locked fingers. The train started to move and they had to let go. He sat down across from me and read the newspaper.

Christine wasn't there to meet me. I called her up and found out that the name of the town was the same as hers, but her town was forty kilometers away. I had to spend the night; my eyes drooped and my body sagged underneath the weight of my backpack. The manager of the youth hostel wouldn't give me any other help than throwing a list of hotels in the area at me. I had enough coins to make two phone calls. Both places I called were full, so I decided to knock on a door across the street. I rang the bell and a man with a beard answered the door. I put on my "I am scared and alone" look. I said, "I am in a desperate situation" and he replied with "Come in, I couldn't refuse you a warm bed and food because I spent months of my life hitchhiking in America and everyone there treated me well." I bought him and his wife flowers.

The mist kissed my face and I stayed standing in the same place long enough to know how I felt. My eyes were as wide open as they go and the water on my eyelashes made me notice every blink. I looked out at the waves, felt the wind on my body and heard the hood of my jacket flapping behind me. I could feel my heart beat in my throat — beating in time to the waves beating against the sides of the boat. It was the one time in my life that it felt like it would be all right to die.

