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Midnight Dawning: A Reconciliation

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The Saint of Light

If one were to ask any Swede who Saint Lucia was, one would be likely to receive innumerable versions. In a country that is arguably one of the most secular modern nations in the world, how is it that an Italian Catholic saint became such an indelible part of its culture? The evolution of the celebrations of her saint's day and the travel of her story to Scandinavia is convoluted and obscure. Saint Lucia probably did not arrive in Sweden through the hands of a single missionary, carrying a white dress and red sash for a young girl to wear. The traditions and celebrations surrounding her illuminated name most likely are based in a melting of German influence, Viking trade and ancient pagan custom.

The young woman that is known as Saint Lucia was born in Sicily around the year 283 BC to a wealthy noble family and died in 304 BC in Syracuse. A pious Christian, she intended to devote her life, and her money, to the poor. Her mother, Eutychia, however, was not so keen on this idea. Her opinion changed when she took ill and visited the shrine to Saint Agatha of Catania with her daughter. There, Lucia had a vision of Saint Agatha prophesying Lucia's importance to Christianity. Eutychia was miraculously cured after this visit, which gained Lucia the persuasive power to give her riches as alms and thus retain her virginity. The pagan man to whom she was betrothed was deeply offended by this turn of events. He reported Lucia as a Christian to the governor, who was carrying out Diocletion's persecutions against Christians at that time. And when she refused to bestow an offering to pagan gods, she was sentenced to die.

There are multiple versions of how her execution was carried out. One version states that when she was being burned to death, a halo of light opened above her head, into which she ascended to heaven. The most common though, begins with Lucia sentenced to a brothel, a fate worse than death for a noble woman and especially a Christian virgin. When guards attempted to move her however, she would not budge from the spot. Piles of kindling were heaped around her and set on fire, but the flames could not even singe her clothing. Finally, she was stabbed through the throat with a sword.

The amount of legends that surround Lucia make her less of a historical figure. A legend tells that a man admired Lucia's beautiful eyes. So, naturally, she plucked out her eyes and sent them to him as a gift, wishing not to be bothered again. Her eyes grew back, more beautiful than ever, and no matter how much the man begged her Lucia would not give him her eyes. A medieval version of her life places the gouging right before her execution as a final, gruesome torture. Yet another addition to her story involves Lucia carrying food and water to exiled Christians hiding in underground catacombs. She lit her way by wearing a crown of candles to keep her hands free. This is also related to a story in Sweden of a famine, which was miraculously relieved by a shipload of wheat and food transported over Lake Vanern with Lucia dressed in white at the helm. These stories are the reason behind Lucia being the patron saint of eyesight and light, dear to both fishermen guiding their boats home on the Mediterranean and Scandinavians alike.

The more likely reason behind the traditional white dress and wreath crown, however, is the travel of German Christmas customs into Sweden. As the reformation

swept through Europe, saint worship and holidays were prohibited. Some, however, such as St. Nicholas, were simply too popular to eradicate altogether. The clever Germans replaced the bearded saint for a youthful child to represent Jesus. This Christ child was typically portrayed as a girl dressed in white with a wreath of candles on her head. For a contrast, and to frighten the children into behaving, the Christ child was accompanied by a devil figure called “Knecht Ruprecht.”

The devil figure coinciding with Saint Lucia may have either derived from, or mixed with, an ancient pagan tradition celebrated on December 13th, the longest night of the year. In the pagan tradition, December 13th was a dangerous night, when supernatural creatures roamed, including a female demon who caused particularly heinous mischief. This is eerily similar to a Christian legend about Adam’s first wife, who was banished because she refused to be loyal to him. She was said to have joined the Devil and had children called infernals. This is likely to be the reason behind the name of this female demon, a mixture of “lux” meaning light and “Lucifer.” Anyone caught outside on December 13th was sure to have met terrible trouble. This mixture between Catholic dogma, German tradition and pagan superstitions has led to how numerous Swedish holidays are celebrated today, not only Saint Lucia.

In a typical Swedish household, the eldest daughter wakes early in the morning on December 13th, traditionally just before dawn, and dresses in a white gown with a red sash. The white represents the saint’s purity, and the sash the blood she shed for her faith. On her head, the daughter wears a crown of candles, which light her way through the house as she serves her family coffee or tea and saffron buns, called lussekatte. On

this day schools are closed early and have their own celebrations, and ceremonies are held throughout the country in churches or clubs, as well as households.

As major a holiday as December 13th is in Sweden, it wasn't always held to such high esteem. In fact, it was a tradition at one time celebrated mostly in the western part of Sweden or rural, agrarian communities. It wouldn't become a widespread national holiday until 1927, when a large newspaper asked their readers to elect a Lucia. The idea spread and soon there wasn't only a national Lucia pageant but one held in small towns as well. A Swedish composer, who traveled to Sicily, heard the fishermen's songs of the town of Lucia. Bringing back that song, the lyrics were altered to become the distinctly Scandinavian version Swedes sing today during winter ceremonies.

Though the mixture of German yuletide traditions certainly play a part in how the Lucia tradition developed, the initial story of her sainthood was most likely carried back from Sicily by the Vikings. At the high time of Viking expansion and trade, during the late 900's, Lucia was already an established saint in Italy. The Norwegians and Danes conquered in the western kingdoms and, based on findings of Arab coins and artifacts, reached northern Africa and middle eastern countries. They explored from Iceland, to Greenland and even to North America where they encountered the natives, which they called "skraelings," or "ugly men." The Swedes on the other hand pushed eastward into Russia, traveling down rivers and into the Caspian Sea to reach Byzantium.

With this expansion came new ideas and new religions. Most notably, of course, Christianity. Conversion to Christianity was not complete until well into the 12th century, but in specific regions, lords were gradually adopting the new religion. Viking lords

converted for either genuine or political reasons, and so foreign traditions of saints and holidays were spread along with spices, furs, silver and gold.

No one can ever know exactly how the story of Lucia took hold in Sweden or Scandinavia at large. One can only imagine that in a land where night consumes much of the country for the cold wintry months, any figure of warmth and light, pagan or Christian, would be a welcome reprieve. The relatively indifferent attitude toward Christianity that early pagans possessed has seemed to endure through time, reflected in the low numbers of modern church-going Swedish citizens. Nevertheless, Saint Lucia is a figure who has traveled up from the banks of Syracuse into the heart of Scandinavia, representing hope for a rising sun and warmer days to come.

St. Lucia, Sweden

Silence in the black.
Thick black;
It pours in through my eyes and fills me to the brim.
I am blinded, blended, smudged out.

Their voices move with the glow.
Weaving together and spreading through the dark,
like paint blooming in stained water.
Wingless angels, dipped in white,
their hands cradle light as fluttering birds of gold.

Suspended wicks and floating dresses,
she follows amongst them, haloed heaven carried on her head.
I can almost see the blood tears seeping from hollow sockets.
Her youthful mouth singing,
refusing to submit to the lasting night.
Saint incarnate.
I blink.
The tears have condensed into thick ribbons around her waist,
their voices fill boundless vaulted ceilings,
her Nordic eyes are blue.

Light pours in and fills me to the brim.
Warmth sheltering organs like a second skin,
buried within,
pumping my lungs with a new oxygen.
Lips move with their words, my voice joins them
helplessly.
Gratefully.
Because
I can see my mother, grandmother sitting next to me,
I see us hold hands and smile, linked generations.
I can see the dawn through a shrouded horizon
assured that it will come,
Splintering the longest night.

The Joy and Terror of Running

I

Mental list in my head, writing itself as I wake.

Get out of bed. Pull back the thick swaths of cloth warmed by sleep and swing legs out over the side of the rectangular box of springs and cushioning. Allow that spring to translate into your feet as you rise, into the day.

Put on sneakers. Pull the curious mix of rubber and cloth and laces to your feet, holding the lip and inside of heel (jaw) as you guide your foot into its mouth. Tie the laces. Form the bunny ear loops and pull to form a lovely bow. Remember the cold brick of the breezeway where you tied your sneakers successfully for the first time, the breezeway monument long since lost. Torn down, built over by a new addition, a new edition, of your house.

Something about the way my muscles ache afterwards, columns of euphoric jello.

Maybe it is the desire to stay healthy. Maybe I am addicted to my albuterol inhaler. Maybe I am addicted to my non-stop sport, always in motion. Or maybe it is the itching restlessness that seizes my limbs. Whenever I see a soccer ball. Whenever troubled thoughts percolate and accumulate in my fingers and toes. Itchy itching to punch, kick. Anything. Whenever I can't breathe...inside. I suck down a safety breath from my inhaler, slip on sneakers and leave. Over the steps that replaced the breezeway. Outside. At a sprint.

II

I often dream of running. Sometimes toward something indefinable on the horizon. Usually though, I am running away, pursued. The pursuers are varied and strange. Masked ninjas or men with machine guns, masses of groaning zombies or Godzilla thundering behind my heels. When I have lucid dreams, these chases are easier, because I move at an impossible speed.

Something about the sensation of gliding. I fly. I'm in control. Outpacing my pursuers, I enjoy it. It becomes a game, because I am assured that it isn't real, and that nothing can hurt me. Until I wake up.

III

I just couldn't get them to pronounce my name correctly. It wasn't *that* difficult. Was it? I didn't understand that pronunciation wasn't the issue. Us. Them. We. They.

We flew Swedish blue and yellow alongside American stars and stripes. They flew Portuguese red and green or Italian green-white-red instead, sometimes omitting the red-white-blue altogether. That's not to say, we didn't occasionally omit it either. They just liked to point it out more.

Certain things were familiar to me, and to them as well. Bakeries smelling of fresh bread and canolis, zeppole on St. Joseph's day. Dominic the Christmas donkey. The ringing of bells for Saturday mass. Friends in CCD classes every week (for too many years). Every other restaurant having veal parmesan or antipasti on the menu.

Red, white, and green banners and flag bumper stickers, and fireworks during St. Mary's feast.

Other things commonplace to me, were foreign to them. The smell of gingerbread and cinnamon filling the house, cinnamon rolls and Finnish finger cookies. Pickled herring with dill on thin crispbread. Solemn songs and a girl crowned with candles on Saint Lucia day. White plaster walls of the Lutheran church. Confirmation class (for two short years). May poles wound with silky ribbons during Midsummer, and outdoor bon-fires.

Surrounded by children with names ending in vowels, my name was yet another billboard of difference. Those children in my grade followed along with the older ones. Later, I would forgive them, realizing that that was just the way it was. You either ran with the pack, or risked being trampled.

Something about companionship, which will make one endure anything in order to find it, and to keep it. Even if it is the wrong kind.

When they called to me that day, they pronounced my name correctly. Flattered by the attention, I shyly approached on the lawn by the basketball court, staring at my shoes, twisting the plastic in my hand. It had been a walking stick, a wand, a staff in my imagination, where I was the fearless adventurer. But suddenly I wasn't the explorer anymore. I was being explored.

With odd questions.

"Do Swedish girls shave their legs?" "Do they take showers? I heard they don't. Do you?" "Which is better Astronaut? Sweden or Italy?" "I bet she doesn't even know where Italy is." "She's not sayin' anything. Ask her somethin' else." "Do you yodel

when you take a shower Astrid?” “I bet she does!” “What’s the matter Asteroid? Hey get back here!” “What’s that in your hand Asteroid?”

“M-my walking stick,” I answered. My voice sounded small, my heart was beating rapidly, slamming into my sternum. I was too timid to correct their “mispronunciation.” I felt pretty foolish, because I actually hadn’t taken a shower in a few days (I hated brushing the tangles out of my hair), I certainly didn’t shave my legs (because I was eight), and though I wouldn’t call it yodeling, I often did sing in the shower. The dirt under my fingernails seemed to stand out, highlighting my filthiness. For a moment I almost did feel like the dirty, dumb, battle-ax wielding Viking pillager they pigeon-holed the entirety of my mother’s country into. I stared at my shoes, feeling the soggy grass beneath them. Squish, squish. I was slightly dizzy, wondering how on earth they expected me to answer all of their inquiries.

“That’s not your walking stick. That’s *mine*. You stole it!”

I remember being momentarily stunned with confusion. The stick had been in my back yard, well out of their reach. Why make such a blatantly wrong claim? And yet, somehow, I knew it was fruitless to argue. Laughing inwardly, I began to walk away. A warmth rose in my chest, clearing the dizzy thoughts from my mind.

Something like an epiphany. In spite of their age and supposed worldliness, it occurred to me that these kids were actually quite stupid.

They called again, my name pronounced correctly.

I turned around.

At first, it didn't register. What was happening? Something about the way they moved. In unison, as if rehearsed, mounting their bikes and riding en masse. Like guided missiles, or ravenous hawks. Their voices lifted, breezes carrying stones and bits of bark and sticks and insults. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words leave deeper scars.

I felt fear scramble like a rabid animal over the bars of my rib cage, hissing into my ears.

Run! Run! Run!

The mud sucked on the rubber, dragging. My feet felt like weights, cement filled shoes. I tried not to think. I tried not to think about tires over skin, snapping bones, hard wood and feet. Pounding, I willed them up, down, up, down, forward. My joints became unglued, I was barely touching the pavement. Voices behind yelled into my ears, sticking and tangling with bark and wood.

Hey where are you going? Stupid Swede. Go back to Sweden. You don't belong here. We hate you. Who do you think you are? This is our town. Get out of here! Better run, better run faster! Dumb Swede. Get out of here! Who do you think you are? We hate you! You don't belong here! Get out! Get out get out get out get out get out

V

With the first opportunity, I was gone. I rarely go back. Each return feels like a slingshot, the tension building the longer I stay, anchored back in some other town, in some other part of the state. In some other part of the world. I have to take care. If I'm not careful, I am suddenly hurtling out of the driveway in the car without so much as a

kiss and hug good-bye. It's not them, my parents, truly. It's just the town. A massive beast of contrasts; concrete and plazas, tapering to manicured lawns and gated communities. Cracked sidewalks are the only shred of continuity between them.

I don't want to hurt their feelings. How can I make them understand? The house doesn't even feel like my house anymore. It's a museum of family heirlooms and glimpses of memories.

No, really, I have to go now. I'll see you soon. I love you too.

Stepping outside, breathing the night air, my body relaxes. It gives itself up to the elastic pull. Staring upward, I see a few stars, those strong and brave ones who punch through the nearby city glare. It occurs to me that those stars are probably millions of times larger than the city. The world expands above me, stretches out on all sides, and my breath catches. Like a mouse seeing a human being for the first time, frozen beneath its foot.

I know where my destination is, but my footing there doesn't seem so firm. So I tighten my laces and prepare to run some more. I don't know if I'll ever stop. I'm not sure if I want to. But I'm curious as to where my shoes will wear out.

Airplanes

Do you remember fitting beneath airplane seats? Where the air and noise was condensed, our entire world was humming. Pressing my hands to the floor I stared down through blue carpet and saw the clouds and earth. God's puffs of suspended smoke. Patchwork blankets with blue embroidery. They weren't thought of for long, because there were games to play, forts to be built with pillows. With the help of figurines and doll clothes, we became fast friends you and I, underneath airplane seats.

What was your name? What did you look like? What language did you speak? I only remember curling ringlets of yellow hair. My brown locks seemed flat and lifeless in comparison.

The memory sticks to me like fly paper, and it won't come off. Looking at airplane seats, all I can fit underneath is my carry-on suitcase. How did we fit? If I open my bag, will you be tucked inside, clutching a doll to your chest, ready to play?

I press my hands to the cold window of layered glass. The wing juts out like a white butcher's knife, slicing through clouds as we rise. My limbs are glued to the seat, invisible hands press into my chest. Heart beating, like a rock repeatedly slamming into my ribs, pieces crumble and rattle through my nerve endings. Outside the air is rushing, the ground is falling, dropping away.

That feeling always thrilled me. Butterflies sparkling in my stomach, I anticipated a new place to explore, a new adventure. You and I, we were six-years old and antsy, wreaking havoc underfoot. My six-year old, six-hour friend. Do you remember not caring? Do you remember eating messy foods without napkins? Do you

remember when your feet didn't touch the ground sitting in a seat? Do you remember feeling weightless, spreading our arms like the plane? Flying. I remember both hands fitting inside the circular airplane window, reaching out to grasp the world. I remember confidence, ripping down language barriers and creating my own. We made our own world, flying above the real one.

I'm different from the girl who built forts beneath airplane seats. I am conscious of the metal compartments surrounding, encasing me, a steel cylinder hurtling through space. The world is spinning, flying by, recycled air clouding my lungs. Mother speaks Swedish to her neighbor in the next seat, father reads, lost in inner dialogue. My friends are thousands of feet below. Outside the ocean shimmers; I am between one country and the next. I wonder where you are. I need a six-hour friend to guide me. But you aren't in my suitcase, you aren't under my seat. I want to spread my arms, but not to fly. To sink.

I press my hand to the glass window.

Mom---before

The album is heavy,
packed full with flashes of light.

Glossy and clear at one time,
before.

I imagine fingers gentle;
press—glue, stuck on paper, permanent
memories laced into images like woven rugs on a loom.

An amalgamation of scraps.

Torn segments of time.

Pages crowded with mountains, roads, Christmas trees, smiling faces, kids with guitars,
The insides of dormitory rooms.

I see typewriters in place of computers,
tapestries instead of posters.

A green tapestry leaps through the finish,
attaching to my own wall.

I want to link arms with her across time.

Across the page, we are the same age.

She stares outward, startled, frozen,

And for a moment I think it is me, startled, frozen

In a moment captured long ago.

But, no. Held breath released.

A stupid realization really.

She began many years before.

Before,

crossing oceans, and green cards

American slang and proposals,

Before that,
she had Baltic beaches and mossy forests,
sewing with mother and cross-country skis.
She had nursing school and traveling teams,
coffee-tables laden with bottles.
Huddling under a blanket with friends
beneath a cool spring sun.
She had a sister nearby, a brother,
an apartment, a boyfriend.

But also,
uncertainty, doubt, heavy in her head,
inner clock ticking with every step.
Life slipping, her confidence ripping itself
to shreds.
It is there, engraved on her flat line mouth.
Others have said we look alike, but I never considered it dug below the skin.
Before. Now.

More More More I wish I had More

I didn't call her grandmother, and yet I did, because that is what she was. She was Mormor to me. In Swedish, it means "mother's mother" but the sound of the word strikes a chord deep within the heart. It is not simply a name, a title, a family designation. The word is an entreaty. A childlike plea; the syllables fill the mouth, as full and rounded as a baby's plump, reaching hands.

Mormor.

Mother, more. More, mother.

Mormor was my chief connection to my mother's country. Half of myself stretched along a tenuous line that braved the barrages of Atlantic waves. It snaked through Norwegian fjords and burrowed through mountains to reach her. She sent letters and gifts along that rope line. Postcards featuring exotic stamps, a silver locket, a heart pendent carved out of wood that smelled like apples.

When the line was severed, the whiplash hurled back dresses, hats, jewelry. Most notably, my favorite, a tiger's eye pendent. The large stone fits comfortably in my palm, a drop of gleaming caramel.

More. More. I wish I could have spoken to her more. On our last visit to that country, I was young and impatient. Speaking was a slow and careful process that I wasn't used to, where instead of spitting out words like a manufacturing plant, I had to choose the components wisely. I had to shape them with my lips like works of art, heavy on the tongue. And she would return it, thickly accented.

The accents of relatives were my favorite part. The stresses and lilting speech swelled and receded, like the ocean it was built upon. Years later, I was prepared, fully ready to engage in the meticulous event of speaking. I was desirous of those waves. She was supposed to cross the sea, she was supposed to arrive, but never did.

A fall, sickness, hospitals. Worry. Phone call home, she's home. She's fine? She's fine! Of course she's fine! And yet, worry, worry, worry. The late summer air only heated the tension, expanded the floorboards so that it could infiltrate everything. Like dust impossible to clean away, it camped out in corners and collected in cupboards, it made us sneeze in the mornings, it crunched in our breakfast cereal and made it taste like dry chalk.

Father told me. Blunt, cool words. She died this morning.

A bucket of iced water, dumped suddenly over my head, cascading down the spine and trickling in rivulets on my arms and legs. My boyfriend, sitting next to me, gently laid his hand on my arm. As if to make sure I didn't shrink to the ground in a heap of rubble, or blow away with the next set of breezes through the window. Actually, it was because my entire body had gone rigid, and I wasn't speaking.

One side rationally approached, saying, "Alright now Astrid, you have to understand what this means. She won't be sending letters. She won't be visiting next month as planned. She won't be calling your mother anymore. She won't be...well, she won't be."

The other side, she frantically shook her head.

"Maybe he heard it wrong. Maybe he was misinformed. You'll see, mom will come home and be happy and say she's ok. Mormor's ok."

And there I was in the middle, hands pressed to my ears. No no no no.

When my mother brought back some of Mormor's possessions after the funeral, the tigers eye pendent was one of the things that, incredibly, no one wanted. My mother said it was one of her favorite necklaces. Tigers eye is my favorite stone, the necklace now my favorite. It was only then that parts of her began to surface, and the severed line seemed to wrap itself around me, smelling of sea salt and moss and polished wood.

The prompts that made me wonder. Dresses that she had made which fit me perfectly. Their designs that matched my taste. An equal overabundance of handbags and hats. A fondness for jewelry. Mother insists that our tastes weren't the only things that matched, but our personalities overlapped as well. It skipped a generation.

What could we have talked about, if we weren't separated by generations, languages and an entire ocean?

More. More. I wish I had more.

The tiger's eye gives me comfort. It wasn't a gift. It had once belonged to her. She wore it, loved it. Feeling it's assuring weight against my chest, I wonder what the necklace had seen. What kinds of parties, holidays, trials or vexations did it hang to witness? I wonder if those vexations were what had folded the sad strength into the wrinkles around her eyes.

There is a state report, compiled in the 1920's and again in the 1930's, that lists characteristics of ethnic communities in Providence, RI. Essentially a book of stereotypes, the Swedes were described as a "sturdy, strong race," no doubt from years of pillage and war on the open seas (oh, and we all wear metal helmets with horns). Though I knew it wasn't entirely correct, I wanted to believe it. My fingers grazed against the

stone around my neck, and I thought of Mormor, letting her beloved daughter cross the sea. I thought of my mother, packing everything and leaving everything. Such uncompromising strength.

That is, after all, what my mother and I are named after. I was named after my mother, whose name means, “divine strength.” It’s comforting to think it was done on purpose. As if the magical connotations of the word, etymologies stretching back hundreds of years, have been transferred. I like to think Mormor gave my mother such a name in order to transfer her strength down the line.

I feel her heart beating alongside mine, infused into the rock. I imagine her watching the world through shimmering bands in the stone, the entire world caramel colored. And when I touch it’s polished surface, I know where it came from, and I know it will move with me. Forward.

Dressed

She embroidered the sleeves of the blouse herself. Picking up the blue woolen skirt, my mother gently ran her hands over it as she explained it was hand-woven on a wooden loom. The striped apron was also made on that same loom. The embroidered bodice was made by my Mormor, and the matching embroidered hat was sewn by her mother, my great grandmother. They have been handed down, repaired and improved through generations.

My mother reserves an hour exclusively to dressing. The traditional dress of her province, Blekinge, is comprised of numerous parts. First the white blouse with its full rounded sleeves and lacy cuffs, a slick slip and then the blue wool skirt. The gathering on the skirt must be in back, with the blouse carefully tucked in. White or black stockings on the feet into buckled shoes. The shawl is worn underneath the bodice, so that the decorative fringes are splaying out over the shoulders. The striped apron should be tied on the right side, and tucked underneath the bodice hem. Then a lace collar is tucked over the shawl around the neck, and both are fastened together with a silver pin.

The dress was familiar. I had seen it worn by Mormor in pictures from my parents wedding. My mother wore it for special occasions and folk concerts. I helped to hold the collar and shawl in place so that my mother could drive the sharp pin through the cloth. Dress. Dresses. Decorative dressing. The silver pins were often in the shape of hearts with hanging silver hammered disks, or intricately carved silver squares inset with stones. Woven with green thread for the warp, blue for the weft, the skirt seemed to shimmer whenever it moved.

Mother looked beautiful in it, but for years I didn't touch it. The wool skirt was too itchy, the full fluffy sleeves of the blouse too cumbersome, and the bodice constrictive. Why should I wear it? All those Swedish costumes are so funny looking anyway. Why should I care?

I remember going to a spring festival when I was very small, and I was wearing an orange dress. Wool was a strange thing to wear on a warm day, but it was a Swedish festival, and the dress was a traditional garment for someone my age. There was a flowered bonnet as well, but as soon as pictures were taken and I was allowed onto the lawn, the hat was off. I remember the deserted bonnet and orange dress as clearly as I remember running with nets and trying to catch butterflies that were far out of reach. There is a picture of me with that same itchy outfit and the butterfly net, my straight brown hair tousled.

Only when she showed me, how her hands gently and slowly laid the garments out, did it become clear. And I wore it with pride.

Every piece had a voice. I could hear ancestors speaking over each other, a garbled babble. My great grandmother whispered from the embroidered sleeves, my Morfar's mother's voice perched on the collar, whistled through the lace. I heard Mormor's deep aged laugh from the flowers on the bodice. But the voices seemed skeptical, analyzing the skin the fabric rested on. The family friend who wove the skirt poked and scratched through the silk slip. She shook her head.

I don't know about this, ladies. She lives miles away from our country, doesn't even speak the language. Can she do it?

A terrifying thought consumed me as mother helped me dress. It rose up, a tiny ball lodged in my throat, backing up the writhing creatures fluttering in my belly. When my mom is gone, who will help me wear it? Who will help to fasten the collar and shawl and pin? I will be alone, my last physical anchor of that country in America gone. How will I walk inside and alongside so many voices?

Night and Day

Her family was from Portugal, and she was turning 16.

I was invited, through a mutual friend. Into.

A room of dark haired horizons,
molded from the earth,
speaking in sunset tongues,
that pooled somewhere around my neck.

I was a vertical sunrise
with eyes cut from the skies, skin light as morning,
a mouth unable to swallow their language.

Voices stirred as windswept reeds,
sharpened, boring into my back,
poring over the differences
in height, structure, accent.

I was the fragile lily in a field of sturdy roses.

I was a whispered question mark.

I was a highlighted mistake.

Who let her in, anyway?

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Stereotypes VS Types in Stereo

My city.

My town.

Slick and dirty.

Concrete, strip mall wasteland.

Little Portugal. Little Italy.

Third, fourth generation.

Greased, spiked hair.

Leather jackets.

Chest hair tangled in thick gold chains.

Hoop earrings, dropped R's.

Shiny cars, reflective windows.

Big attitudes, suspicious looks.

Who are you? What's your name again?

Bakeries smelling of bread and money.

Restaurants serving linguini, antipasti.

Businesses with cars outside, but not open.

Not for that kind of business.

My city.

My town.

(was actually)

Their city.

Their town.

Her house.

Her family.

Big and loud.

Little Italy, fluent speaking.

First, second generation.

Pressed shirts, scuffed shoes.

Dark hair, white hair, bald heads.

Friendly smiles, firm hand shakes.

Platters of food; please, please eat!

Pot bellies, rolled R's.

Laughter and jokes, lost cousin?

How are you? What is your name?

Fresh brewed espresso in tiny cups.

Home-made hand-pressed wine,
right in the backyard,

vibrant, fragrant gardens.

Doors open wide, breezes come in!

Her house.

Her family.

(were)

My house.

My family.

Rusks (or, Swedish biscotti)

Oven temperature: 225 degrees Celsius or 425 degrees Fahrenheit

Convection: 200 C or 400 F

Ingredients:

150 g (2/3 cup) stick margarine or butter
5 dl (2 cups) milk
50 g (1 3/4 ounce) yeast or 2 tablespoons active dry yeast
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 dl (2/3 cup) sugar
1 tablespoon ground cardamom
approx. 15 dl (6 1/4 cup) all purpose flour

Makes about 100 rusks

- Melt the butter and add the milk. Heat to 37 C (100 F). If using dry yeast, heat to 45 C (115 F)
- Crumble the yeast in a large bowl and add some of the milk mixture, stirring until dissolved. Add the remaining liquid, salt, sugar and cardamom. Knead in enough flour to make an elastic dough that does not stick to the sides of the bowl. Sprinkle with a little flour. Cover and let rise for 30 minutes.
- Turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface. Knead until smooth and elastic with the remaining flour. The dough should be quite loose and rather greasy. Divide the dough into four pieces of equal size. Form each into 40 cm (16 inch) long crack-free ropes.
- Place on greased or parchment lined baking sheets. Cover and let rise for 30-40 minutes.
- Bake on the center oven rack for 15-20 minutes. Cool completely.
- Halve lengthwise. Cut crosswise into 3 cm (1 1/4 inch) slices. Toast and dry.
- To dry, leave the rusks in a slow oven, or even after the oven is turned off. Dry with the oven door slightly open until there are light and crispy.

Mormor's Mor's Pepparkakor (Great Grandma's gingerbread cookies)

Oven temperature: 425-450 F

Ingredients:

1 1/2 dl (2/3 cup) syrup (sugar beet syrup)
1 egg
1 tablespoon ginger
1 tablespoon cloves
1 tablespoon cinnamon
1 tablespoon baking soda
1/2 kilo (1 pound) flour
250 g (9 ounces) sugar
250 g (16 tablespoons) butter or margarine

- Whip the heavy cream until stiff, or it can stand on its own.
- Add syrup, beaten egg and spices into the cream.
- In a separate bowl mix the sugar and margarine or butter, and half of the flour.
- Then add everything together in a large bowl.
- Mix the dough and gradually add flour until it holds together and isn't sticky. Be careful not to add too much flour. Refrigerate overnight.
- The next day roll out the dough with a rolling pin so that it is very, very thin. Cut with cookie cutters and bake on un-greased cooking sheets for 3-5 minutes.

Finska Pinnar (Finnish fingers, or Finnish sticks)

Oven/convection oven temperature: 175 C (350 F)

Ingredients:

200 g (14 tablespoons) butter or margarine

50 g (1 ¾ ounce) sugar

50 g (1 ¾ ounce) ground almonds

225 g (1 ¼ cup) flour

garnish: 1 egg lightly beaten

Pearl sugar

- Work the butter until soft and add sugar and almonds.
- Add flour to the mixture.
- Let the dough rest in the refrigerator overnight.
- Roll out the dough in ropes about as thick as a finger.
- Line the ropes in rows. Whip up one egg as a garnish and brush onto ropes.
- Cut the ropes into segments approximately 2 to 2 ½ inches long.
- Bake on a un-greased cooking sheet until golden brown, or about 5-7 minutes.

Bitter Bread

You will need:

One young naïve girl, preferably within the ages of three to six.

Several manipulative older children, preferably within the ages of six to eight.

One large mixing bowl.

Assorted spices.

- 1) Mix the young girl and other children well in the large mixing bowl.
- 2) Add Italian spices such as rosemary, cannoli's, St. Mary and Catholic shrines, along with Swedish cinnamon, mulled wine, Midsummer ribbons and songs, to taste. Be sure to include other spices such as pride, frustration, sadness and anger to aid in the fermenting process.
- 3) Allow the mixture to rise for approximately seven years.

Coming home from school I walked through cold December air, pushing through mists of crystallized breath. Opening the front door felt like stepping into a furnace of fragrances. Heat emanated from the kitchen, carrying on its warm currents the scent of breads, my mother's vertbread (or beer bread). Red and white decorations assaulted the eyes, warmth trickling down through the body like water through a dank cave.

The scent of wheat and rye mingled with molasses, breathing it in was like inhaling a warm blanket. It filled me up and wrapped around my insides. The taste of the bread was just as full, a booming and shattering on the tongue. Broken pots of pungent flavor. Mother's recipe was handed down from her grandparents. Hand written

in a small flowered notebook, the unintelligible Swedish was converted in my mother's skilled hands every year.

I always enjoyed watching. Fingers coated in flour dust, mother mumbled the measurements to herself. Grams to tablespoons. Deciliters to cups. Beer, butter, flour, yeast. Slicing into the soft dough with her hand as a blade, they came off as dark brown rolls sprinkled with white. Into glass bread bowls with towels over them. I wasn't allowed to peak underneath. The loaves had to rise. And they wouldn't if they were watched, like secretive gnomes hiding underground. Rise, rise like magic.

~*~

A hot summer day. The air felt heavy and viscous, weighing down the lungs. I didn't like them. I was fairly certain they didn't like me. But...they had a pool. A glorious blue oasis, and so I went, leaping over their veiled insults. We played games and made up names for each other. Warrior labels. The pool became a playground, battleground.

I remember one of them rising up out of the water. He was a big, older boy. His eyes were hunks of coal set into a molded olive face. Raising his burly 16-year-old arms, he flexed every muscle he did or didn't have and declared, "I am the Italian stallion!" We all laughed, they said "us too, us too!" My laughter died in my throat, dissolving around my larynx. They were looking at me now, laughing hyena eyes. Hungry.

"What will you be? A Swedish fish! We'll eat you up like candy. Chew you up and spit you out."

Then they were rearing and stomping and cackling. Words hard as hooves. I had reddened skin, freshly burned. They held up open flames and gleefully watched the skin

curl. No amount of water put it out. No amount of acid from my mouth singed their surfaces. It just slipped off, disappeared into the rollicking blue. I was engulfed under waves, and I couldn't swim, and I couldn't stay afloat. I wasn't a fish, I was bait.

Walking away, the shame and failure stank on me as sharp and sterile as chlorine.

- Equal parts anger and aggression.
- Cover with discretion.
- Allow to cool.

Cinnamon rolls are as much fun to make as they are to eat. Note: this recipe will not result in the giant pastry sugary-coated bakery buns. Ours are small, soft spiced dough, daintily sprinkled with pearly granules of sugar. The dough should be a warm creamy color, oozing between the fingers.

Flour toughens it up. Coating the counter, I slam the dough down and press inward the ball of my hand. Fold, press, fold, press. The muscles will ache and complain in my arms, but they are to be ignored. The dough has to be taught a lesson. The dough isn't completely kneaded until it stops clinging desperately to the counter and is able to retain its shape, stand firmly on its own.

~*~

She didn't stand a chance, high school ridicule. She walked weird, every gesture stammering with learning disability. Hissing forked tongues tasted her insecurity. She concentrated on her assignment, and I attempted to follow suit. But I followed every

remark. Like infected spores they swept into my ears and settled in my brain. Anger blossoms fiery red and acidic black, their roots dug deeper.

Giggling hyenas, they ripped up paper with sharp teeth and tossed them into her hair. This was, apparently, hilariously funny.

She didn't seem to feel it. But she did. Drops stained and wrinkled the pages of her notebook. The ink swelled, like tiny fuzzy threads that drifted and ran over lines. I could see the springs winding in her limbs, tightening with every rip of paper.

Finally, SNAP, she was off. Jumping up, tears fell with bits of paper to the floor as she fled.

In the hallway, I pulled the bits out of her fluffy hair, combing it out like snow. I wished it would melt. I remember the door opening, I remember him passing, the boy who threw the most. I felt the roots dig deeper, wrapping around something inside and squeezing until it crumbled away.

The words I spoke have long since faded. I remember classmates crowding the doorway. I remember my voice echoing off lockers. But I most clearly remember his retort, the hateful glare stamped into my stunned memory.

“You stupid Swedish bastard.”

As if being stupid and a bastard weren't enough.

As if that had anything to do with it.

~*~

Once the dough is firmer, roll it out in a wide flat circle. Then apply even layers of butter, sugar and cinnamon in that order.

Touching the soft dough, it changes colors at my fingertips, and I am suddenly transported back to kindergarten. Rolling out snakes and worms, flattening the balls in my palms. Cutting them with ease. I'm not thinking about the growing pit in the center of myself, growing every year. I'm not thinking about how the mailbox is always knocked down, how my family's cars are mysteriously covered in paintball splotches, or how the backboard of my brother's new basketball hoop shattered itself. I'm thinking about time passing. I'm thinking about how it all doesn't really matter. I'm thinking about rising.

It's time to try again. It is time to create a new recipe.

You will need:

Beer brewed in bitterness, abuse and depression.

One fully matured female.

A large bowl.

One measure of beaten pride.

Several heaping tablespoons of buttery forgiveness.

Assorted sugars and spice: conciliation, cardamom, rosemary.

Mix all ingredients well in the large mixing bowl. Once the dough is thick and not sticking to the counters, place in containers and cover with towels. Allow to rise.

Bake for approximately 4 to 5 years.

The alcoholic bitterness of the beer will burn away, leaving the taste of lessons learned. Broken pots of fragrant forgiveness, seeping inward and bestowing outward.