

Diane Comer

The Invisible Distance

I raise the vinyl shade and look out the plane window, golden clouds, deep blue sky, the sun in her circle at the top of the world. The light blazes across the darkened plane and the sleeping passengers and I pull the shade closed. On the video monitor our tiny illuminated plane flies over the Scandinavian Peninsula on its way to Stockholm. All around me the Swedes slumber on. I have never been on a plane with such quiet passengers. They hummed like bees through the preflight and dinner and then tucked themselves under the thin, scratchy blankets and fell right to sleep. Beside me sleeps the man whose life I am crossing the Atlantic to join. Keith, even his name is like a breath exhaled in relief. I never tired of saying it to myself or in his ear when we made love. His eyelids flutter in REM sleep, his face smooth and relaxed. I sigh. I have not slept, despite the upgrade to an ergonomic business class seat with ample leg room, despite drinking the complimentary bottles of wine and liqueur the SAS stewardesses handed out without a smile, despite months of exhaustion preparing for this move.

“Try to keep an open mind about this. Don’t go there with any preconceptions,” my brother Will had said. I nodded. We stood smoking together outside the Newark International terminal. I was grateful he had come to say goodbye, driving up the Jersey Turnpike at rush hour after teaching high school math all day. I wanted to lean into him and cry. America howled around us, its buses, its taxis, its planes, its cars. We added to the pollution with our blue smoke, our sibling silence. My eyes burned, my chest a fisted knot. Keith blew through the door, having checked all our baggage. I could feel him racing ahead of me, eager to reach the boarding area, to be gone, while I wanted to stand and finish this last cigarette with my brother and never go anywhere outside the moment. Will put out his cigarette. He looked at Keith. “You take care of my sister,” he said, a command, not a request. Then he held out his hand and

Keith grasped it in his, sealing the pledge. Will turned and hugged me, “You write. I won’t write back, but you write.” I stood mute as my brother strode away through the crowd, a gait I would recognize anywhere; he was at home in the world I was leaving.

I crack the window shade again. Morning gilds the clouds below molten orange and honey. I am suspended above a country I have never seen, despite three tours in Europe as an Army brat and traveling there four times since. I passed through Sweden fifteen years ago on the night train to Oslo, but it is blank in my imagination. When I summon Sweden, I come up empty. Somewhere below the Arctic Circle, above Europe, beside the Baltic is a place on the map I have never been or ever thought to go until love pulled me there against all reason, all odds, into the invisible distance.

Passengers begin stirring around me even as Keith sleeps on. I cannot understand how he can fall asleep on a plane and stay there, sleeping, for hours, but he can and does. I am past jealous. My night has been cold and fitful. I dozed in snatches, if at all, skimming below the surface like a shark, my mind in constant motion. The first set of lights chime on. The breakfast bustle begins. The captain announces the arrival time and current weather conditions in Stockholm in a low, growling Swedish and then a flawless British English. Keith yawns and stretches beside me. “Did you sleep?”

I shake my head.

“Maybe you can sleep on the next flight.”

I nod. His eyes are clear dark blue shot through with light. If he is afraid, he does not show it. Everything I feel my face reveals. Keith squeezes my knee in reassurance. I remember watching him up in my sister’s corral, soothing the restless mares with his hands and voice. Usually his hands have the same tranquilizing effect on me, but not this morning. I feel like I am hurtling faster than the plane towards my destination, falling through the thick clouds to certain ruin. I concentrate on my breakfast tray. The coffee is strong and delicious. I drink several cups. I swallow the bottled water and still my mouth is dry. Keith is explaining the procedures at customs and I am nodding but not paying attention. The plane

passes through the clouds, and below is a pineclad landscape stretching toward dark gray water untouched by sun. The Baltic. The coast is fragmented into a myriad of islands, all covered in forest. I can just make out little houses painted red or yellow or white.

“The Stockholm Archipelago,” Keith points out. “Those are summer houses.”

“Must be nice.”

“It is in the summer.”

“Have you been there before?”

“A couple times. Karin had friends who had a house on one of the islands.”

Karin, the ex-wife. This is her country, not his. The plane touches down and a pine forest streams by and then stops. Seven in the morning, the beginning of April, raining. The only flights on the ground are from other continents. I see planes with the exotic tail feathers of Korea, Australia, India, and the Middle East. How is it we have all landed here? I descend the metal steps, slick with rain. The air feels cool and wet on my face after the plane, the wind freshening. Inside the luggage hall the Swedes take out their cell phones and begin talking with more animation than they have shown all flight, no doubt glad to be home. The only person I want to talk to in this country is commandeering two luggage trolleys and staking a place near the maw of the baggage carousel. He looks capable and determined. I feel crusty with fatigue. Luggage spews forth from our full flight. The bright yellow suitcase Keith bought me seems to have infinite twins here, but none with the teal mountaineering rope lashed around it. I have carried my small rattan suitcase with brass fittings onboard with me. Inside are things I cannot afford to lose: Keith’s letters, his pearls, my mother’s pearls, good luck charms from my family, my journals—words and totems.

Finally all of our luggage, including the cardboard box with my mountain bike, has been loaded onto the trolleys. Keith takes the trolley with the bike box standing on end, and as he leans around it to steer through the crowd, he keeps repeating, “*Ursäkta me, ursäkta me.*” People move aside like sheep in a fog. I am sweating

by the time we reach the first elevator—not a real elevator, not an elevator designed to carry passengers with trolleys loaded with gear, but an elevator that holds one trolley at a time, and only if the luggage does not stick out on the sides, as mine does. I push the trolley through, swearing, as my big blue duffel sticks in the doorway and the elevator doors close around it. I push again and the trolley bursts through and bangs against the wall opposite. The elevator is three feet by three feet. At the next floor, I reverse the process and again the duffel sticks in the doorway and I pull and pull until the trolley leaps free and smashes into me. There are four elevators between here and the domestic terminal. I smell rank as a goat by the time I stand beside Keith in line.

“We can catch an earlier flight if that cow at the desk ever bothers to do her job,” Keith says, jutting his jaw at the Valkyrie behind the counter. He has already taken a number, number 59, and the digital monitor above her head reads 58. Minutes pass and the number does not change and the Valkyrie does not look up. We fidget, we cough, we glare, we speak English in loud and impatient voices about wanting to catch the next flight, and she refuses to acknowledge us. I have never been ignored with such competence. More time passes. Riots would break out in the United States if customer service were this lax. Finally our number appears in red on the digital monitor.

“*Femti-nio*,” the Valkyrie says.

Six years living abroad in Sweden have taught Keith he gets better service if he speaks Swedish, never mind many Swedes are fluent in English. What ensues is a wrangle over whether or not I have to pay for my bike on the next flight. Keith is patient for a long time, reasoning with her in Swedish, but as she stonewalls him, flipping back and forth in my ticket, he switches to English and anger and points out that I have a paid return flight and if the original SAS ticketing agent in Newark saw fit to check the bike all the way through to Karlskrona, what was her problem. I am not sure if it is the English or the anger that does it, but she sniffs, stamps my ticket a couple of times, slaps more orange tape on the bike box, and points her red lacquered talon to where the oversized baggage can be checked. Keith wheels the trolley over,

a metal door opens, hands shoot out, grasp the box, and my bike disappears.

While Keith goes in search of the *Herald Tribune*, I go outside to smoke a cigarette. He disapproves of my smoking and only tolerates it because I smoke expensive cigarettes that are fragrant and additive free. They are carcinogenic and I know that, but I am not going to give up smoking just when I have headed my life into the wind. Anyone who smokes understands how the cigarette keeps you company when you are lonely, anxious, upset, and, most of all, depressed. I am all of the above or I would never be smoking at seven a.m. I rationalize that by my internal clock this is not morning, but midnight, a perfectly fine time to have a cigarette.

I sit on the bench and watch the buses and taxis pick up and drop off passengers. I feel numb with fatigue and stunned that I am here, in Sweden, at last. Five months have passed since the truth came out and set in motion meltdown, therapy, separation, divorce, packing, moving, reunion, then flying together here. My body sits on this bench, my hand holds this cigarette, but my mind is still flying east, continuing its trajectory over the Eurasian continent, over the Pacific, across the Great Basin, trying to find home. But I have left home, if I had one, in my family, in my first marriage. I have come to Sweden to be with the man who is home to me. Suddenly I need to see Keith, to reassure myself that he is indeed here. The doors hiss me in and I look around the vast terminal, filled with people, trying to find the one familiar face in the anonymous sea.

“You lose something?” he laughs.

I press my head into his chest where I can feel his heart beating the slow cadence of the distance runner, “Only for a moment.”

“Our flight is about to board. Come on.”

More clouds, more rain, more quiet Swedes flying south in a Saab 2000 with twin Rolls Royce Allison engines, props that bite the wind, a noise reduction system that emits balancing sound waves, an all leather interior—I study the flight information card to steady my nerves. The smallness of the plane reminds me of the one I took to Albuquerque when my mother was dying, only then

I could watch our shadow move across the desert floor, here I can see nothing but gray cloud batting. A Stealth plane had been on our starboard wing above northern New Mexico, a black speck of menace, an omen of what was to come. My mother flew beneath our radar and escaped to the next world. Her flight had freed me to make my own. I am on the final leg.

The plane touches down in the middle of a cleared field surrounded by pine forest. The air strip looks clandestine and Keith tells me the Air Force flies out of here. Our baggage is off the plane before we are and set inside the terminal door, quite casually. Small town. Backwater. We are in Blekinge, a province in the southeast corner of Sweden whose original name means “still water” because of the archipelago that fragments the coast into hundreds of small islands. Swedes from Stockholm or Gothenburg make fun of the local accent and consider the natives hayseeds. Here comes one now, happy at the thought of all our excess baggage racking up in his fare.

“Is all this going to fit in there?” I ask, staring at the Volvo station wagon. The cab driver glances at me and then drops his eyes. He makes a mess of stowing our luggage until Keith takes over. He is a packing demon. I look around. The forest stretches thick and dark in all directions, overhead the clouds seal off the sun, the rain blows in from the sea five miles away. This could be Maine or the Brothers Grimm. Once we are settled in the car my companion seems to desert me, as he chats in Swedish with the cab driver. I am daunted and impressed by his speaking another language, the strange vowels and hard consonants filling his mouth. I too will have to learn to speak Swedish if I want to live here, and suddenly the forward thrust that has been carrying me for weeks through the packing, the moving, the parting with friends and family, stops.

I am sitting beside a man I have known for fifteen years whom I have not spent more than two months with altogether. I know him on paper, in hotel rooms, on holiday, playing house at my sister’s, but he is a stranger in his dailiness, and he can speak Swedish. I feel an undertow of panic as I realize I have flown halfway across the world to live with this person, in the house he and his wife

bought together. If this is a mistake, it is a big one. Nausea takes over and I unroll the window breathing in big gulps of rainy air. I have moved more quickly in the abstract than is possible in reality, where the emotional and actual gravity of the situation pulls me up, if not short, at least back from the cliff I have been racing toward.

Only it is not a cliff, but a pine forest that speeds by the window in a uniform dark march. The trees are planted densely together, their branches entangled, their gloom steadfast—no wonder this country believes in trolls. Only a troll would find this forest habitable. “In cold hell, in thicket,” I murmur, not remembering where the poem goes from there. Nor can I leave a trail of crumbs to find my way home, having forsaken home, marriage, country. Now I must learn to speak a language that is all *ooh, uh, eh*, and sounds like something fish might speak when they first came ashore, the vowels in the front of their pursed mouths. Why couldn’t it have been Italian? I laugh to myself—if his wife had been Italian, I wouldn’t be here. Keith and the cab driver continue chatting, and I drift beneath the surface of their conversation, feeling my dread harden into fear, my stomach roll, my eyes smart, and I keep the window open to remind myself to breathe and not cry. Another twenty miles and we turn off the highway. Ahead is a McDonalds and I do not know if I should be cheered or alarmed to see the familiar golden arches.

“They make good donuts,” Keith says.

“They make donuts? McDonalds doesn’t make donuts.”

“They do here.”

Who knew? The taxi makes a series of turns into a well-kept neighborhood. I am surprised at the size of the houses, ample, not quite luxurious, but I imagine the children are in high school or college, and the parents are easing toward retirement. A curious choice for a professor and his secretary wife in their thirties, and an expensive one. The taxi turns up a street, and I glance at either side, trying to guess which house it is, but we drive all the way to the end of a cul de sac and come down again to park beside a red brick ranch house with white shutters and slate blue trim. White metal awnings hood the windows, giving the house an inscrutable

and brooding look. A clutch of evergreens squat in the yard and snowdrops and sky blue scilla dot the grass. My heart sinks. I would never have chosen this house, and yet Keith did.

We walk up the steps to a double door painted white. I look across to the neighbor's house, which is shaped like a barn, only it is painted yellow, not a good yellow, not a sunny Bonnard yellow, but a dull yellow, a frowning gold of a yellow. I frown back at it. Still, in some respects it has more curb appeal than this house. Keith sorts through a mass of keys until he finds the right one and unlocks the door. To my surprise the door opens out, not in, and we have to step aside. How strange, how rude, I think. Why on earth does the door open out, not in? I will have to ask.

We cross the threshold and I breathe in the smell of a house that has been left alone for weeks: tight, airless, dry. "I'll get the luggage. You go on in," Keith says, nodding toward the shoe rack. I remove my shoes and pad across the cool white linoleum toward the kitchen and adjoining dining room. I am cheered to see many windows, including a bay window in the dining area with plants, all paired, all in matching white ceramic pots. Pine cupboards in the kitchen and pine wainscoting in the dining room, and a massive, rectangular pine table with six straight back chairs set squarely, if not militantly, around it. Keith knows how I feel about tables. "It came with the house," he says, by way of explanation or apology. Functional, solid, without concession to adornment or comfort, save for some skimpy chair pads, it looks like something hewn for Vikings, a country of hard asses, no doubt. Still, I like being able to look out the bay window and I have chosen my seat, if Keith does not already sit there.

The living room opens off the dining room, large, wood floored with a pair of very modern, very large couches covered in teal wool. Does everything come in pairs here, I wonder. Pewter colored open metal shelving holds the stereo, the TV. A pair of matching floor lamps in chartreuse keep watch over the dusk despite the huge picture window hung with the most hideous curtains I have seen since the 1960s—the same ochres, olives and dizzying print. The window looks out on a square deck surrounded by rose bushes starting to leaf and an expansive lawn framed in

trees. I can just make out the roofs of the houses behind and beside this one. Very private. You could sunbathe naked in this backyard, and perhaps the Swedes do exactly that, if the clichés are true.

“Nice yard,” I offer.

“It’s a pain to mow. The grass grows overnight in the summer.”

“Still, it’s pretty.”

“The sooner this place sells, the better. Then we can move into town.”

The town of Karlskrona is six kilometers and a bike ride away. We have no car. His ex-wife got that. I wrap my arms around me as I look out at the drizzle.

“I turned the heat up. The house should be warm soon.”

I nod. Triple paned windows and radiator heat notwithstanding, I doubt this house is ever warm. The layout seems resistant to warmth, too open, too north facing, too much gray and white linoleum. The sun, the sea, and the town all lie to the south. Anywhere in the world could be like this and I realize what this reminds me of: my childhood in Belgium, the same gray, anonymous skies, the same low horizon, the constant rain, only here there are more trees and I feel even more isolated: I have no family here.

Keith continues to let me discover the house on my own. I hear him buzzing in the background. I can sense he feels uncomfortable, but I am not sure why, if it is the simple fact that I am here and Karin is not, if it is his desire to have me like the house despite its psychic hangover, if he feels shy sharing his home with a different woman for the first time in twelve years. I go down the hall and open the first door on the left. A double bed resting on a handmade pine frame, covered with a Pendleton wool blanket in black, forest, and maroon, pulled very square and tight. The missing pair of dining room chairs flank the bed and serve as nightstands. I walk over to the window hung with white and ecru curtains that filter the morning light. I push back the curtains and look out on the street across to the yellow barn of a house—too bad the room is not at the back of the house, where it would overlook the garden. I turn around, on the wall opposite is a black and white print of

an unmade bed, the sheets a tangle of post love making, morning in a room somewhere on holiday on the other side of the Atlantic, the muslin curtains stirred by an ocean breeze—everyone knows this photograph, its soft gray tones and dreamy ease. It might even be called *The Unmade Bed*. This bed is very much made. I could bounce a kronor off of it. Very spic and span, very Marine Corps, very bachelor, the bed fills me with sadness and unease.

Keith comes and stands beside me, “The hot water heater was turned off while I was gone, but I’ve turned it on again. Maybe you’d like a bath when it heats up?”

That’d be nice. I feel gritty from travel.”

“We should try to stay up as long as we can to get adjusted to this time zone. If we go to bed now, we won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

I nod.

“I’ll hook up my mobile phone to the laptop so you can check your email later.”

“You can do that?”

“Sure.”

“I doubt anyone would have written yet. They’ll think I’m in transit.”

“Well, then you can write and tell them you’ve landed.”

Crash-landed is the word I would have used. I have crash-landed in the middle of the forest. My craft is not salvageable. I do not speak the language. But my traveling companion is going to rub two sticks together and provide the heat of communication for me. Bless him.

“I brought your bags in. Maybe you’d like to unpack.”

Maybe not. Maybe I would like to ring for a taxi to take me back to the airport, only my return ticket departs two weeks from today, a date I chose at random because the roundtrip fare was cheaper. I had no intention of using the ticket and now two weeks seem like an eternity. My bags look both formal and forlorn sitting on the floor of the bedroom, meek even. For some reason I remember Laura Ingalls Wilder, her first day as a married woman in her husband’s house. What did she know about him, as she took off her bonnet and her good black dress and changed into her

everyday clothes, noting the plump and starched pillows on the bed, the pillows she stuffed with goose down, the lace she tatted for the pillowcases, the quilt she pieced together, all this arranged by her husband for her arrival—even as this high, tight bed has been made for mine.

I turn away from the bed and open a white melamine closet door. Inside are shelves and wire drawers that pull out. All empty. I open another door, a closet rail, bare. All four doors open onto shelving, drawers and closet rails stripped of its owner's clothing. I wonder where Keith keeps his clothes that they are not here in this barren room. I feel a sob rise in my throat like a hard bubble and my eyes smart. I shut the closet doors. Keith wants me to stay. I know he wants me to stay, even though it was my decision to come to Sweden in the first place. I can remember asking him if he thought I was moving too soon and he said, no, he was happy I wanted to come sooner rather than later—which might have been not at all, we both knew. My courage, such as it was, might have failed me, or the tide turned, or the wind shifted, and my lifeboat in need of more work. But this is the real distance I have crossed, not some vision of living with him, but the reality of it. This house, this life, not something in my head humming along content, oblivious, untried, but an empty closet that shouts of her absence and former presence, a bed that was once tender and welcome and shared.

Four thirty a.m., the light in the bedroom cool and blue, just as it is in Scandinavian films where the protagonist walks along the beach, the angst as perpetual as the wind along the coast and as enduring as the twilight that lasts and lasts. Tires hiss and then pause on the wet street outside, the newspaper carrier perhaps. I remember this blue light in Norway, how it amazed and delighted me. I felt euphoric, like I never needed to sleep, and now I cannot sleep to save my life. For weeks I have been waking before six to watch Keith sleep when I most want him to be awake. The reservoir of sleep for him has been drought stricken for years. An insomniac, I respect sleep and do not disturb him. Instead, I wrap up in my dressing gown, find my cigarettes and journal, and go sit

in his study. He will not like that I am smoking in here. I do not care. Numb and alone, I scratch my anxiety into the page and wait for him to wake.

Breakfast: bread, butter, juice and coffee bitter at sea level. We are riding into town for the day. Keith unlocks the front door that opens out. I shake my head at this.

“Do you know why the doors open out?”

“No. They just do.”

“All of them?”

“All the ones I’ve seen.”

“How weird.”

“It might have something to do with living in a snowy climate, you push the snow away when you open the door.”

“Does it snow much here?”

“Not really, a couple inches, and it melts fast. The sea keeps everything mild. This is actually one of the sunniest parts of Sweden. It’s nicknamed the Swedish Riviera, or so I’ve heard.” He smiles and the lines around his eyes crinkle.

I snort. The skies are gray and overcast and impenetrable.

“Really, that’s why the town was founded. The king wanted an ice free harbor and this place doesn’t freeze, or hardly, or even when it does, the water is shallow enough you can break through it with an ice breaker. Karlskrona used to be the second largest city in Sweden. But when they founded it, nobody wanted to live here.”

“Why not?”

“Who knows. Swedes don’t like to move. Anyway, that winter they took all the doors off the houses in the nearest town, which is Ronneby, trying to force everyone to move.”

“And that did it?”

“Well, if you didn’t have doors on your house in the middle of winter, what would you do?”

“God, they really have a thing about doors in this country.”

Keith has gotten our bikes out of the garage already. I pause on the driveway, my bike leaning against me, the wind straight off the sea and wet, the list of what I need to survive my dailiness accrues: fenders for my bike, biking gloves, decent java. I watch

as Keith swings himself onto his bike, finds his toe clip and pedals off before I have even gotten my leg over the saddle. He doesn't look back to see if I'm even following. I hate him. I hate his stupid house. I hate not having a car. The suburbs exist because of cars. Everyone knows that.

I race to catch up. An asphalt bike path borders the suburb, four feet wide, with a railing dividing it from the street. Ah, the safety conscious Swedes. At the first intersection is a metal barrier to keep motorcycles off the bike path. Keith rides through, threading the tight turns easily. I am afraid my handlebars will hook on the railings and I dismount and walk through, remount while he whizzes ahead, downhill. I switch into a lower gear and pedal harder. A pasture full of bay brood mares flashes by, well tended barns, an arena, how my sister would love this, and then up, curving up over a pedestrian bridge over a highway. I stand up on my pedals to crank, brake hard on the descent trying to avoid a cyclist going the opposite direction, "Sorry," I call out as I pass by. What is the word for sorry in Swedish? A long straightaway through a tunnel that smells of urine, then McDonalds (stop for a donut, stop for decent coffee, forget about it), another tunnel and up a hill and there, just beside the bike path in a small meadow are standing stones, carved out of granite, leaning in the soft green grass looking out toward a sea not yet visible on the horizon. Keith has stopped for me.

"What are these?"

"No one really knows for sure. But they were put there between 500 and 1500 B.C. Could be a burial site. They're all over the country."

"They're amazing. That one looks just like the keel of a boat."

"They were seafarers even then. And the sea came up this far a thousand years ago. Be careful when you cross here. It's two lanes, but it's busy," and he shoots off again. I fish for my toe clip and curse him under my breath. A bus roars by. I cross over and see him whizzing downhill. He used to race bikes as a teenager, but this is no excuse for not waiting up for me. I pedal into the wind, my eyes tearing. I will have to wear my sunglasses even

when there is no sun if I hope to see on my bike in this stupid country. We are in an industrial part of town, small factories, car dealerships, everything gray and ugly. The road has gravel all over it, kicked up by the trucks that make deliveries here. At least my mountain bike has fat tires which are good for something, though Keith's bike is lighter, faster, and a speck ahead of me. I put my head down and pedal. He waits at the next intersection.

The bike path follows alongside the road, opposite an inland waterway, where tall, fawn colored reeds grow. The horizon is very low, the clouds lower still. Large, Stalinist apartment buildings crop up, gray, flat, hideous. Pizza and kebab signs, immigrant fare. The bike path picks up more riders. Everyone seems to bike here. Kids, women with babies, old people. They all ride sensible three speed bikes with upright handle bars and bells and ample bike racks, not something designed for Moab, Utah. We come to a train crossing and have to wait for the train, which is two cars long and electric and looks more like a trolley than anything else.

"The train from Emmaboda," Keith laughs and doesn't explain. A long flat stretch beside water with woods rising above it. Pretty. Then we begin to climb and climb. I stand up on my pedals, regret that I smoke, regret that I came here, regret that I have left car, comfort, and convenience back in America. Keith waits for me at the top of the first hill.

"The school is that way," he points right, up a curving street. More pizza and kebab signs on the corner. "Maybe we'll stop by after our errands in town."

I nod. Zip and he's off. I sigh. A long, slow hill, then a fast descent, and a tricky crossing under the train tracks and main highway to the town proper. A metal labyrinth that spooks me like a horse. I dismount, walk through. This tunnel smells especially bad and has graffiti all over it. We ride on a causeway joining the town of Karlskrona to the mainland. A mass of holding tanks for oil mushroom along one side of the harbor and a dock with an enormous ferry boat marks the other. Where can you go from here? I wonder. The wind is punishing, and I can hardly raise my head to glimpse the town or the dark blue water flowing along either side of me. Still, I am sweating. The town begins

at the edge of the island. Traffic flows around a large park, and we thread our way through on the bike path, which is clearly marked on the street. There are even buttons placed at cyclist hand level for each stoplight. I am impressed. We pedal by shop fronts, clothing, bakery, furniture, gifts, and up a steep cobbled hill. Now I am grateful for the mountain bike, which is nimble on this surface at least. At the top Keith dismounts and waits for me. We have reached a pedestrian mall and the main shopping street of Karlskrona, Ronnebygatan, named after the town that lost its doors to come here. Five blocks long, cobbled, with handsome Baroque buildings painted cantaloupe or honey, their copper roofs gone verdigris.

“I’ll show you the main square first. *Stor Torget*. Means Big Square. Original, eh? This is said to be the largest square in Europe.”

“Really?”

We walk our bikes across the cobbles. The street bustles, people carrying plastic shopping bags or wheeling prams or pushing bikes. Cell phones abound. Everyone seems to be wired and talking to someone not there. I’ve never seen anything like it, a world of communication animated but invisible. We pass by an ATM machine and I notice my card’s logo.

“Wait up. I’ll get some money out.”

“Good idea, the closer it gets to the weekend, these machines run out of money.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. By Friday night every ATM in town might be cashed out.”

“Why is that?”

“A lot of reasons. People use cash here more. It’s unusual to write a check or use a credit card to pay for something. Since most people work for the state in one capacity or another, or benefit from the state—students, retirees, the unemployed—everyone gets paid the same day. Plus there’re only five ATMs in the whole city, so they can’t exactly keep up with the demand.”

“Five ATMs for a town of what, thirty thousand?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“That’s completely stupid.”

“You got it.”

It’s my turn in line. One button bears the Union Jack. Good. I press it. My card gets inhaled and I have a sudden fear it will be swallowed into the bowels of one of the five ATMs in Karlskrona, and then into some mysterious Swedish banking network, never to return. I key in my PIN number, which is my wedding anniversary date. I will have to change that. Several choices for sums of money appear.

“How much should I take out?”

“Five hundred crowns would be good.”

“How much is that?”

“Divide by eight.”

I press the button for five hundred and a message appears, “MONEY IS COMING.” I burst out laughing. The machine makes snicking noises, talks to my bank in America, and out pops a five hundred crown note, a receipt and my card.

“Great. It works.” I study the note. Smaller and wider than US currency and engraved in shades of maroon with some historic figure on one side, a watermark—it looks too pretty to spend. I do the math, roughly sixty dollars.

“Listen, I need to go to the bank to see what happened to my salary.”

“What do you mean what happened to it?”

“It doesn’t seem to be in my checking account and I have direct deposit.”

“Oh boy.”

“Tell me about it.”

We wheel our bikes back to the main street to where his bank is. “Lock them together, both sets of wheels,” Keith says, handing me a long cable. I struggle to snake the cable through both sets of wheels and the bike rack. I shove the bikes closer together and they both list and start to fall. Keith stands watching. I right the bikes, tuck mine ahead of his, adjust the pedals so they don’t snag, and still the cable is too short. Try again. Fail. My face is in flames. Finally I give up on locking the back wheels together and opt for the front two. Keith says nothing. I am so angry I cannot speak as

I follow him into the bank.

Inside the aqueous light reminds me of a morgue. The air is chilled and dusty, the plants fake, the clerks washed out and moving in slow motion. Dickens comes to Sweden, I think. We take a number. I look around at the tellers and the customers. No one will look at me, or if they catch my eye, they immediately drop their gaze. I had noticed this in the airport too, but now it comes home to me: people do not look at one another in Sweden, or if they do, it is sidelong and covert. The moment they see you looking at them they look down. How strange. I make a game of it. Stare at one teller counting money at a closed position. Smile. She becomes discomfited, loses count, and must start over. Our number appears on the red digital monitor. Keith explains his business to the teller, and we are told to wait and where. We sit down on a small settee opposite a woman's desk and wait. And wait. She does not look up from her desk. She makes a few phone calls. She walks away from her desk. Returns, sits down, shuffles some papers. Ignores us. Keith is seething and I am afraid he will erupt any second. Finally she raises her head to look at something and I catch her eye. Unable to escape she asks, "*Får jag hjälpa dig?*"

Keith pounces on her, practically typing in his account number on her computer. The money is not there. Tracing the money proves difficult—big surprise. Calls are made. Supervisors are consulted. Much head shaking. Finally the missing sum of money is found—in Karin's checking account. They divided their joint account six weeks ago before he left for the States. She kept his last name and the computer allocated the money to her account because Karin comes before Keith in the alphabet. A simple computer error. No apologies made. He storms out of the bank.

"What's the matter? They can transfer the money back into your account, no problem."

"She knew it was there and she didn't do a damn thing about it."

"What do you mean she knew it was there?"

"I know her. She calls her checking account a couple times a day. She knew when the extra money hit that it was my salary."

What else could it be? She knows how much I get paid each month. And she did nothing about it. Said nothing about it. Like I wasn't going to notice?"

He unlocks the bikes in a fury. I stand back. I remember years ago we were in line at the student union cafeteria. A woman had cut ahead of him. He nearly severed her head verbally. I want to ask why Karin kept his last name, but that will have to wait.

"We'll go to what is considered the best grocery store in town," he says as he lashes the bike cable underneath his bike seat.

"Okay. I have a list."

The grocery store is within an enclosed shopping mall, a small mall by American standards, more like an arcade, but filled with similar stores: junky junior clothing in a choice of black or gray polyester or ethnic ready-to-shrink wear, CD stores, leather goods, vitamins, fast food, a hair salon reeking of perm solution, and a couple surprises, a bank and the post office. The prices in store windows floor me: CDs begin at twenty-five dollars a piece, a chintzy rayon skirt that will disintegrate unless dry cleaned is a hundred dollars. Clearly I will not be buying clothing or music if I live here. Noon and the place is jammed.

"Is it always this crowded?"

"People cut through here," Keith explains. "It's between the two main shopping streets."

Smart on the part of the developers, that and anchoring the place with a grocery store in the heart of the city, ICA Wachtmeister, whose doors slide open to admit us. Keith takes a basket, saying, "A shopping cart makes you buy more than you can carry on a bike."

Fair enough, we pass by the carts that are chained together and require five crowns to be released into your possession. I look at my list. Well, here goes. "I want nicer toilet paper. That stuff in your house is like sandpaper."

"Fine. It's right here in this aisle."

We stand surveying the toilet paper choices. I try not to be self-conscious, but I feel exposed shopping for the first time for everyday things with a man I have never lived with. Maybe he does not care what brand of toilet paper he uses and is indulging

me. Ridiculous, I give myself a mental shake. Unlike the U.S. where an entire aisle is devoted to toilet paper, the selection here takes no more than fifteen feet of shelf space. I laugh out loud when I see the brand we currently have in the house is called Krapp. Crap indeed. For the rest, small cuddly animals seem to be the advertising theme, whereas in the States it would be babies. I have to choose between squirrels and lambs. I choose lambs, or more specifically, Lambi brand, which also happens to be the most expensive. I do quick math. Four rolls of toilet paper costs nearly three bucks. Amazing. Horrifying. I look down at my list. Juice, pasta, tomatoes, olive oil, garlic, lettuce, cucumbers, green onions, balsamic vinegar, tomato paste, java, cream, milk.

We reach the dairy case and Keith takes several cartons of *mjölk*. Good, the word is similar.

“We need butter,” I add.

Keith riches for a gold foil brick that reads *Smör* with a happy Holstein grazing in the background.

“Say that for me,” I ask, pointing to the word for butter.

“*Smör*.”

“*Smör*,” I repeat.

“No, *smör*.”

“*Smör*.”

He shakes his head. “This is the o with an umlaut, the two dots, ö, sounds like uhr, at the front of your mouth. Make your mouth small,” and he purses his lips and repeats, “*Smör*.”

I make the fish mouth, “*Smör*.”

“You’re getting it.”

I’m not. I sigh. We go through the entire store, which is only a bit larger than a mom and pop grocery store in the States, and I find or substitute the Swedish equivalent for everything on my list. When the clerk announces the total, “*Fyr hundred sjugo sju*,” I turn to see the price on the cash register, 427 crowns for a basket of basics. I hand over my newly spit out five hundred crown note. I want to contribute even if I don’t want to stay long enough to eat up any of this food. I feel a loop of fear wrap around my chest. We walk back to the bike rack and load our provisions into pannier bags that clip to the side. Both are bulging.

“We’ll skip going to the school today and ride along the water for a bit; it’s pretty there,” Keith says, swinging onto his bike. “Then we’ll get this stuff home.”

“Sounds good,” I say, racing to get my left foot into the toe clip and catch up to him before he vanishes down the street. The bike is heavier and there’s a momentary shift in balance before I readjust to the extra weight on one side. I can feel how the symbolic equivalent of these groceries might throw me to the cobblestones if I let it. I need to right myself or I will never be able to pull forward but keep backpedaling in the past where suddenly everything looks better. I join the flow of traffic going downhill toward yet another harbor. This one *is* prettier, no oil tanks to spoil the view, just a gentle curving arc with a cobbled quay, sailboats and tour boats nodding at anchor, a choir of shops, apartment buildings and houses rising above it. Directly across the harbor is another island studded with the barn shaped house I recognize, only here they are painted red, yellow, blue, green, gray or white, a small island with a bridge arching over to it, another island, another bridge, more red, yellow, blue, green, gray or white houses. Maybe there are only six house paint colors in Sweden. I see Keith on a bike path bordering the water. I pedal hard to join him, and when I am riding abreast, he reaches out his hand to hold mine. We cycle together holding hands until we meet oncoming cyclists and Keith shoots ahead. We follow the water, the wind rifling the surface with its catspaw.

“That’s Langö,” Keith says, pointing to the island opposite. “It means Long Island. Ö means island.”

“Ö,” I say to myself. This sound will be the bane of me and I am surrounded by islands. Karlskrona is in the middle of the second largest archipelago in Sweden. How romantic that sounded back in the States, the Baltic, the Karlskrona archipelago. “Ö. Ugh.”

The wind in its infinite misery has shifted and we ride into it, pedaling on a downhill stretch even. I am beginning to recognize landmarks, and when we head uphill through the industrial backwater, Keith rides close in front of me to break the wind. I stare at the skinny tire of his bike, only inches in front of my own toothy fat tire, my chin bowed to my chest, my thighs on fire. I

hate that my naiveté did not factor in this commute, this wind, this distance, six kilometers, four miles, nothing really, unless you have been driving everywhere in America since the age of sixteen and bought your mountain bike for recreation not transportation. We reach the top of the hill where we join the main road. Yellow fog lights march into the distance and disappear, burnishing the sky above a strange orange, reminding of something, I'm not sure what. The golden arches shine in the dusk.

"We'd stop for fries if we didn't have this stuff to get into the fridge. Maybe next time," Keith suggests.

I nod. Try to smile. Feel bitter and winded and resentful that he ever bought a house this far outside of town, that his wife got the car, that I am not in existential or physical shape for this stupid bike ride, that I smoke, that even now I would like to smoke a cigarette out on his back patio and think about why coming here was a bad idea, that I was out of my mind, that passionate love is temporary insanity, just like the ancient Chinese say, and that I have regained my senses, if not my breath.

"Here," Keith says, and he unwraps his cashmere scarf from around his neck and ties it around mine, pulling it up over my nose like a Bedouin in a sirocco. The scarf is warm and soft and smells like the cologne I gave him. My eyes sting. I don't want him to be kind to me right now or to take care of me or witness my small suffering. "We're almost home," he says.

Home. A word that can stick in my throat like a lump of soft bread and choke me. Whatever else his house is, it is not home. Before I left the country, my ex husband told me the path with heart was the only one worth following. No one said anything about the path being uphill, into the wind, into the suburban twilight. Keith unlocks the garage door and yanks it open, the hinges shrieking in protest. We unload our carrier bags and lean our bikes against the wall. For a moment they look like horses, heads down and tired, blowing exhaustion from their nostrils, but I realize it is myself I am describing, not my bike. I unwind the scarf damp with breath from the ride and follow Keith to the front door that opens out, not in, and therein lies all the difference between house and home.

Saturday. I wake before six and get up and make coffee in the French press I brought over with me in my suitcase. Even drowning in fat cream the coffee is bitter, as am I. I cannot seem to get the simplest things right, like coffee. I go sit in Keith's study and smoke. I want to talk to someone, anyone, but it is too early or late to call the States. I watch our neighbors in the yellow house across the street strap their toddler into the bike carrier and ride off together. Saturday morning errands, the happy trio. To have a routine, to live somewhere you know and are known, to get on your bike by choice, not lack of choice—to have the world be ordinary once again. I want that. I doubt it is possible in a country not my own, in a house not my own, under a sky so low and overcast I feel cut off from the sun. I scratch more misery into my journal and type more pleas for wired contact and wait for the sun to rise in the form of Keith.

Over his bread and honey and my reheated and even more bitter second cup of coffee, I tell Keith, "I need to see open water. Not this inland stuff separating the islands. But open water, with waves. The big Baltic."

"That might be hard. The real open water is past all these barrier islands and you have to drive to get there. It's too far to ride."

Damn, not landlocked, but island locked, who would have thought this was possible.

"But we can go to where we can look out toward the open water and get a view. I'm afraid I can't promise waves. The Baltic isn't tidal."

"No waves? No tide?"

"Not really. Sometimes when there's a storm we get waves, but the Baltic is an inland sea, more like a big lake, and it doesn't have tides."

What a useless sea, I think to myself, and I remembered when Keith wrote me about his wedding years ago. How he went windsurfing on the Baltic the day before. I was envious at the thought of it. I had this image of him whipping around on deep blue water white capped and swelling underfoot, golden sun above, radiant with health and happiness on the eve of his

wedding. How much of life is imagined, especially the lives of others. We believe the fiction we create around others is true, but it is not. I have seen the wind here and glimpsed the Baltic. Only the wind is impressive.

We bike into town and this time I concentrate on landmarks, the horse stable with brood mares, McDonalds, the standing stones, the industrial strip, the railroad crossing, the tunnel, the causeway. Town. I follow Keith across the main square, my teeth rattling in my head from the cobbles as we ride down toward the sea. At the bottom of the hill is a large bricked quay with a rose colored mansion fronting the water. “That’s the governor of Blekinge’s mansion. When the king of Sweden comes to visit, he stays there. Often he sails right up to this quay and ties off.”

“How can a socialist country have a king?”

“Good question. But they do. The Swedes love tradition and can’t seem to get rid of the king, though he has no power.”

“Weird.”

“Go figure.”

I walk down the king’s steps and put my hand in the Baltic. The water is very cold. I taste my fingers, surprised it is not that salty, but then this is not an ocean and the water only slaps against the retaining wall.

“What’s over there?” I point to a small white lighthouse and what look like warehouses and more open water.

“That’s Stumholmen, another island.”

“Can we ride over? It looks like you get a better view of the water from there.”

“Sure.”

We cross a bridge and cycle toward the lighthouse, past cantaloupe colored buildings turned into flats. We head toward the southern shore of the island and ride on an asphalt bike path along the waterfront. I pull ahead of Keith and race along, the wind in my face. The water may be black, tideless, waveless, but past two small islands that hook the harbor mouth closed, the distance glitters. Above me is a high stone rampart topped with grass where cannons are entrenched, facing out to sea. Keith catches up to me.

“Can we go up there?” I ask, pointing to the cannons.

“Sure, follow me.”

We cycle around the edge of the fortification and then up a sloping hill. The ground is soft and hummocky and I struggle to keep upright. Even on a road bike, Keith manages the terrain. Excited to see the view, I don't care for once that he outshines me every second on his stupid bike. From the crest of the rampart the wind is stiff. I throw my bike down and race to the edge. I feel Keith grabbing the back of my jacket.

“I'm not going anywhere,” I laugh, “Besides the wind would keep me in place.” On the horizon I can see a shimmer of silver between the two islands: open water. I want to fling myself there, but even from this height I cannot see past the invisible distance where the Baltic is free from the net of the archipelago.

“Is that good enough?” Keith asks.

“It's the best yet. Still, someday I want to go out there,” and I point to the silver mirage.

“I'll borrow a car and take you.”

“Good,” and I hunker down next to a cannon to get out of the wind and still have the view. Keith sits behind me and wraps me in his arms and legs, resting his chin on my shoulder. The wind and the water before me help clear my head. Everywhere I have ever lived or visited I wanted to get as high up as possible to see where I am. Here I am perhaps no more than twenty-five feet above sea level, high enough to fire down upon ancient enemy ships, but not high enough to see past the fortifications of the harbor. We watch a bright yellow car ferry steam toward one of the outer islands.

“People live out there, with cars?”

“Yep. Another great Swedish subsidy.”

I imagine the southern shore of such islands faces the open Baltic. I want to see that. More than anything I want to see what I cannot see from here. I have a fierce hunger for a view not possible from this vantage point. I don't know what I would accomplish if I were to see past this point, but the yearning is there all the same. To see past now and here. To see my way through.

“Chicky, you're getting cold. Let's zip over to the pool and check the hours. Maybe you can go for a swim next week.”

“So now you’ve got me in training for the Swedish triathlon, swim, bike, stay.”

“I just thought you might like to swim.”

“I just thought you might like me to stay.”

“That goes without saying.”

I look out to sea, matte slate in color, the sky heavy and gray above, the sun hidden. “It’s too soon to say if that’s possible.”

“I know.”

I turn to kiss him. The planes of his cheeks are cold, his mouth warm, the wind behind us.