

A SHORT SOJOURN IN STOCKHOLM

A STORY BY

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Origins

Stockholm is a fine friendly city. Every Tunnelbana station had its resident drunk who seemed to be on another planet. Suppose they really were

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A Short Sojourn in Stockholm

I've mentioned before that I live a suitcase life. My work is, well it doesn't really matter, but it takes me all over Europe. Weeks here, months there, sometimes a conference or two, just to show the company's face. Market visibility I think they call it back home. Not many want to travel out these days, so it usually falls to me, as the constant volunteer, to talk to competitors and clients alike.

This time I was assigned to a seminar in Stockholm with one of our system designers. There were lots of very clever people showing other clever people how clever they are. I'm one of those other people who turn their dreams into real saleable products. Most of the stuff at these technical seminars goes right over my head, but at least it gives a lie of the land ahead, where there are products to build, and a profit to make

for the company.

We had booked into one of those expensive executive night stops in the centre of the city. I prefer those interesting little hotels out in the sticks, where conversation revolves around Auntie Mary's sciatica and the other exotica of every day family life. I don't have a family, so it's a refreshing change from listening to other executives telling lies about how well their career is going, and how company X shafted company Y. I see those people for a few years, then their careers are on the rocks. Or they've been promoted to some boring admin job out of the way of the young turks chasing them up the promotion ladder. Not me. I gave that up to stay on the technical side. It's safer, and a lot more interesting. I'll be doing this up to retirement.

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I was stuck in the city with Josh, one of our brilliant young designers. It was his first trip out, so I was obliged to stay at the best hotel we could afford. I don't mind that every so often, people like him don't get the chance for a whack at the company expense account. Quite honestly, I don't think he noticed, he was too lost in those technical heights of his at the edge of what was possible. I'd worked with him before. Great dreamer, but no practical sense of how to turn the dreams to reality. That's my job, when I can understand what they're talking about.

Wonderful city, Stockholm. It was, in those times, one of the last cities you could walk around without wearing a suit of armour for protection. Lots of interesting places to see and visit. I'd been there one winter, many years before, when the harbour was frozen over and people were going for Sunday afternoon walks and buying hot chestnuts roasted on braziers right there on the ice.

The seminar was not as fascinating as it promised. The subject was too new, and most delegates were keeping their cards close to their

chests, trying not to give away how far ahead they really were, or how far behind. Josh presented his paper and got the best kind of accolade from his peers - total silence. They knew they were far behind this boy, and I knew we had a really good chance to break a market ahead of the competition.

It's a shame in a way, because everyone clams up trying to figure out how to spoil our chances. It's more exciting to be at the same level. There's a tighter feel to the project, greater satisfaction at beating the competition by a nose rather than several lengths. The secret of bringing an advanced project to market is to instil the fear of losing the race into the project team, otherwise they squander their lead with researching too many sidetracks.

My job was to stop Josh giving away too much, now I realised he was further along than the other designers. He'd get his papers out, and his extra degrees, eventually, but a commercial sense to the possibilities was a priority. I became his agent for the rest of the seminar, issuing 'no comment' whenever anyone got too close to

prying into our plans. In the meantime, I was trying to figure out what our plans were going to be. Our boy was a valuable resource to be defended. Our boy? He was 28, married, with two children, but you know what I mean.

There is something else you would have noticed about Stockholm at that time. Every station on the underground railway network, they call it the Tunnelbana, had its resident drunk. Sweden had virtual prohibition on alcohol, you could only buy strong drink at state shops. Friday afternoon you'd find sober Swedes queuing up to get their weekend supply, and you couldn't get anything stronger than a weak lager beer at bars. Well, you could, but rolling home with a skinful of spirits was a grave social crime. If a driver was found over the very low limit, every passenger with a driving licence lost theirs too. Drink was a serious business.

We took a train from Central Station each morning, it was a direct line to the conference centre. We rarely got back to the hotel before eight in the evening. I don't like the bustle of main stations so we'd get off a couple of stops up the

line and walk the rest of the way. Josh didn't mind, he was too lost in the clouds to notice.

There was always the same drunk sitting on a bench each evening, gabbling to the commuters, waving his bottle, asking for money to buy more drink. The drunks were never violent, and in the winter it was the only place they could keep warm for a few hours. That was about the time the graffiti was appearing on the trains. You'd think that after that warning sign they'd nip it in the bud, the trouble that was to come. We'd warn them about New York and London, but 'Sweden is different, it won't happen here'. It did. Now they lock themselves in their apartments like the rest of us. Monday evening I dropped a few kronor into the drunk's grubby hand. Josh came down from his clouds and spoke.

"He'll only spend it on more drink."

"Perhaps," I said. "On the other hand he might have had enough and buy himself a burger."

Josh just smiled. I took the hint though, and for the rest of the week I saved some food from lunch, wrapped it in paper napkins, and dropped

the bundle into the outstretched hand instead of the money. I'm no great Christian, but there but for fortune, and so on.

There was another seminar the following week so we stayed over for the weekend. It wasn't Josh's area, we were there only as observers, just to see what was going on. We went out sightseeing on the Saturday, and Josh disappeared off to the old town for the evening, to visit a blues or jazz club or something. I had a lot of reports to write so had dinner in the hotel. It was full of weekenders from out of town, and the atmosphere was a little rowdy. Country Vikings were in town to put a little life into their soft city cousins. They demonstrated real Viking hey-ho by pulling all the hotel's pot plants out of their tubs. Real mean stuff.

I retired to my room after dinner and started tapping away at my laptop word processor. The telephone rang, I answered, cursing at the interruption. It was the reception desk.

"We have someone in the lobby who wants to see you."

"Fine," I said, "send them up."

I expected it was a local competitor who wanted to do a deal with us for Josh's work. It happens sometimes.

"No," said the voice, "we'd prefer you saw him in the lobby."

"Who is it? Did they give a name?"

"No," said the voice hesitating. "It's a person."

I didn't expect it to be a horse or a donkey, and I got an impression of disapproval. Just what I wanted, some Jan Persson on a Saturday night with the Viking hordes on the loose. It took me a few minutes to secure everything and head for the lobby. The young woman on the desk nodded toward someone sitting by the entrance. It was the station drunk. Charity was fine until it followed you back home. The receptionist was pretending to study the register, but I could feel her eyes following me. I went over to the old man, he stood up and extended his hand. We shook, and I led him to warmer spot away from the doors.

"I am sorry to disturb you," he began slowly in a

very thick accent.

I judged he wasn't Swedish, his accent was quite different, and they all speak such beautiful English anyway. He followed my eyes over his shabby coat. He shrugged.

"It is enough," he said by way of explanation.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, dreading the answer.

He shrugged again, and seemed reluctant to speak. I asked the young woman to order some food from the restaurant, some Swedish sandwiches, smorgasbord. They aren't at all like the real thing, merely grand sandwich mixes they serve up for us foreigners, but it would do. My visitor cleared his throat.

"I came to thank you," he said.

"No need," I said. He smelled of sleeping and living in his overcoat, and the cheap beer he drank.

"We leave soon, I had to come." He nodded toward the door, where four others waited outside.

I asked the receptionist to send some food out, which she did after disapproving tut-tuts, and a minor argument with a waiter. Our food was served with rather bad grace.

"You see how difficult it is here for us," said the old man.

"Yes," I agreed.

I didn't really want to get any deeper, but he seemed to be trying to find the right words.

"We don't come from here. We are leaving."

From his build I guessed he was Slav.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

I nodded.

"We came a long time ago. Now we have good news, we can go home. We were once more than you see, hundreds, but only we survive."

I muttered some inane condolences.

He brought out a bottle from his pocket and waved it. The receptionist looked up.

“We need this only to survive.”

“Oh, really?” I said.

He put the bottle back into his pocket.

“The air is too thick, we have to...” he hesitated, looking for the right word, “burn it off somehow, it poisons us.”

I frowned, trying to guess what he meant, but he simply smiled.

“Where did you come from?” I asked, more out of politeness than general interest.

He just raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“Upstairs?” I asked.

He shook his head and nodded emphatically to the ceiling.

“Where?” I asked.

He raised his index finger and pointed to the ceiling. “The sky,” he said smiling.

“Oh, I see,” I said, “by aeroplane.”

He shook his head and looked around to his comrades outside the front door. One of them was laughing.

“Higher.”

“You lived on the mountains?”

A strange image passed momentarily before my mind’s eye, a galaxy of stars turning in space. I shook my head.

“Yes,” he said.

“Yes what?” I asked, feeling very stupid. Some kind of game was going on, perhaps I could buy him off with a hundred kronor note.

“What you saw just then.”

I blushed, and looked around. “What did I see?”

He tapped his forehead. “Stars.”

I must have looked even more stupid.

“We came from the stars.”

Wonderful, I’m going to be treated to a real fantasy, I thought. I wondered what it was going to cost, and how many other tourists had been caught by it. Perhaps the hotel receptionist had seen them before and that was why she was so disapproving. Another foreigner falling for it. I sighed, and settled down. At least I might get a

story to tell at the next boring dinner party I was invited to.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

I got it too, the full Ancient Mariner bit. They had come far across the galaxy, navigation and control systems damaged very shortly after they left their home system. All they could do was hope for a suitable planetary system on their course. They left distress beacons in their wake. After some time they found a star in their path that matched home and had a planetary system, with one planet they could live on. The power units on their ship were burning out and the ship was falling apart. They didn't have the means to head back home. I didn't ask how they could have survived what must have been millions of years in interstellar space, it seemed impolite.

The old man seemed to catch the thought, shrugged and said, “It doesn't work that way, we were only five years travelling.”

I smiled. Telepathy is a simple trick if you tell the same old story and watch for telltale facial expressions. Many stage magicians could do the

same. So could I when trying to sell a new project to management. He continued his story.

They found Earth and tried to land but the ship became unstable in orbit, began to break up. They abandoned ship in a shuttle and landed in the north, in Siberia, in darkness. The ship exploded half-way around the planet, leaving trees flattened in the snow for a radius of fifty kilometres, and sending a shock wave around the world that was heard, but not understood, by our elementary recording devices. They hid. Some survived, though many didn't. They spent years on the move looking for a place to live and get food regularly, and eventually came to Sweden. They lived the best they could, but needed the alcohol to burn off the excess oxygen from our atmosphere.

It was an impressive tale, and I was impressed enough to think about giving him two hundred kronor. Why not? It was more entertaining than the cabaret Josh and I had gone to the previous night. I asked for more food.

They had set the shuttle to acting as a beacon nearly ninety years ago and they had heard

recently that they had been located and rescue was coming.

“Ninety years ago?” I asked detecting a flaw in the story where I could score a point. “It was your grandparents who came here?”

“No,” he said shaking his head with a smile, “we live longer than you. It was us.”

The story had taken almost an hour to tell, I wish I had listened more carefully, but my attention was turning to the reports I had to write. The old man had stopped talking.

“So, you’re going home? I’m very glad to hear that, you must be happy after all this time.”

He looked at me, his eyes twinkling. “Yes.” He could see I didn’t believe him, but that was just part of the game. He and his friends had had plenty to eat, and he had spent an hour in the warm. He got up.

“Thank you for your kindness,” he said. “I must go. We leave tonight, it’s a long way to our shuttle.”

I took out my wallet and gave him three hundred

kronor. “Take this, buy some food for the journey.”

He looked at the notes and smiled. “You are very kind. Please take this in exchange, it’s all I have. I don’t need it any more.”

He gave me a black plastic cube, like a child’s toy building block, the sort that usually has a letter of the alphabet on it, or a picture of an animal. I looked at it in the palm of my hand. Either he was humouring me, or he was dotty enough to think it was valuable. Perhaps it was all he had in the world. I looked up. We shook hands, and he walked slowly out of the hotel to join his friends outside. They smiled and waved to me, then walked slowly away, talking amongst themselves.

I wrote a note for Josh, telling him to come to my room if he returned before midnight. I gave the note to the receptionist, which she accepted with utter silence. She looked as if she wanted to spray the lobby with disinfectant.

I didn’t see Josh, so went to bed, but was woken by him banging on the door at half past two. I

opened the door after he refused to go away. He was giggling.

“What’s this story you have to tell me?” he asked waving my note under my nose.

“Not now,” I said, “it’ll wait, I’m tired.”

“I’m not,” he replied, pushing his way into my room. “I found this great place in the old town.”

He giggled.

“I hope you’re going to lay off the giggleweed when you start this project.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s only once in a while. Besides, I’ve got a heavy year ahead, it’s my last chance to relax. Now what’s this story?”

I gave him an outline of what the drunk had told me, and said I’d tell it all tomorrow. He looked at the black plastic block.

“Sounds like a great story. What’s this?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “just a plastic block he picked up somewhere.”

“Wow,” said Josh breaking into another fit of giggles. “All I’ve done is smoke a little weed

tonight, while you’ve been talking to aliens. I’m really impressed.”

“He was a drunk, that’s all, with a unique line.”

Josh was looking at the block, and held it up to the light. He squinted at it and brought it close to his face. His eyes lit up and he uttered a string of wows, fantastics, and incredibles.

“How the hell did they do that?” he asked nobody in particular, scrutinizing the block.

“What?” I asked.

“I was swimming in stars, they were all around me, in the room, only, only...”

“Only you’re as high as a kite,” I said.

“No, really, you have a look.” He was stone sober.

I took the block and held it up as he had. I saw some pinpricks of light around me.

“Put it closer, right up close to your eyes.”

I did so, and the room exploded into darkness and I was floating in a field of lights, tiny lights that shone like stars. I gasped, and dropped the

brick.

“That was really clever,” said Josh. “I wonder how they did that.”

He picked up the block, and held it to his forehead and was away in a dream for minutes.

“This is really something, I can see all sorts of things.” He gave it to me. “Hold it against your forehead and close your eyes.”

“No, there might be something on it, I don’t want to touch that stuff.”

Josh took it out of my hands and held it against my forehead, and the stars burst all around me. Imagine you are standing in a river, up to your neck, in the darkness, and on the surface moving past you are millions of floating pinpricks of light. Now imagine they are in the air and under the water too, in three dimensions. Millions of them moving past you. That’s what I saw, at least to start with. I saw landscapes too, and animals I didn’t recognize, and cities, though not with any architecture I’d seen before, and people, small stocky people like the drunk and his comrades, darker skinned, an odd hue to the skin I couldn’t

identify. There were machines of some kind, flying around. There was an airport, people milling around, touching, hugging. Then I was inside a vessel, aircraft, train, maybe, but no windows, just seats, and other people. I thought I recognised one of the other drunks. I was interrupted by Josh laughing.

“Do you know what I think it is?” he said.

“Virtual reality? If it is, someone is way ahead of us. Someone from the seminar dropped it.”

Josh laughed and shook his head vigorously.

“It’s a photo cube. You know, like the one you’d put on your desk with photos of the kids, or favourite holiday places.”

“Look, it’s late Josh, I’m tired. What on earth are you saying?”

“No, not what on earth,” he said giggling once more, “but in heaven.”

“Heaven?”

“Yes, dumbhead. Heaven, the sky, space, the stars. You’ve been talking to aliens, and that’s their photo cube of home. No wonder he didn’t

need it any more, he's going home."

He sat upright, sober once more. "Damn! Where are they? I have to talk to them."

"I don't know, in a station, or a shop doorway, or a hostel for the night. It was hours ago."

"Phone the desk for a taxi, let's go look for them."

"You can, I'm going to bed. I gave them three hundred kronor, they're out there somewhere."

He jumped up and rushed out. I didn't see him until next evening, looking very disappointed.

"No sign of them," he said. "They must have gone. Did they say where their shuttle was?"

"Shuttle? Come on, Josh, you're still high on weed. They were drunks with a good story. You'll see them in the week, begging as usual."

"Have you still got the cube?"

"Of course. It's a neat trick, and when we've figured out how it works, we'll get one on the market too."

Josh sat down heavily, shaking his head, looking at me with that look that says he's just

expounded something obvious, but nobody understands.

"They were right here," he said. "Right here, and you sent them away with three hundred kronor. Amazing."

"What else should I have done?"

"Asked them about their drive system, control systems, navigation system, any system. Where is this shuttle? How can they communicate across a galaxy that's tens of thousands of light years across, yet someone has heard them and is coming to pick them up after only ninety years? How long do they live, how do they manage to live that long? What else do they know? Roy, they were right here. Unbelievable! How could you let them go?"

"Did I do wrong?"

Josh replied with a strangled cry and went up to his room. I gave him an hour, then knocked on his door. He let me in with a pitying look.

"Look," I said trying to make my peace, "maybe they came to me because they sensed I wouldn't ask things like that. I gave him some food. It's an

old tradition, hospitality between travellers, but their reason for travelling is their own business. Maybe they're aliens, maybe they're drunks with a good line. Either way that's their business. Right?"

Josh groaned, but said nothing.

"I travel all the time, you know that. If people kept asking me what's in my briefcase, how did I get here, and all that stuff you want to know about, I'd turn away, and go somewhere else."

"So they didn't trust me?"

"I didn't say that. Maybe this hospitality toward travellers is universal, that's what they sensed, that's why they came to say goodbye."

"You believe them, after all?"

"It's not my place to disbelieve. If that's what they want to tell me, then that's fine with me. I don't care whether they're going on a train to cardboard city or a spaceship to Mars. I can only respect what they wanted to say. And he came to thank me for the food. It would have been bad form to cross-examine another traveller, a terrible discourtesy, wherever they came from.

Hospitality and discretion among travellers. Higher priority than any other consideration."

Josh leaned back, closed his eyes, and slapped his forehead several times.

"Damn, damn, and damn again. Roy, they have the technology to fly across the galaxy, and you gave them three hundred kronor and a sandwich? Contact with real aliens, and you talk about discourtesy?"

"You don't understand, Josh."

"No, you don't understand," he said, "there are overriding considerations."

"What would you have done with them? Put them in a nice comfortable government hostel? Cut them up to see how they're made? Interrogate them? Are these the overriding considerations? Treat them like that? Besides, someone is coming for them. If they can cross the galaxy, they can pull out their friends from whatever place a government can hide them, and make an awful mess for our discourtesy.

"Meaning I'd harm them?"

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“No, not you Josh, but someone else. If they can do what they claim, then they’re shrewd enough to keep out of our way. I’ll bet nobody sees them come. I’ll bet they’ll fly right through our radar and nobody knows they’re there. What are we talking about? They were just drunks with a line that earned them a few kronor. How was the club last night?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, great music. People still play jazz in this city.”

“They let you in then?”

“Of course.”

“Gave you food and drink?”

“I paid. Someone bought me a beer, I bought them one.”

“Did they ask how you got here? What you know? Put you on a table and cut you up to see what made you work?”

“Point taken. Let’s not discuss it any more.”

“Suits me. Let’s go for a walk, across to the old town. I know this great little place where all the aliens hang out.”

“Come on, Roy, be sensible.”

“I am serious. Poles, Germans, Americans, Baltics. All sorts of aliens far from home. I know a Finn who can recite Eskimo Nell in seven European languages.”

Josh laughed and we went out. Imagine, a Sunday evening in Stockholm, drinking vodka and gin, and everything else, until four in the morning. In Stockholm. I made a deal with Josh. I wanted the cube for a while and when the novelty wore off, I’d let him have it, on the understanding that he’d say he found it lying in the road, or it fell out of a Christmas cracker, or something.

Our project worked fine, Josh did a magnificent design job. We were out on the market in eighteen months. On spec, on schedule, on budget. It was a model project. Josh had a royalty agreement with the company, and made a fortune. When we released Version 1 of the product, I gave Josh a little present to commemorate the effort, a black plastic cube the size of a child’s building block. One with a galaxy inside instead of a letter of the alphabet. He

smiled when I gave it to him, and held it up to his forehead.

“It’s still there,” he said.

“Doesn’t seem to wear out,” I replied.

I went on to other projects, Josh left for pastures new. He didn’t say where he was going, but I went to a seminar a year later with another of our young geniuses, and there was Josh, representing NASA. He didn’t say what he was working on, but knowing Josh, it’s ahead of anything on the market.