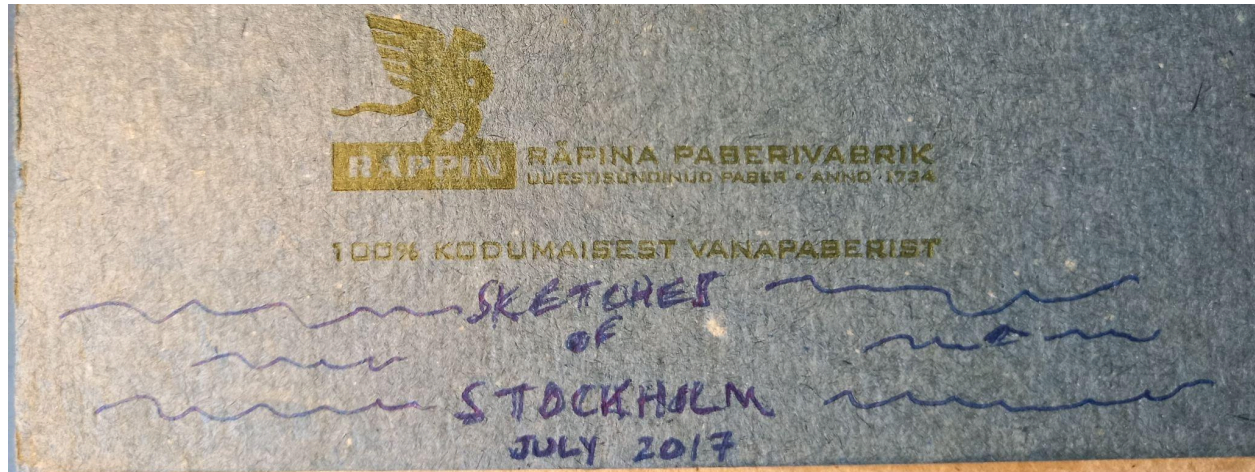


Sketches of Stockholm

By Justin Petrone, July 2017



IN STOCKHOLM on a peaceful July day— at last. Bryggartäppan is a children’s playground, the size of one city block approximately, with clusters of leaning red buildings set up to look like an old Swedish village. There’s even a wooden *putka* here where two fine-looking ladies make coffee for the parents, mostly mothers, even on a Sunday. Tiny birds flit around and one of the sellers is most fetching, a sturdy lass with silver hoop earrings. Her eyes are as blue as the sky and her hair is pulled back. Such Swedish baristas are the respite of the recently divorced father.

But maybe it’s not just her that toys with my senses but that smell of baking waffles, coupled with all of those cream-colored buildings around us. There was even a little yellow fly that landed on my hand before. Have I ever seen an insect that color? Is everything in Stockholm made of gold? “I don’t want water, there’s juice there, there’s some juice over there!” This is what my youngest daughter, age 5, is shrieking in Bryggartäppan. Then she cries aloud in Estonian, “*Ma saan nii kurjaks*,” “I’m getting so angry!”, and punches her older sister, age 9. Then she begins to sulk and cry. The youngest is wearing a light blue headband from Copenhagen Tiger, and totes around a blue fairy balloon from Gröna Lund, the amusement park. This troubles her older sister. “I told you at the park that I also wanted you to get me a balloon but you didn’t get me one!”

At last the seller returns from making waffles and hands over a box of *äppel* juice. Quickly, the straw is in the little one’s mouth, and she is quiet for a moment. The other children here are Swedish. They are pale, thin, and have straw-colored hair. They are physically active, and on occasion expressive, but I have not witnessed the kind of seismic outbursts of which our children are so ready and capable. I search our family trees for some culprit — is it their mother’s Komi great grandfather? A plosive mix of Siberian and Greco-Roman blood? — but there is no answer.

The parents here at Bryggartäppan are, as a rule, older. Perhaps a few of them are actually grandparents. Swedes are a peculiar breed though. They are married to modernity. They are infatuated with their perfect civilized society, yet so haunted and repressed by this civilizational impulse that they have the emotional temperament of office wallpaper. They hide away their thoughts, dreams, dark sides behind apartment doors, sunglasses, and politely phrased, thoughtful senses that implore only moderation. Rows and rows of perfectly symmetrical apartment windows, cascades of identical balconies, rising up and up and up, peaking in crescendos of tiled roofs and towers. The pursuit of wealth, the proper means to express it, these are the chief concerns of the Stockholm Swedes. Everything here must be perfect. A little girl with her face painted and her hair done up in cornrows goes skipping by, and another waits patiently for the five year old to dismount a small rocking horse. When she does get off the horse she sulks again and then announces to the lot, "I am so bored!" To which a little boy nearby, who understands English, chides her. "Be quiet," he says. "You're acting like a baby." "I am not," she says, and smacks at the air with her balloon. "I am not a baby," the five year old sobs and then takes her apple juice and squeezes the liquid all over her older sister's drawing on a table beside the playground café. "You are bad!" the nine year old scolds her, to which she only shouts, "I'm not bad!" "You poured juice on my picture — that's bad." "I did not." "You did too." "*Tegid küll.*" "*Ei teinud. SA VALETAD!*" "YOU LIE!" These are perhaps the loudest sentences that have been uttered on Swedish soil since Estonian pirates sacked the old Swedish capital Sigtuna in 1187. There are lots of pregnant Scandinavians in the park here today, paging through magazines and pretending not to hear this terrible squall. Their days will come.

"Here's an idea for a good life," my Swedish pal Erland said yesterday, skulking around the Pressbyrån at Slussen with his hands in his pockets and harbor wind in his hair. "Meet a girl, have a bunch of kids with her," he said. "Then you can all be wonderfully miserable together for a few years. Doesn't that just sound like the greatest idea?"

STORA BLECKTORNSPARKEN is an urban park a bit farther south on Södermalm with the same kinds of Bullerby buildings as Bryggartäppan. There is more graffiti here, though, and shreds of rubbish, broken glass shards, fruit peels, chipped paint and rust, the illusion of safety. "Dad? Dad? Dad!" "What?" "Look what I can do!" The nine year old swings away as the five year old arrives, panting. "Daddy, my knee hurts, look what happened. I slipped on the rocks." I survey the wound only to be interrupted by, "Dad? Dad? Dad! Watch me swing!" And she swings higher and higher. Mothers sit around us tinkering with their phones. More wonderful park birds flit about. It feels good to breathe and write in Stockholm. To write without any project or desire for money. Just writing with feeling, without that evil thought looking over your shoulder, the one that says that every word has to count toward something. But maybe that thought came from the office or from some editor. Maybe it was never my thought to begin with.

"When you are with someone, you become someone else," says Erland. "You change yourself. When I was with Henrietta I was someone else. And when I was with Agnetha I was someone different from that person. And when I was with Gunnhildur, that Icelandic football

player, I was also someone else.” Erland has been a lot of people. “Dad? Dad? Dad! Come here, help me off this swing. Come, Dad. Come!” These children. They so crave my attention. If I only had some time off I could be such a better father to them. I could never have any more children. Not now. I would go crazy. That would just be the end of the story. Not with these thin Swedish women. Not a chance. Although the lady who made me coffee was rather nice and might get me to reconsider, especially if she turns out to be some Zelda Fitzgerald type who can ruin me and provide me with loads of material about her schizophrenia. This playground is a madhouse. All the sobbing, crying children. All the childhood drama and trauma. The pale thin mothers call after their offspring, their *barn*. One of the children steals the five year old’s balloon and I have to run after him and take it back, causing a puzzled look from the toddler, who thought the balloon was his. In the meantime, a mouse ran over the nine year old’s shoes at the bottom of the slide. The parents here all look at each other. I suppose this is one way to pass the time at a playground on a hot day. A Muslim family arrives, the mother’s head covered, the daughters bare to the sun. They look truly happy, content, and I sense no disturbance or cultural conflict. The Swedes don’t dress so differently from Americans. They seem maybe more capitalistic though. A Swede is the sum of all he or she consumes. The patterned dresses, the well-groomed facial hair. A barber shop stands on every other corner, catering to the perfectionism of the Swedish man. The women shop for dresses at the boutiques in between. One must exude one’s wealth and value. A haircut, a shave, a flowing cut of textile, this is worth nothing alone. It’s the effort that goes into being Swedish. This is what pays the real dividends.

At night, we find ourselves at another playground nearby on Nytorget. Teenagers stand among the benches singing songs and playing ukuleles. “Södermalm is like the best place ever,” my nine year old says. “There is no traffic, the houses are pretty, and everyone has time to do whatever they want.” This is the fun of a playground in the dusky twilight of midnight in Stockholm. As the children play on, and the ukuleles strum, and I admire the lights from the cafes around the park, I read a sign about local history. This was once the site of a large garbage heap, it reads. And in the 18th century it also was the location of the gallows and a major site of public executions. I wish I could have seen Stockholm then when it was rough and tumble and full of pickpockets and convicts, truants and robbers, counterfeits, highwaymen, gentlemen of the day and ladies of the night. Before the boutiques and barbers, there were wards of the state sentenced to hard time. Looking around nighttime Nytorget, this seems impossible. It’s as if it never happened.

ON KATARINA KYRKOBÄCKE, at 8:30 am or thereabouts. A small street winding with the cool air through the bluffs of Södermalm, damp and refreshing, creamy houses with mustardy finishes and black stovetop pipes protruding, cobblestones and fine hemmed in trees. These give way to red wooden dwellings with toys and yellow flowers in the windows and everywhere that faint chirping of Stockholm birds. In the distance the roar of construction by the locks of Slussen winds up. Outside a school, a father is gently combing through his daughter’s white-platinum hair and a black car breaks the silence, its wheels finessing the stones of the road. A man in a flat

cap jaunts by, clears his throat loudly, spits on the street. Despite this, there is the feel of polished cleanliness everywhere, that well-to-do feeling, as if the Swedes have always known wealth and wealth is all they've ever known. Back at the hotel, we have a good breakfast of scrambled eggs with chives and onions, big bowls of yogurt, dried banana, crisp dried coconuts, and three cups of the finest coffee there is. "Of course, you drink more coffee here," says Erland, a steaming mug in his hands. "You're in Sweden." He says it as if we have all died and gone to heaven. This Swedish angel is proud of his homeland. He even approves of its bike paths and pedestrian walks. "It's not like in Estonia where BMWs and Lexuses blow by you, splashing you with water," he says bitterly. I am surprised he chooses to recall the makes of the cars, but Sweden is old money and the Estonians are nouveau riche. It's that old old money, new money thing, along with some shared hand-me-down of clumsy woodsman's poverty. I feel blessed to be here. I remember my first trip to Stockholm in '01, staring up at the wreck of the Vasa in the VasaMuseet, a museum I had read about in a children's book my grandparents once gave me but never expected to see with my own two eyes. After breakfast, we head to the Nordiska Museet, where my children make for the playroom first and never really leave, hoisting toy wooden buckets into an old make-pretend farm.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to stay in Sweden, I consider, to elope with that redhead from the Pressbyrån in Slussen, to lie beside her at night, listening to ship's horns in the harbor, and hear of the inner workings of this marvelous convenience store. "We were out of Maribou chocolate." "It was time to refill the cups." To lie sprawled in bed sheets with a woman who reeks of cinnamon buns, *kanelbulle*. In the mornings, she is off to the shop, to prepare the coffee, *stor cappuccino*, *lite cappuccino*, the whirl of the machine, and there she is again behind the counter, processing people's payments in her blue shirt and saying, *varsågod*. The blue of her shirt brings out the blue of her eyes, just like the water licks at the docks of Östermalm where we step off a boat later and are surprised by the golden glitz of the gilded Royal Drama Theatre.

I keep processing this idea for a children's book, about a Stockholm teenage girl with a ne'er-do-well father who turns to petty theft to make ends meet. Then one day she is caught and sent away to Långholmen, the old prison island down the harbor. I play with this idea all the way to the ship that takes us back to Estonia, the front bar of which has been permanently converted into a playroom. The five year old's balloon is still with us, believe it or not, this artifact from Gröna Lund. It may be the best balloon we have known collectively in all of our lives. It cannot be lost, deflated, or stolen.

In the playroom, they play Estonian children's disco music, *oi-oi-oi*, *ai-ai-ai*, a strobe light projects dancing rainbows across the floor, and I take a seat beside a Swedish mother whose hair is a mess and is probably as full of ice cream as mine is. She looks to be about as tired as I am, sapped, haggard, and so hungover by life. This is how we set sail on a gray day to face our decisions and memories.