

The Brown Study

When my mother and brother were visiting one summer in Copenhagen, my mother had expressed a desire to see an old friend. So one afternoon we drove out to the island of Amager to pay her a visit. My brother and I didn't know this person and we didn't take any particular interest, we were just there to accompany our mother. When we asked her to tell us more about this person, she explained that it was a "woman that she once knew." We didn't inquire further.

We rang the doorbell and waited by the intercom. Nothing happened and we were just about to turn around and leave, when someone finally answered.

"Hello?", a frail, raspy voice asked. When my mother introduced herself, to our surprise, we could hear the old woman bursting into tears. We looked at each other with astonishment whilst the door buzzed open. Our curiosity had been aroused. We climbed the stairs. The door was ajar and the woman appeared. She was standing with a walker. She was incredibly thin, very lightweight almost to the point of being transparent. She was still crying. As my mother stepped inside the apartment, the old woman embraced her and kissed her cheeks. They were wet when she pulled her head back. I heard my mother's voice responding in a tone that was full of compassion.

As we entered the apartment we were overcome with a participatory sadness.

It is, of course, always a bit awkward when a stranger cries in front of you, so my brother and I sat down on a couch and tried to avoid looking at the woman too much. I gazed around the living room which presented itself as one big anachronism; brown leather furniture, brown wall panel in cheap imitation wood, small brownish porcelain figurines of the cheap kind. A pungent smell of cigarettes hung in the air.

"What a relic." I thought to myself as I scanned the room mercilessly. It was like entering the stale atmosphere of a crypt that had remained unopened for a decades. I looked at my brother. We smiled hesitantly at each other and seemed to think the same thing: What a strange place! What a strange friend our mother had!

The woman, still trembling slightly from the shock of our sudden appearance, lit up a cigarette.

"When did we last see each other? It must have been at least twenty years ago?", my mother asked. The woman was unable to talk. She took a shaky puff from the cigarette and nodded in a jolty manner.

Then something happened, which shook me, and which is the cause of why I am writing this. I realised I had been there before. Sitting on the same couch in the exact same spot. I reexamined the room with my eyes. Yes, I knew this place. My mother had brought me here once before when I was a child. It was on a summer's day in 1987 when I was six years old. We had made a stop en-route to the island Bornholm. A flood of images appeared in my mind. Sequences of events resurfaced.

I looked down, I had been laying on this couch. My mother had bought me a Hulk comic and I had looked at the pages, too young to read what was on them. After flickering through the magazine I dozed off.

I remember observing the adults from a horizontal position.

The apartment had been full of people. It was a merry time, everyone was smiling and excited. A young, lean man was carrying beer and snaps to the table. He had long blonde hair and a broad smile on his face.

From his posture and his arms raised up high it was clear that he was having a great time. They were having a big lunch feast. There was an older bespectacled man. He had a kind face. He smiled at me. I remember thinking that he really liked my mother when he picked us up at the airport. The table was set and they all sat down. There was animated conversation. They were singing songs out aloud.

I was whisked back into the present by the old woman. She was explaining her daily routines to my mother: "I am unable to leave the house except for Thursdays, when a taxi comes to pick me up and brings me to the supermarket. The driver carries me down the stairs. It's hard for me to walk."

We all felt a continued awkwardness by the miserable state of things. There was a pained look of sorrow on my mother's face. In an effort to lift the mood a bit my mother cheerfully brought up the woman's son:

"I talk to him every now and then. He seems to be doing very well with his new wife. He told me they moved away?"

The woman nodded quietly. She was staring at the floor. "Yes, he never comes to see me anymore."

There was no self-pity in this remark, it was as if she was merely delivering to us a matter-of-fact exposition of her life. "He is rarely in Copenhagen." My mother nodded, searching in vain for something appropriate to say. In the meantime the woman lit up another cigarette.

We stayed for a while the way you linger with an old relative to give the impression that you are not in a hurry at all. Sitting there in the hope that they will take real comfort in your visit if you just stay five more minutes. There wasn't really any way to make things better. There wasn't anything we could do, and we knew it.

As we sat there I felt overwhelmed by that transience of time that was so clearly felt in this room. This brown room had given me a strange perspective, one that is normally not permitted to us. It laid bare to me, in a very vivid way, how time had transpired since my childhood till this moment. I could flicker back and forth between two dimensions and compare. It had become to me a sudden and strange parameter for the general passing of time, but on a very concrete level this brown room also revealed to me the unraveling of this particular woman's life. How quiet the apartment had become. I understood how abandoned she was.

Eventually we excused ourselves. Weighed down by melancholy we walked to the car in silence. "What happened to her husband?", I asked my mother as we were driving back. "He died about 15 years ago. That time we went here when you were a child, was the last time I saw him. He cried so much when he dropped us off at the airport."

A couple of years passed. Every now and then the experience would come to mind, and I would ask my mother about the woman: "Do you think she still lives there? Do you think her son ever visits her?" My mother wasn't sure. Ever since our visit my mother would look very burdened every time we discussed the woman. My mother tried to call the old woman, but the phone number was no longer in operation. She had then tried to call the son, but his wife had picked up, and she had been very hostile. She was clearly upset that an unknown female friend wished to speak to her husband. My mother told me she became so perplexed from the woman's response that it made her stutter. She never called them back.

My mother instead proceeded to do a bit of investigating. She discovered that the old woman had been moved to an elderly home. She wasn't able to figure out which elderly home it was, and since my mother lived far from Copenhagen and didn't go there very often, she eventually let go of the matter. After all we weren't next of kin. We both agreed that it was her son's responsibility to take care of her. We expressed disappointment in him, and this was our way of moving on. Many times however I thought of this woman, and so did my mother I'm sure.

In the last months as I have been contemplating to write this I've brought it up with my mother who again has decided to find out the current state of things. She discovered something startling. The son had died suddenly a few years ago. He was only 62 years old. This really shocked my mother. It prompted another question: was the old woman still alive? My mother finally managed to track her down by calling a long list of elderly homes in the Copenhagen area.

"It appears she died a month after him.", she told me.