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Antje Rávic Strubel
Colder Layers of Air

Translated by Zaia Alexander

[pp. 7-15]

About light they knew everything.

They knew it in every shade. They had seen how it made the sky appear brittle and torn, or waxed blue-black. They knew how the light looked under foaming clouds; how it fell diagonally over the Fjell; how it struck the rocks over the forest and the thick underbrush. They knew how fleeting, how illusive it was. If the lake had just shone turquoise to the bottom, the next moment it lay leaden and sealed like asphalt. They had seen how the light made the pines and blackberry bushes appear matt in the rain; they had seen how the roads looked at four in the morning, devastated by falling rocks, and at noon on neatly mown Swedish front lawns. They knew it in the shimmering yellow from the heat, in the greenish glow of the evening; they could say how it looked above the roof of the tool-shed on overcast days.

They knew how faces change when glaring light falls upon them. Every morning, when they left their tents and went to the wash area, they had to cross the grassy field that had been cleared from the forest. There the faces became stable. They changed from milky-gray, the color of night, into a harsh, polished tan. They knew it. They saw it every morning.

And later, when only a few clouds were left in the sky, this tan had a certain sharpness, as faces only here have, on this peninsula. It was brutal how the sun shone.

Nobody spoke about the light.

There were other things to discuss. They had to take care of the tent walls that had torn in the storm and were lying on the field like shed skins in need of mending. They had to replenish the supplies and food that came every Saturday from Berlin; they telephoned often. They reordered potatoes and coffee, charcoal and sausages and rice, and they never forgot fruit, because fruit was particularly expensive this summer in Sweden. They sent the newly arrived youth groups to the lakes, first to the small Stora Le and then to the wind-whipped Foxen; they gave the crew photocopies of outdoor cookbooks, so they knew how many cans of chili to empty into the pans at night. In the kitchen tents, they packed weekly supplies in waterproofed plastic barrels. They

explained how to cook over an open fire and assigned boats down at the dock. They were slim canoes for two people, made of light-gray sheet metal. The ghetto-blaster played all day long.

They lived rootless. Time suspended. They had come to an unknown realm, another country, a strange region, where what they did was who they were, each day, all summer long; they were canoe scouts, they built teepees, collected berries; they barbecued salmon and swam in the lake. It was as if their present life had no connection to their previous one, except for some wounds and a few abstract reflections. Retro-crap, as someone put it at the campfire.

There was little distraction. They inflated every rumor. And if the rumors fizzled out, they invented new ones, or they enriched the old ones with new facts, and it was impossible to find out what was true in all the gossip. They had gotten used to it. It didn't bother anyone when Svenja, the camp boss, complained about Ralf. When he got his hunting license, she said she was certain he'd *had humans in front of a gun* in his lifetime. Behind her back, they asked how Ralf could get along with somebody like Svenja.

They lived rootless; they tried to make the best of it.

One morning, a girl was walking alone on the shore.

The girl stepped between the boats; her dress blew. It was a light dress, nobody wore dresses here. In the camp, they wore Gore-tex sandals and gray or beige functional trousers with zippers at the thighs. When it got warm, they simply tore-off the pant legs.

The girl walked down to the dock, she moved drunkenly. She walked without stopping to remove her dress; she walked to the edge of the dock and plunged into the water.

The people near the boats were startled by her body slapping the water. They looked over. The lake was calm. The girl surfaced next to a buoy, her hair stuck to her head. She swam back slowly. The others lost interest. They returned to their clipboards and wrote down the numbers of the boats that would go out that day. Months ago, they had announced swimming was forbidden near the dock. Now they acted as though the incident was of no concern to them.

The girl climbed slowly back on land. She came ashore. The water running over her face didn't seem to bother her.

She stopped close to the pines.

"Schmoll", she said, and she turned to me. "You're a smart boy. You paid close attention the whole time." She looked towards the swimming area, which was nearly covered with raspberry bushes and buckthorn, and I saw she wasn't a girl anymore. "I'm sure you can tell me where the towels are."

I was inadvertently standing close to where she came ashore. I wasn't by the boats; I stood somewhat apart from the dock, now I moved as if I'd been standing there frozen for hours.

"I'm not Schmoll," I said. "And I'm not a boy."

She tilted her head to the side and looked at me. Her brows were dark from the water in a very pale face.

"Towels don't come with the equipment," I said.

The lake was calm this morning; the sea-birds drifted further on. Gray herons. Swans. The others had probably finished with the boats. She blocked my path as I moved to leave.

"I just want to see something," she said, and came closer. Her skin was white. A white that was reminiscent of shiny, smooth, polished wood you sometimes find on wild beaches. Her toes briefly grazed the sand. She wanted to touch my naked foot, missed it, and stumbled.

She'd have fallen if I hadn't held her.

She put her arms around my neck. I smelled her wet hair.

It was early morning, the sand was still cool, the shadows fell long. Around noon it would get hot, so the boats had to be tipped over and registered early; nobody wanted to be on the treeless beach in the heat, especially with the boat's glistening aluminum bellies making it doubly hot.

We stood there like a billboard at the Zoo metro station. One of those glossy photos. Dainty little girls nestled in the strong arms of confident boys. Boys who looked down at their girls and the KuDamm. We fit into this picture.

"Are you okay?" I said.

She pressed herself to me. To the others it must have seemed as if I wanted to strip away her dress, push the cloth slowly up her thighs. It had to make them think of how she'd look naked, her hips, her butt; how I'd hold her in the sand, on the shore, by the swimming area, hidden behind the bushes.

Her body pulsated; her skin glowed beneath the wetness.

"You see," she said in my ear. "I finally found you. I knew it."

Then she let go of me immediately. She grabbed her towel from near the pines and ran across the sand towards the street. She ran quickly, she didn't turn around. Her legs were lanky under the dress; it was a child's dress, a dress for very young girls. I wasn't sure. I kept looking at her, and since nobody by the boats noticed her, I yelled, "Hey! Why don't you get changed and have breakfast with us? We've got fresh rolls!"

She didn't react; she reached the road. Her wet dress didn't seem to bother her; she turned left up at the shoulder.

I went over to the others. They pulled a few boats from the water and tilted them belly up on the beach. Slowly, it got warmer.

Later, in the washroom, I looked at myself in the mirror. I wore jeans and a light blouse, unisex, typical outdoor clothes. I was strong and slim; I was tanned like all the others, my hair had this strawy, washed-out look from swimming in the lake; I had been living outdoors for four weeks. The scar above my eyebrow was the only thing that distinguished me from the others.

I went out into the sun again, where they were busy planing wood. They were building a teepee from smooth, polished tree trunks and it was going well. The bark peeled-off in soft long splinters. They knew how to apply light pressure to remove the upper layer so it wouldn't hurt the wood. They'd done it often. Two-meter-high teepees wrapped in tent canvas stood on the grass by the edge of the forest.

I joined them for a while. I began at the tips. I secretly watched the men and found nothing in them that resembled me.

Around noon the food supply arrived, a pick-up made the rounds, honking its horn through the camp. The exhausted driver parked in the delivery area. He'd left from Berlin that night. Now he was demanding a bed with bleary, red eyes.

Hey, Marco, where are the lists? And the charcoal? Did those idiots in Berlin forget them again? Barbeques are in the kids' program, don't they get it?

They don't get it, because they don't care. They're kids, right? They're not going to start a camp rebellion if they don't get exactly what their folks paid for.

Assholes.

Asshole yourself. Take a look behind the passenger seat.

Marco squeezed through the clotheslines and disappeared into the house. The house: a shed made of thin plywood and three windows. You could hear every noise. *Stop making such a fuss, people,* called Marco from the lower window. *Now that we're here, we've got to stick together, no matter what.*

Nobody nodded. Had they nodded, it would have been like admitting they were stranded, and that would be a capitulation, an avowal that this condition was permanent.

Outside, they started unloading the crates. They dragged them over to the kitchen tent, where Svenja was busy preparing the blue containers. Huge cheese bundles were halved, and the halves went into a container along with salami, canned beans, and bread. When the kids took them out later on their canoe tours, the food in the containers would be protected from the water.

Friday at noon they all met in the kitchen tent. Maybe they gravitated there because they craved fresh fruit. By the end of the week, the food got monotonous. Or maybe it was the odor the sealed containers gave off; they smelled of vegetables, butter, bacon, and to some extent plastic. The smell was like a memory of being outdoors on the lakes, where they'd rather have been. But the camp was understaffed, and there were too few of them to handle the onslaught of weekly busloads. The lights often burned through the night.

As I got up to rinse the sweat and dirt off my face with the garden hose, I saw the woman on the other side of the road. She was leaning against a pine. The knees were bent; the head tilted to the side, the face in the shade. She wore a different dress now, a blue one. She sat motionless by the tree. Her arms hung by her side. The right hand was slightly opened in my direction, as though she wanted to give me something, as though she were offering me the grass and the earth and the pine roots. She seemed to have her eyes closed. At least, she didn't react, although I'd been watching her for a long time.

I remembered how forcefully she had pressed her body to mine at the shore. Her glowing body. Her white skin that seemed in strange contrast to the glow. I thought about my idiotic answer. And then it occurred to me she'd retreat if I were to suddenly walk up to her and touch her. She'd become afraid the minute she felt me, and her eyes, which seemed so restless and tragic to me, would open wide. Maybe this impression was caused by the light. Green speckles gathered in an otherwise clear brown iris.

Ralf had run after me. He took the hose from my hand and dunked his face into the jet. "Damned busy today, huh?" The water ran down his shirt. "Listen, I'll help you hand out the swimming vests. Then you'll have time to take a break."

"It's okay. I can handle it. Really."

"Half for you, half for me," said Ralf. "Are we a team or not?" He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. Then he looked over to the forest. "Who's that?"

"Who?"

"What's she gaping at? I'm gonna go tell her this is private property. She's got no business here."

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[pp. 22-23]

I was gone from Halberstadt, gone from the oppressive pub scene, the revamped Gothic, and the new apartment houses painted in gaudy colors; gone from the duplexes, and the bureaucracy with people always asking what I did, and who I was; gone from all of it, and from who I used to be; gone from the whole system. And who was I anyway? Moved away from home, took a correspondence course I never finished, worked as a lighting technician for a rundown theater putting others in the limelight. I'd written a few articles for the local newspaper, opened my mouth a couple of times, though it didn't change anything, since the baldies – that's what my brothers called the neo-Nazis – hadn't vanished from the streets.

My brothers had outgrown me. They got jobs as salesmen; one of them took an extra job delivering newspapers at night. I didn't envy them, yet I knew they thought I was a loser for running away.

I liked it here. I liked the concentration. The stillness hovering over the grassy field, where I felt no pressure, even though I had to work hard and the tone was rough.

I liked this summer in Sweden. This air saturated with the scent of wood and earth. I liked the sky stretched so flat it lay over the treetops of the forest like a serrated line. I liked the harsh, sudden shadows you could dive into if you took one of the fir-tree-lined roads. The asphalt looked like reddish velvet from afar. I liked the quietness of the towns and the tranquility. The people seemed calm, as if they were floating absent-mindedly through the day, and yet they possessed a certain awareness that can come from lavishly consuming something expensive. By the end of August summer was over. Until mid-month it would still be lighter here than in Halberstadt. It darkened discreetly, at the edges. But nobody was deceived about the impending, rapid change that came in the next weeks, about the plunge of afternoon into the night.

Only sometimes it was so quiet the light seemed to ignite from the silence, as though a smoldering fire had singed everything. There were unconscious people in the blinding sun. Red-overheated faces after too much beer. Limp bodies on the playgrounds. People collapsing at park kiosks.

Nobody picked fights. There was no violence. People folded away noiselessly. They stumbled home, they tottered, they collided with trucks; they fell from their bicycles. Strange accidents often occurred in summer: someone got caught on the electric fence and hung there, another drove a lawn mower blade into his leg, the chain from a power saw sprung loose and smashed someone's face, someone was always falling drunk into the lake and drowning.

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[p. 28-37]

A few days later, she appeared again, this woman, whom I hadn't thought about anymore, whom I'd nearly forgotten.

It was windy. She stood next to the wood stockpile and asked one of the kids about Schmoll. She asked in an unnecessarily loud voice, and I left the remaining paddles unsorted. I ran quickly from the shed and waved to her; I didn't want the whole camp to hear her

"My favorite season," she said, as she came closer. "Spring."

"It's July."

"In the evening and in the morning it's spring because it's further north." She nodded thoughtfully as though hearing some words of wisdom.

"And it's beautiful here," she said. "The lake, this air, the sun, I thought there would be lots of mosquitoes here, but no, look, my arms, my legs, not a bite."

"That's a cliché. That thing about mosquitoes is something the Swedish politicians made up so their country wouldn't get overrun by foreigners. Be glad you didn't go to Finland."

"Finland?" she said. "What would I do in Finland?"

"Go canoeing, work, the same stuff you do here. They counted thirty mosquito swarms per head there."

"Finland is too far north to be like spring," she said.

"Want to get something to drink? It's still early, but I'm done for the day and we could drink something."

"I'm not at all thirsty."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "I only suggested it to gain time, so you can tell me who you're mixing me up with."

"You think I've mixed you up with somebody?"

"Not if you throw your arms around the next best person's neck."

She laughed; it was a light clear laugh.

"Did you come with the others?"

"The others? What others?"

"You know, Sabine, the half-Indian, Wilfried, Ralf."

"I don’t think so," she said. "Is that important?" We went to the grassy field; the light was pale, it would rain soon.

"You didn’t come in the minibus?" She wore tie-up, high-heeled leather sandals that I was sure everyone was talking about by now. "The one the latecomers took."

"That’s absolutely unimportant!"

"Okay, fine. But since we’ve already had pelvis contact, we could at least use the informal ‘you.’ Or is that unimportant too?"

"Go ahead if you like," she said with a laugh, but went on using the formal you with me. "I like you. I like your voice, did you know that? And your forehead and I like how you’re standing in front of me. You never put your hands in your pockets, for example, and you look at everybody and are constantly asking all sorts of questions, and you’re so squinky thin, I like that too, and the way you watched me at the shore. But I‘ll address you as I like.

I’d been standing there with a hand in my pocket and pulled it out as inconspicuously as possible. She continued to talk, she talked fast and without pausing: there were too few flowers here, no primroses, no rhododendrons, just closely mown grass, she coughed, and why didn’t they just let the meadow grow. She swept her hair from her face, she touched my arm. Her wrist bone stuck out.

And then she said something like "You’re Schmoll" or "You’re a troll" or "You sure are droll!" but I couldn’t understand her under the gathering storm, the crashing of tarp against tent poles. Kids were running all over the place, a light switched on in the kitchen tent; suddenly everybody had something to do.

"And what are you doing in this desolate place?" I asked. We were sitting next to each other on a bench in the crew tent, while outdoors the thunderstorm flooded the grassy field. "Are you looking for happiness too?" I used the informal you and it didn’t seem to disturb her.

"What do you want to hear?" she said seriously.

"The truth."

In back of the tent, Ralf lit the iron stove. It started to smell of ash and oil from the wood lighter.

"And then," she said. "What comes next?"

"Nothing but the truth."

"No. Then we get something to eat. And then once you know everything about me, of course you know what I like the most, and then you get it for me, you try to do everything perfectly for me, and then, if at some point I want something else, something that doesn't correspond to what you know about me, then you'll be insulted because you think it's an affront, and that I don't love you. But I don't want that with every shrug of the shoulder you think you know what I am feeling!" She leaned back triumphantly.

I said, "How interesting." The conversation was interrupted by a clap of thunder.

""If you don't want to tell me the truth, then maybe we should do it like the Swedes. Talk about the weather. The Swedes are almost as good at it as the English."

"Yes!" she said. "And about dragonflies! And fall showers, shamrock, shadows, shells, and what else starts with *sh*? And about how exciting a thunderstorm is, and how fast you can paddle a canoe against the wind."

"That's what the kids talk about all the time," I said.

"Of course. But they always do it in the same way." She had put her feet on the bench and perched her chin on her knees. She was thin; it was easy for her to sit that way. She might have been in her mid-thirties, but it was difficult to tell. Her hair was tied with a velvet ribbon.

"Are you bored?" She grabbed my arm. "Please, I don't want you to get bored."

Ralf had heated the iron stove. As he passed, he put a cover next to me and tapped me on the hand. First he looked at me, then at her, and then he brought us two cups of tea with rum. She smiled. A conspiratorial smile. I didn't know who it was meant for, him or me, or someone in the back; it was dim in the tent.

Outside they were calling for Marco in the storm, all the stuff *was going to get fucking soaked here*. I had forgotten how long we'd been sitting there.

"In case you're wondering," I said. "My name is Anja."

She looked at me over the rim of her cup.

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

I laughed.

She stared into the cup, put it on the table, took a quick glance at the others, unfolded her legs, and stood up.

"My cup is empty. – I have to go!"

It was still raining. It was cool in the tent. I didn't hold her back

The thunderstorm had stopped, the air was heavy, the light hung pale behind the pine trees. The storm had torn two canvas covers, branches covered the ground. I'd have liked to know where she went, and what she was doing here; I'd have liked to know a lot of things.

Svenja came out of the kitchen tent; she dumped a bowl of water onto the gravel.

There were various possibilities: a mobile home parked near the campground, a pension in the village. She didn't belong to the camp, I was sure of that. There were some German drop-outs living in Sweden, who baked their own bread and grew potatoes. There was also an old fisherman's shack at the end of the peninsula that had two cots and a small table with a storm lamp. But the bedding in the shack consisted of sacks filled with straw, and I couldn't imagine her sleeping on something like that; I couldn't imagine her here at all. She wore dresses, but they weren't much use in this area that had no theatres or restaurants; the dresses were probably made of chiffon, satin dresses that got caught on the bushes in the forest. After fifty meters, all the paths ended in a web of briars, undergrowth, mud, and moss and could only be crossed in hiking boots. I heard myself laughing again. Looking back, it sounded forced. Maybe I had laughed that way because she fascinated me. A fascination that made me feel inferior.

I had come here to be alone. I also needed money. But more than anything, I wanted to live as if the rest of my life didn't matter. No "Vienna Bar", no more all-nighters in cold kitchens, no empty beer bottles in front of the apartment house, no bum at the supermarket, whom I gave a bottle of expensive Russian vodka, because I felt sorry for him, no offices with cubicles, or employment agencies with their *now listen, we don't have anything available, not even a cleaning job, and you come here and demand something challenging?* Nobody I had to prove myself to.

Early mornings belonged to me.

Everyone was still asleep. Only Ralf prowled around behind the shed; he was working out on an old bench. The first light hung on the tips of the teepees, blurry and without layers. Early morning I was alone. It was the only time of day when nobody was around.

Otherwise, everybody seemed to know everything; there were rumors about everyone. The latest ones were announced in the evening over the campfire, and the more you knew about the others, the less you risked becoming a target yourself. They knew that Marco had lots of debts when he came to the camp, and that he sewed his earnings into his socks; they said that when nobody was watching, Svenja ate herring with her fingers straight from the package, they were certain that Sabine collected dream catchers, and that Wilfried got eroticized by the scent of moose, that was the most absurd claim of all.

I also knew what was being circulated about me. One night at the campfire, they said I was so disgustingly fair, I gave the fattest kids the best paddles and divided the soup equally down to the last noodle. They said I could only be like that because of the miniature lighter, *or what's that cute little silver-plated light bulb doing in your backpack?* I blushed. It was a lighter shaped like a light bulb that the actors had given me when they closed down the theater. When you flicked the thumbwheel it blinked: Keep lighting up!

In the morning I was alone by the lake. The dew made the air soft and damp. As I left the tree-lined access road for the sunlit bank, a streak of mist hung on the border between shade and light; it rose from the marshy soil, receded before me, and vaporized.

But I couldn't simply escape to the lake without something getting in the way.

Ralf had gotten used to catching up to me at the teepee.

He came teetering towards me; he called it *warming up*, before he headed out to the shed with his weights.

„Hey, up already, sport?"

He looked over to the tents; he was the only one who hadn't said anything about the light bulb. "Look at 'em snoozin' away!"

And then we just stood there like two conspirators, who'd forgotten what they were conspiring about. He in his fleece jacket, me in my bathing suit. We didn't know

what to say. It was a trip up in rhythm; a moment in which I thought he'd deluded himself; he hadn't wanted to meet me here at all, he'd have rather been somewhere else. I thought he'd wanted to be left alone too; he'd have rather gone to the lake separately, swum separately, so he could be left unobserved for a few minutes. But something drove him to me, and since he was there, we had to make conversation, the same conversation we had every morning.

"I'd rather go swimming later, too. Or really get out somewhere. With a group. Overnight."

„Mainland or island?"

"I prefer the islands."

"Once on Bärön and you'll never want anything else again."

„Bärön or Trollön," I said.

He nodded. „Only Svenja doesn't get it. She always carts her troops over to Norway. Even though they've got the most ants there. Whole battalions. Ever see 'em? Red killer ants. Not long ago, a moose was attacked there. They crawled into his ears, into the nostrils. A real major offensive, an invasion. He croaked that way. Imagine a huge beast like that. And conquered by ants. Done for. But don't ask me when the last time I made it out there. Wanna try some?"

„Not in the morning."

He looked at me with this weary look he'd get when his body was under a huge strain. When he was lying on his back under the weights and a shiny trail of sweat ran from his chest muscles down to his belly.

"Sure? It's healthy. Bitters. Lots of it in dandelion. Take a bite."

He often talked about Svenja. She'd done this or hadn't done that, something was wrong or right, was true or wasn't. He never complained about her swearing. Maybe he wanted something from her. Maybe he wanted her job. One morning he told me she'd almost *eliminated* his daughter. I assumed he meant Svenja kept him so busy, he started to forget about his daughter. He just couldn't formulate it any better. He hadn't seen his daughter in years. She was plain gone, outta there, bang, finito, he didn't say another word about it. Not to anyone but me.