**A Stockholm Story**

Vanessa Mancos

We are sitting in a room made of ice, tearing bloody meat with our teeth and fingers. It is your birthday. They gave us parkas outside before we came in to survive the cold in here, but we didn’t need them. They don’t know we are used to things being frigid. I laugh at something you say-- I don’t remember what-- and knock my cup made of ice to the ground, spilling purple wine everywhere. It freezes instantly. The bartender moves to bring me another, but you wave her off. I bite my lip until it bleeds like the meat. “Let’s go.” You say, without looking at me. I thought of making a joke about stealing the parkas, but you didn’t seem in the mood to laugh at anything I said.

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We almost miss the train. I’m not sure whose fault that was. But we don’t miss it, that’s what matters most. A woman shoves me out of the way as I place my suitcase in storage. “Hey!” I look around for you. But you are far ahead, pretending not to see what happened. Or maybe you really didn’t see it. I don’t know anymore. The woman turns to glare as I pass by, so I get a good sense of her displeasure. “What’s her problem?” You are looking out the window and take too long to answer. “What’s her problem?” I repeat, a little louder and with an edge so you know you have to answer. Your look is tired and says *who?* I gesture to the woman, but she has turned around. You give me that pitying look you give me when you think I’m thinking the whole world is against me. And then you are looking at your book and I know that means *no more talking*.

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I am staring out the window as we roll by fields of cows. “A *skogsrå* is a Swedish forest nymph that has a hollow back and cow tail.” I say, to no one really, but hoping you will find me interesting. “Hm.” Your eyes are closed now, although I can tell you’re not sleeping by how you are breathing. “She lures men into the forest to have sex with her and turns them into introverts by sucking their souls through their mouths. Isn’t that funny? That the worst thing in ancient lore was a quiet man?” Now you are pretending to make sleeping sounds. But you don’t know what you sound like when you sleep so they’re all wrong. “But if she can trick a man into marrying her in a church, she can become human.” You turn away, which means *I can’t listen to this anymore.* I stare at the cows and wonder who made up the first story about falling under someone’s spell.

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Our whole room smells of pickled herring and bile. I ate too much and drank too much and threw up and now a cloud of putrid fish is bearing down on us, plotting our suffocation in the night. I sure know how to ruin things. Your expression is unfamiliar, but I am worried it might be the one that means *I’m done.* I open my mouth to kiss you; I am desperate for you to suck my soul through your mouth, like the *skogsrå*, or like when we first met, and you were insatiable. You block my lips with your hand. We are under the covers now and I can feel your heartbeat against my spine. I close my eyes and imagine we will stay here so long our organs will meld together. When they find us curled up as one, your heart will pump blood for my body, carrying messages from you to me in a way only our cells can understand. I let out a sob because I know bodies don’t really work that way and it’s just so unfair. “It’s okay.” You say. “I’m not going anywhere.” I of course wonder when you will change your mind.