

The Church

The white church immediately caught his attention as the train slowed down. He was surprised to find it located on the top of the distant hill, so isolated from the small town below.

The sight of the church evoked a hazy, distant memory in him – some significant connection that he felt an inexplicable need to explore. He had never been here before, never even heard about the place but found something instantly soothing about it.

He had left his host family in Copenhagen for the day, needing some time alone. Longing for the sea, he had originally planned to visit a coastal town further west, hoping that the wide stretches of sand and endless ocean would ease his mind.

He was the only passenger to leave the train. For a brief moment, he wondered nervously what he was doing there, alone on this deserted platform. Maybe it was a mistake to stop here.

At first glance, the station seemed grand and he expected to discover a charming food stand and a ticket booth inside. Instead, he found only a broken ticket machine and an empty waiting area, littered and smelling of stale smoke. The stairs leading up to street level were forbiddingly steep.

He walked up the main street which looked as if it had possibly thrived in the past. The town seemed abandoned, as if something had happened. The closing of a factory, or a devastating accident involving the majority of its inhabitants? The only visible survivor, a small corner store, exhibited yellowed cabbage and weathered potatoes along with dusty beach toys, their bright colors faded by years of exposure. Outside the store, a toddler of unidentifiable gender inspected him. The child was the only sign of life and looked too big to be in its narrow stroller. The scrutinizing eyes followed his every move.

He continued up the hill, aware of the sound of his footsteps as they broke the disconcerting silence. He began counting his steps as he sometimes did when he became anxious, and had a subtle sensation of being observed.

He knew that Danish churches were open in the daytime and it somehow felt important to visit this particular one. It looked so daunting from its elevated position, as if it was breathing life and death into its parishioners below. He thought of his upbringing's mandatory Sunday morning services at the local church. He had gladly taken a break from religion when he arrived in Denmark, but maybe now was the time to go back. An urgent need for the quiet contemplation that had been the only thing he

liked about going to church. Places of worship allowed him to be alone with his thoughts which still felt overwhelmingly shameful.

When he reached the church, slightly out of breath after the ascent, he heard music, unexpectedly sounding like an orchestra performance. He assumed a churchwarden had left a reel-to-reel tape on to lure visitors inside the building. Walking around the structure, which was surrounded by a cemetery, he noticed the neatly kept graves, several adorned with fresh flowers. Inscriptions revealed some recent deaths that year, 1977. Lost in thoughts, he failed to register someone coming toward him. The man noticed him, but didn't smile. The sexton, he guessed, as he saw the man continuing toward the farthest corner of the graveyard.

He had a brief flashback to the small town in Wyoming where he'd grown up. It wasn't unlike this place, its misty weather, the permanent chill in the air. He thought about his parents, imagined them looking forward to his return – to things being back to normal. They had not been in favor of him spending his senior year abroad in Denmark. An only child, he felt guilty leaving them behind, and now wondered if they had received his letter.

He kept hearing the music from inside the building and finally tried opening the front door, but it was locked. He searched for the sexton but in vain, debating whether to give it up. But he felt drawn to this place, this particular church, that music. Something about the effort of making it all the way to this town, to the top of this hill. It was a quest that puzzled him, yet it seemed an important part of this journey on his own. For the first time since he'd arrived in Denmark, discovering this church made him want intensely to connect with something past.

Maybe it was a way of coming to terms with what he was soon about to lose.

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"It's eighty *kroner* per night," the woman said. She didn't seem comfortable asking for money and kept stroking her tidy, gray hair. Her eyes avoided his. She was clearly not used to running a pension – he was maybe her first guest, he thought.

The house, in traditional red brick, looked in a better shape than what he'd seen elsewhere in the town. He was startled to hear loud voices in the background, then realized they originated from a transistor radio.

“May I see the room?” he asked her in the elementary Danish that he’d learned while living with his host family in Copenhagen over the past year.

“Please follow me.” She walked briskly up the stairs, surprising him because she had seemed old and frail.

“So here it is,” the woman said, suddenly appearing reluctant to let him in. It was a tiny room with a small balcony. The antique bed had wood carvings, and although it looked a bit short, it was wide enough to seem comfortable.

“This looks fine,” he said.

“Very well, if you will come back downstairs and sign the registry. I do ask for payment in advance. And there’s no breakfast, but I can make you a cup of coffee in the morning.”

“I don’t actually drink coffee, but if you have tea.....”

“No, we don’t drink tea. Coffee it will have to be.”

He'd wanted to ask her if she was alone, whether she had a husband or a relative living with her. If this room used to belong to someone – a child who moved away?

He had decided to stay overnight, not yet having been able to access the church and feeling a perplexing attachment to this small town. It wasn’t a beautiful place, and there were apparently no notable sights. It was perhaps simply that this was a perfect spot to be alone. He needed some time to digest thoughts that kept him from focusing. All he could do was think about Henrik, the eighteen year-old son in his Danish host family.

He unpacked his few belongings, and took the photo of Henrik out of his wallet and placed it on the bedside table. He looked at it, straightened it out. It was a bit like having him there, creating his presence.

He'd found the photo on a pile on Henrik’s desk and often looked at it when he was on his own. It was a portrait, part of Henrik’s hairless, naked chest visible. Henrik smiling, on a beach. There was something about that smile that stirred him and warmed him.

A cream-colored powder table with a round mirror made him believe the room had belonged to the woman’s mother. A painting depicting Jesus, he thought, and a small, wooden cross hung like a warning over the bedside table. Next to it was a discolored, empty square on the wall, a rusty nail left behind.

His eyes went from the cross to the photo of Henrik, and he briefly thought about hiding the photo.

He went out on the balcony and saw the proprietress now sitting below an apple tree in her garden, knitting, a cup of coffee by her side. He decided to ask her about the church. He had not noticed it earlier, but her left arm was shaking lightly.

“The church is only open during service,” she said without looking at him as he joined her in the garden.

“I thought I heard music from the church. As if it was a concert,” he said.

“No, that would not be possible. They keep it very simple. Just the organ, and the small choir. They wouldn’t allow anything else.” She put down her knitting. He could see that her arm was shaking even more now.

“If you stay until Sunday, you may attend the service,” she said hesitantly, as if weighing in her mind the extra income against having a foreigner attend their church.

“Is there really no way to get in? To borrow a key?”

She shook her head again. “It’s not that kind of church.”

He was not making any progress, and asked for a place to have dinner.

“We have no restaurants, but there is a bar. They do serve a *Dagens Ret* and I guess it would fill you up.” He remembered having passed the building on the way from the train station. He thought she was going to say something else, but her eyes stayed on the knitting.

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The barely readable sign announced that the dish of the day was *Bøf med løg* – hamburger with caramelized onions, potatoes, and a gravy that Danes traditionally served with most meat dishes. The bar was part of an old inn that probably used to cater to travelers arriving by train, back in the days when the town must have been an important hub.

The windows were covered in faded, red curtains, closed to the outside world. It reminded him of the inconspicuous gay bar he had secretly visited in Copenhagen. He was astonished to find a small group of elderly men smoking by the counter, drinking beer and *snaps*. He waited in vain for someone to seat him and eventually moved to sit at a table by the window. The men kept staring at him as they continued their non-conversation and he regretted not having brought a book to read. The air was stuffy with pipe smoke and the smell of fried onions. There was no bartender in sight and after some minutes he finally found the courage to ask one of the men who directed him toward the kitchen. Once

there, he tried to make contact with the man who was cooking. The man finally turned around and faced him. The cook, maybe the owner, was easily in his eighties.

In his best Danish, he asked if he could order the dish of the day. The man smiled.

“The dish of the day? That’s the first time in months that somebody has ordered food. I was just cooking for myself. Let me see what I can do. Take a seat.”

He nodded thankfully to the guy who had helped him. The men still stood silently drinking and smoking, and he pictured them all living alone. He sensed them whispering about him, and occasionally, one of them would turn around and observe him lengthily.

He found a local newspaper and read through it slowly. It was mostly ads for shops in the nearby city, and obituaries. There was an announcement for the Sunday church service, an ad for a funeral parlor, but apparently no movie theater. He would have to call it a day after dinner and get a long night’s sleep.

The food finally arrived, along with a bottle of Carlsberg. When he looked up, one of the men at the bar winked at him. He hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast and hungrily ate the meat and the bowl of steamed potatoes, mealy and bland. The beer helped the food go down more easily. He soon got up to pay but the owner, standing by the bar, refused to receive money.

“It’s rewarding enough to see that you liked my food,” the owner said, and he noticed the strain in the man’s voice; a sense of regret, and maybe grief, now apparent on his wrinkled face. He thanked the man who sent him the beer, and discreetly left five *kroner* on the table, as a tip.

The streets were still empty, and as he walked back to the pension, he detected only a few flickering lights from TV screens. Most of the houses were dark; the inhabitants seemed hidden behind thick curtains, as if during a curfew. The town was again inexplicably quiet, only stirred by the passing of a train that rushed through without stopping.

He found a phone booth and called the family in Copenhagen. The mother answered. He had hoped it would be Henrik.

“I just wanted to let you know I’ve decided to stay away overnight. I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh, okay, that’s fine.” She paused for a second. “Have you found a nice place to stay?”

“Yes, a little pension, run by an old lady. It’s very charming.”

She sounded worried, even a bit upset. He felt bad for letting her know so late that he wasn’t coming home that evening and wondered why she seemed concerned – he had always found her very

easygoing. Had Henrik said anything about him? No, he must have imagined something that wasn't there. Being on his own in this little town made him feel sensitive, unprotected, aware of everything around him and of what he had been trying to hide.

In bed that night, the loud radio from downstairs prevented him from falling asleep. He got up several times and eventually opened the door to the balcony, hoping the night sounds would block out the radio. It was chilly now, but the fresh air calmed him. He tried reading but had a hard time focusing on the Danish novel that Henrik had given him. His mind kept going back to Copenhagen, to Henrik, realizing that he had needed this trip on his own to explore what it would feel like no longer sharing a room with Henrik. He thought about the nights when they had talked until dawn. Henrik had taught him most of his Danish, and he had slowly become consumed with Henrik. At first, he convinced himself it was because he was in a foreign country on his own, far away from his family. His need must account for his feeling so close to Henrik.

He would always make sure to be in bed first, pretending to read but positioning himself so that he could observe Henrik stripping down to his underwear.

Here, alone, in this small, offbeat town, his longing for Henrik was even stronger. Not just the safety of Henrik, but an all-consuming desire to be with him.

He finally fell asleep but woke up early in the morning. He was tired, his mind drowsy after the short night. In a dream, he'd conjured Henrik, visiting him in his room at the pension and speaking to him. Now, he couldn't recall the words and felt frustrated and lonely.

It was windy, the air heavy with rain. The house was so quiet that his own breathing sounded disturbingly loud and he tried to restrain it. Opening the door to the corridor, he wondered what the rest of the house contained, what the livingroom looked like. He examined the doors to the other two rooms, but didn't dare open either of them. Although he had the impression that the woman slept downstairs, he wasn't certain. The old wooden floorboards creaked as he hesitated in front of the bathroom.

He took a quick shower in the old bathtub, trying to avoid spilling water on the floor. There didn't seem to be any hot water and he shivered as he dried himself in the small, child-size towel. He planned to return to the church in the morning, hoping to meet the sexton and persuade him to unlock the entrance. After packing, he observed the room one final time. Once again, he noticed the empty space on the wall, next to the cross.

As he quietly descended the staircase, the woman suddenly appeared. He felt like a thief sneaking away.

“Leaving already?” she asked.

“I thought about going for a morning walk before taking the train back to Copenhagen.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re from. I see.” The woman had never asked him about his accent. She seemed uncurious, unlike the men in the bar the night before who had kept looking at him. He told her he had enjoyed his stay as he smelled the coffee brewing.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like a cup before you leave?” The thought of something hot was tempting.

“Okay, yes, I would like a small cup,” he said, and he finally caught her smiling.

They sat together in silence in her old kitchen. From the wobbly, wooden chair, he observed the kitchen’s gas burners, a dented fridge, the worn-out linoleum floors. The coffee was made in a blue Danish coffee pot like the one he had seen in a folk museum. It simmered on the stove, steaming up the room. The coffee didn’t taste good but at least it wasn’t strong, and it gave him warmth.

“Don’t try the church again,” she finally said, as if reading his mind. “You won’t be able to get in.” There was something in her voice, almost pleading. Then she added, “I never go. I stopped going.” Her eyes briefly met his, and she had a hard time controlling her hand as she led the cup to her mouth.

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He quickly reached the top of the hill. The clouds were hanging low, but the rain had stopped. Fog was now obscuring the graveyard. When he tried the door, it finally gave in.

He called out but no one answered. It looked like other Danish churches, spare, yet elegant: an elaborate model of a ship suspended from the ceiling – a reminder of Denmark’s past as a seafaring nation; rows of plain, wooden benches; an altar covered in white cloth. Three tall, white candles.

He slowly walked toward the altar.

The church was chilly and he suddenly felt uneasy. Maybe he shouldn’t be there. A smell of abandonment, of old psalm books, of long past services, hung in the air. He examined the white plaster walls, as stern inside the building as they were forbidding outside. Fragments of naïve frescoes were visible, but most of them were covered over, or washed out over the centuries.

After some time, he thought he heard a door closing in the distance. Then there was no sound at all, as if he had entered a vacuum. He sat on one of the benches in the back, praying and feeling increasingly desperate. With only one week left in Denmark, he was approaching his last moments with Henrik. So many times, he had prepared in his mind what he wanted to say. He fantasized that Henrik had the same feelings. Although maybe Henrik was simply a kind person, caring, and loving, but not likely to be interested in him in that way. Still, he hoped that Henrik would understand him, not judge him.

Henrik was sporty and outgoing, popular with girls, and had often taken him to discotheques. They'd seen *Saturday Night Fever* together at a cinema in Copenhagen. He preferred the music of Joni Mitchell, and felt uncomfortable dancing in front of others, of standing out. Henrik had often invited him out on the dance floor but he was too embarrassed to accept. He worried he wouldn't be able to conceal his joy, even though he knew that, here in Denmark, it was not so unusual for young male friends to dance together.

No one had asked him why he wasn't dating girls, neither back home, nor here in Denmark. He had become good at pretending.

It dawned on him that the book Henrik had given him was about a man coming to terms with his homosexuality. Henrik had insisted he read it, telling him he had been very moved by it. Henrik must surely have seen through him, and giving him this book was Henrik's way of showing his acceptance. Or was it more still?

Maybe Henrik could come to America to study and they would share an apartment. At least, they'd be together, as friends – it would be better than not having Henrik in his life at all. He did not intend to move back in with his family; he'd applied to study in New York City. Henrik would finish high school in a few weeks and planned to take a gap year. That year could maybe be in the US, he'd said.

He felt conflicted thinking about Henrik in this church. Then again, his adopted country seemed so modern and tolerant. Henrik's parents were very open and would surely accept him, although he still recalled the concern he'd detected in the mother's voice on the phone.

Until now, he had convinced himself that it was just a phase. After sharing a room with Henrik for almost a year, he felt certain. For the first time in his life, he was close to another man and felt comfortable.

When he'd finally had the nerve to visit a gay bar in Copenhagen, he'd hungrily observed the men but had not dared meet their eyes. He'd been terrified that someone would approach him, talk to him, and had finished his beer in a few, quick minutes and left, relieved but saddened that his courage had failed him.

As his stay with Henrik's family was coming to an end, he felt increasingly distressed. At night, he struggled to fall asleep, knowing that Henrik was only a few feet away, under his own bed covers. Almost naked. Often, he would masturbate quietly to the rhythm of Henrik's breathing when he felt certain that Henrik was asleep. He fantasized about joining Henrik in his bed, caressing him, sleeping in his arms. His longing was nearly unbearable, yet nothing he wanted to shed.

He sat still for a long time, feeling tired and desperate about the situation. About returning to his parents. He almost regretted the letter he'd sent to them about how fond he was of Henrik. It had been subtle but it was all there, between the lines. They wouldn't want to understand.

Still kneeling on the church bench, his eyes closed, his hands folded in prayer and lost in reverie, music suddenly started playing. He was startled – how long had he been sitting there, an hour, maybe more? When he looked up, a woman stood quietly before the altar. The three candles were lit. He recognized the music – his father had often played that LP: Schubert's 8th Symphony. He didn't understand why he had not heard the woman enter the church and wondered if she'd put the music on. She now kneeled down.

After some minutes, she slowly stood up and took something out of her coat pocket. She turned around.

It was the woman from the pension. She held a photo in her right hand.

He couldn't quite see it from this far, but suddenly worried it might be the photo of Henrik. Had he forgotten it on the bedside table – had it been there when he came back from the inn last night? He was so tired from the lack of sleep that he couldn't think straight.

He suddenly started to panic, concerned that she would challenge him when leaving the church. *Don't try the church again.* He tried to hide behind the bench in front of him, pretending to be lost in prayer, to not have noticed her. He struggled to control his breathing as his heart raced.

The woman brought out another photo. This one was framed, in black and white. She looked carefully at it while standing still for minutes. He kept expecting her to look at him directly, to say something, but she remained silent. He wondered how she got here so quickly. She must have read his mind, she must have known that he planned to go here. He now felt certain that it was the photo of

Henrik. He was ashamed that he'd left the photo on his bedside table, and also upset that she'd entered his room while he was out the night before, or this morning while he was in the bathroom. She knew his secret.

Unexpectedly, though, there was a gentle expression on her face.

He was now able to look at the other photo. It was an old image, the young man dressed in formal dark clothes that looked like something Henrik's grandfather would have worn when he was younger. Maybe it was not her son, maybe it was a relative. He was absorbed in thoughts as the woman left the altar.

He finally heard footsteps walking by, slowly, quietly. It felt like his life went by. He realized that the music had stopped. He looked around – the church was empty. The candles were no longer burning.

It was just another early morning, in a church, in a small town in Denmark.

He quickly left the building. The scent of the now extinct candles accompanied him outside. He closed the heavy door carefully.

As he walked through the cemetery, he saw the woman again. She was kneeling by a gravestone, and had placed the two photos on top of it. He approached her, wanting to ask questions he had formulated in his mind inside the church.

"My brother," she said. She didn't look up. She knew he was there.

"The church discouraged me from burying him here. He refused to lie about who he was. I pretend he's resting here, next to my parents. They cannot prevent me from doing that, can they?" Then she got up, and as she left she added, "It was his favorite piece of music. The unfinished symphony." She'd taken the photo of her brother, but left the one of Henrik on the gravestone.

He hesitated for a moment, then quickly picked it up.

He followed her at a distance and considered trying to catch up with her. He wanted to know more about her brother, who he had been and why the church didn't want him there. When he had died, how he had died. But she walked so fast that he would have to accelerate to follow her, and she clearly didn't urge him to accompany her.

When exiting the cemetery, he noticed the sexton by the church entrance, locking the door. He worried that the man would confront him about having entered the church, but the sexton quickly disappeared. Maybe the woman knew him, and he had left the door unlocked for her, for *them*, on this quiet morning when nobody would ask questions. Maybe the sexton had known her brother.

As he went down the hill, a subtle sense of transformation slowly took place in his mind. He now felt prepared to face Henrik, ready to move on. Even if it had to be on his own. If a woman this age could accept him, then other people would, too. Maybe even his parents, eventually.

His feet headed for the station at a fast pace – he was hoping he wouldn't have to wait long for a train, eager to be back in Copenhagen, to tell Henrik about his visit. He observed the small town one last time, wondering again if he had imagined it all.

He recalled moments of praying in church back home in Wyoming when he would sometimes end up in a meditative state, almost similar to sleep. Maybe he had been dreaming, and simply awakened rejuvenated. But he knew for certain that he'd met the woman by the gravestone. That she'd spoken to him and left the photo of Henrik there for him. The brief moment with her, her words about her brother, had made him feel understood.

As he walked by the inn, he saw the old man by the window, the curtains now half-open. He waved hesitantly, at first unsure if the innkeeper recognized his customer from the night before, but the man eventually nodded at him. The familiar smell of fried onion accompanied him as he moved on.

Reaching the station, he hurried down the stairs to the waiting area. He briefly thought about returning to the pension, a sudden urge to find out more. But he also sensed that all had been said.

When he opened the door to the platform, he was heartened to find her there. She looked him in the eyes and held out the photo of her brother.

“Keep it,” she said. “It'll help you. It would have meant a lot to him to know that somebody was thinking about him. He never had anyone.”

Then, without saying goodbye, she opened the door to the station, and climbed the stairs. He knew he would never see her again.

He wondered again what had brought him here, to this small town, and then to her house. What had made him decide to stop here.

He then felt the vibrations from the approaching train, and searched for signs of it in the distance.

When the train began slowing down, he took a final look around him. It was as if he saw the town anew. The church was again visible, the fog beginning to clear. It had not been a dream.

He never had anyone.

He entered the train and, pushing open the door to a compartment, a young man sitting by the window smiled at him. He decided to sit next to him even though all the other seats were vacant. He

liked the smell of the train, of the young man, as he settled into his seat. Comfortable, at last, as the train started moving forward. He pulled out the photo of Henrik from his backpack and placed it on an empty seat.

A shimmer of a thought emerged, barely conscious, barely there. That he would maybe leave the photo on the train when he reached his destination. He would maybe allow himself to forget it.