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Sweden

I liked Sweden fine. There wasn't any traffic. It smelled like a rain scented candle, the ones that come out around wintertime. There were all these pine trees, lining the highways and backyards. Where I stayed, there were all these kids, blonde and fair and loud. Every single one of those kids had these baby blue eyes, clear and pretty as day. My eyes were so dark you couldn't even see my pupils. It wasn't what I knew.

I knew God real well. My dad was a very devout Muslim, and my mom always listened to my dad. I heard about God all the time. He was the creator and the sustainer, the all powerful and all knowing, everything you could ever think of and then some more. I couldn't comprehend God but that was fine because no one could and no one was supposed to. I just loved God, and that was good enough for me. God was in our heart and in our eyes and in our blood and in the trees, even the Swedish pine trees, though the Swedish didn't think of Him at all. All the Swedes, they didn't believe in God. He was like a story character or a myth or a legend, the figment of a whole lot of people's imagination. I felt almost bad for them because it was an entire country filled with godless people with nothing divine and noble to tell them what is good and bad. I got to wondering how they knew the difference.

Elias, this sweet boy with gap teeth and a big smile, came up to me one day. His hair was puffy and nearly white and all sorts of lengths like his mom cut it even though she had no business doing that. I was walking alone along this gravel rock path in my cousins' neighborhood, wearing flip flops from the grocery store that were ten steps away from breaking. None of these Swedish kids ever came up to me or smiled at me or anything, the whole time I was there, except Elias. We were about twelve or thirteen and he was a whole head taller than me, lanky and strong. He held a soccer ball out in front of him and he was wearing a soccer jersey from God-knows-where. He talked in very fast Swedish.

"I don't speak Swedish," I said, wide-eyed because he startled me.

He switched to broken English because the Swedish school system started teaching it in like kindergarten. Elias talked and talked, telling me his cousins lived in America and that he had never been on an airplane, with his friendly, toothy smile plastered on his thin face.

"Are you from New York City?" He asked. He really seemed to think New York City spanned over about half of the United States, and that was the only place you could really be from.

"No." I told him. "I'm from Alabama."

He just nodded at me and got to walking on this gravel path. I followed him because I was bored. It was my second week in Sweden and I didn't have a thing to do. After a little while, he stretched out his arm and pointed at a big, old barn house at the end of the road, right in front of a lake. God, there were so many lakes. You couldn't even drive to the gas station without seeing at least two. All the houses looked like barns. They were red with white trimming like the kind in Old McDonald picture books. I thought it was pretty.

"A old man lives there." Elias told me. "He is mean."

This was all I ever came to know about the old man. I imagined him to look like Santa Claus. After that day, Elias started showing up at my aunt's apartment that looked like an extended barn house until I left and we'd walk down the gravel path, through a little bit of forest, and to the old man's house.

"Lana, why do you always talk to the tall Swedish boy?" My cousins always asked. They could've really been talking about any Swedish boy because they were all giant compared to Syrians. My tallest uncle was 5'8. They only asked the question as a way of nicely scolding me for talking to a boy because I just wasn't supposed to. I said he was nice because he was. Elias wasn't boring and Sweden was so I kept on talking to him to keep me from going out of my mind.

The old man never left his big barn house or even really looked out the window. I bet he saw us a few times, hopping over the fence to his yard. I thought maybe one day he would come outside and sit on the rocking chair that sat on his porch, but he never did. Like usual, I stood on the bottom part of his fence and Elias boosted me over.

We ran out to the lake.

The lake just belonged to the old man. There were no other houses I could see. A canoe sat near the shore and never moved. Elias always suggested that we use it and I always said no. I thought that was overstepping. He tried to say this big, long sentence that he stumbled over, trying to convince me to help him push it. I laughed at him and threw my flip flops, digging my feet into the sand. Elias ran into the water, dunking his head, saying it “felt more cold” if you hesitated. I trudged through the water. My thighs stung, the water was numbing. Swedish summers were as good as Alabama winters. I just wanted some real sun again, some real summer 100 degree weather.

I plopped down in the water to warm up. I just stood with the water up to my neck and told Elias that I missed home and that I loved my cousins, but they annoyed me. He nodded his head like he understood every sentence I said even though I knew he understood a good fifty percent. I was talking too fast and too much.

“It is okay.” Elias said firmly. He looked funny with his white hair darkened a little and plastered to his head. He was smiling big at me in a dumb attempt to be reassuring because that’s how Elias was.

He started to splash water at me and I flinched because it got all in my eyes. He was roaring with laughter and then he just stopped, all of the sudden. He whipped his head to the shore so fast that I jumped a little. I looked because he did and saw a girl, standing, smiling. She was wearing a white dress that was blowing all over the place. It was thin as a sheet. Her eyes were bigger than they were supposed to be and bright blue. I was sitting a good twelve feet away and I could still see their color. She looked ethereal almost, the girl. She seemed to glow, not so much that it was the first thing that you noticed, but still, she glowed.

She looked at Elias and I and then walked gently through the water, as if the cold didn’t bother her. She moved like a well-oiled machine, smoothly, but every movement was the same. She didn’t feel human, just human-like. The girl was beautiful, really beautiful. My mouth was gaping and I’m sure Elias’s was too but I didn’t look at him for even a second. I think I was in a trance.

Real fast, I decided she was an angel. I had never been so sure of anything in my entire life. The thought was just replaying and replaying in my head, like it was the most important thing I ever thought. It was the surest thing I ever thought. I bet Elias even thought it and he was the least spiritual boy I’d ever come across. She looked perfect, above any person I’d ever seen, and that made my stomach stir. She felt holy. It made sense to me. I didn’t think. I didn’t even have time to.

The angel walked towards me, not Elias, staring. I stared back. You’d think I would’ve ran or something, at least gotten up. She held her hands out, slowly moving them towards me. I held my hands out for her too. Somehow I just knew that I was supposed to even though it was a stupid decision. Her fingers laced with mine and I began to notice how strange it was. It all struck me then, a little too late, when I was already trapped. There was a little twinkle in her eye, a reflection of the dim sun, and she looked so happy, like she wanted me to be scared then, exactly then. I tried to pull my hands away from hers, but she dug her fingernails into the knuckles of my hand. She had nails like talons. I opened my mouth to scream and she pulled me under.

I was kneeling on the bottom of the lake, my eyes peeled open and looking at her, only her. I wanted so badly to look away but she wouldn’t let me. I was yelling but nothing was coming out. Water was just choking me. My nose burned and my eyes burned and I was more terrified than I’d ever been. It felt like the lake was getting deeper and deeper, the water murkier with every second. Her fingernails were still digging into my skin. My knees were scraping against rock. My knuckles and my knees bled. I was in pain, breathless and drowning, but, for a second, for a strange second, I thought about how beautiful it was. I thought how it had to be since all angels are beautiful. Light splayed out around her like sun rays, as if she sat in the center of her own halo. I stared at her for an eternity, my eyes wide and stinging, my whole body stinging. And for a second, I did not mind it. For a second, I was glad.

Her hair moved in different directions, following the flow of the water. It was long enough to reach her waist. She was no longer smiling, but I could still see the happiness in her eyes. She looked thrilled. I wondered how she kept me there, perfectly still. I could feel the strength in her hands, a sort of warmth, so I clutched them, spellbound. I didn’t know if I was drowning. I couldn’t breathe, but I stopped missing air. As soon as I began to cling to her, as soon as I stopped wanting to run, she released me.

I floated to the surface. I was closer to the middle of the lake now, and I had no clue how we moved down there. She rose out of the water and walked to the shore, slowly, with ease. Elias yelled after her and his mouth fell open. He stared at me, paralyzed. I let my head float above the water and I just stayed there, coughing up water and letting my knees hurt. God, it was the most painful thing. I gulped air.

“Lana, Lana!” Elias yelled in the most strangled, scared voice I ever heard. He sounded so unlike himself. “Are you living?” He said.

I laughed. I was desperate for a long breath, my lungs were begging me for it, but I kept laughing. My lips were blue and my hands shook and I was merely floating in the lake, but I kept laughing. My blood swirled into the murky water. It felt like a thousand little knives were digging into my skin. Elias was hovering over me then carrying

me to the shore.

“Your skin is white.” He gasped.

“I’m fine.” I said. I didn’t even get mad at him for not saving me. I was sure he couldn’t, that he was entranced too. I took a long breath and Elias fell back, finally allowing himself to smile, and to laugh, and to wonder.

Angels are the purest of God’s creations. They are incapable of anything but goodwill. Their benevolence and beauty is something above ours. Light is associated with them because light is pure and good. Angels are religious things. Their existence has forever been associated with that of God. Swedes do not believe in God.

There are no angels in Sweden.