



Bernadette, Nostradamus and My Mother

By Marie Kristensson Håkansson

I think I woke up a millisecond before the phone actually rang. My heart was racing when I reached out for the receiver and answered.

“You must come home. She is really dying now,” I heard my sister say on the phone. She was speaking in Swedish and it took my ears a while to adjust to my sleeping mother tongue.

“Is she really that ill?” I said, and in the corner of my eye, I saw my husband begin to stir under the covers and reach out for his laptop. He opened it and went for Qantas’ site.

“Yes – you just have to come. I will never forgive you if you don’t come home this time.”

“You could be in Stockholm on Thursday morning,” my husband whispered. I had no idea how he had understood what my sister and I were talking about, since he only knew about ten words in Swedish. Maybe when you have been married for almost twenty years, you communicate more or less wirelessly.

“Ok, I’ll be home on Thursday morning,” I heard myself say and immediately started to regret it.

“Send an email with the flight number and I will pick you up at the airport. Hurry home, I really need you now.” My sister hung up and I sat up in my bed with the receiver still in my hand and felt totally lost. My husband put his arms around me and told me over and over how good it would be for me to go home this time. I did not believe him.

I had come to Australia almost twenty years ago. I had just finished high school, and together with two friends I backpacked around the world. Australia was our first stop, and three hours after we had landed at Sydney airport, I met my future husband, John. I guess it is too much to admit that I met him on Bondi Beach; but in my defense, I have to say that he was not a lifeguard and he was not wearing swim trunks when I met him. I got a nasty cut in my left foot the moment I set foot on Bondi Beach, and he worked in the first aid tent.

John was tall as a telephone pole and rail thin, and he always said that it's good to know that women were most likely more interested in his soul than his body. I don't look like the stereotypical Swedish girl, either. Have you ever seen one of those female shot putters from the former U.S.S.R? That is more like me – minus the facial hair. I came limping to John's first aid tent. He was sitting on a stool reading a ridiculously thick book about parodontitis. I did not know then that he was going to dental school. I just saw this tall and thin man sitting on a small stool reading a thick book. It was not love at first sight – it was beyond love. He put me in a chair and took my sturdy, not-that-clean foot in his hands, like I was Cinderella and he was about to slip on a golden shoe. I stayed in that first aid tent for three days and saw John tending to cuts and bruises, sprained ankles and a vast variety of other minor ailments. I even saw him remove a splinter from the paw of a Saint Bernhard, even though it was way out of his jurisdiction. On the fourth day, my friends got tired of me and continued their around-the-world trip. I never got any further than Sydney.

After six months, however, I had some trouble with my expiring visa and I had to go back to Sweden to renew it. I spent three miserable months in Sweden before I could go back. My parents drove me to the airport, and I remember my mother's tears and worries that I would never return.

I had not been back in Sweden since then. That was almost nineteen years ago. I really do not know why. My father had taken ill and died ten years ago. Just then, I was thirty-six weeks pregnant with twins and was not allowed to get even close to an airplane. It did not help that my father-in-law spent a whole afternoon at the department of transport, trying to convince them to force an airline to accept a pregnant lady who was due any second.

To John it was a total mystery why I would not go home to Sweden. John had taken some psychology classes at dental school, but they were more focused on how to prepare someone for a root canal than how to convince your wife to go to Sweden. Sometimes I almost wished that I had had a terrible childhood and horrible parents, but I did not. My parents were good people and they always did the uttermost to give my sister and me a childhood full of beautiful memories. They made me into a nice person with sturdy feet and a clear head. Now I had run out of excuses and I had to go back. Otherwise, my sister would never forgive me and I would probably never forgive myself. I did not consider myself as an evil or self-centered person, and I was painfully aware that my actions might render me as all of the above.

I woke up the next morning with a feeling of impending catastrophe. I went down to the kitchen and found my mother-in-law in the midst of making pancakes. When she saw me, she put down the spatula, went over, and hugged me.

"I came over as soon as I heard," she said.

"I thought I would help you to get the twins off to school, so you could pack your bags."

My mother-in-law was one of those mothers-in-law that meddle in everything. You cannot turn your back for a second without her trying to rearrange your pots and pans. But I loved her. Everything she did, she did out of care for us. Whenever John and I had a minor argument, she always took my side. "Listen to your wife. She is European, and they know things. When we still had dirt floors and manure in the streets, they invented the zipper," she used to say.

I got dressed and went down to the basement in search of a suitcase. John came home early from work and drove me to the airport. I held his hand in a tight grip all the way to the departures hall.

It was not as if I was dependent on my husband. I just could not live without him.

“Hurry home,” he said and kissed me on the forehead. I boarded the plane and braced myself for what was to come.

I arrived in Stockholm on Thursday morning. My sister met me at the airport, and the second she saw me she started to cry. We just stood there hugging and crying in the middle of the busy airport. Finally, we managed to pull ourselves together and walked over to her car. During the first ten minutes of the ride back to my sister’s house, we did not utter one single word. Then suddenly we started to speak at the same time. I started to laugh, and suddenly the ice was broken. My sister told me that she had booked a meeting with the head nurse at the nursing home where my mother was staying.

“Whatever for?” I said.

“Well, there are certain things about our mother that I have not told you,” she said and looked guilty.

I was too tired to explore the subject further. We got home to my sister’s and she led me to the guestroom where she promptly put me to bed and tucked me in.

“Sweet dreams,” she said and closed the door behind her.

I fell asleep the second my head touched the pillow. My sister woke me up eight hours later with a tray with a teapot and some sandwiches.

“It’s Lady Grey,” she said when I smelled the tea.

“My favorite.”

“I know. Some things are very persistent in a person.”

I drank my tea and ate my sandwiches. My sister sat on the bed and watched me the whole time.

I got dressed and my sister drove us to the nursing home that had been my mother’s home for the better half of a decade. Our arrival caused quite a stir. It was as if the whole staff had been waiting for us. They ushered us into an office with a giant mahogany desk with a tiny woman sitting behind it. She rose to her feet and greeted my sister with a hug, and then she turned to me.

“Anna, it feels like I already know you. Your sister is constantly talking about you. I’m so glad to finally meet you in person.”

I assumed the tiny woman was the head nurse. She was a woman in her mid-fifties, with a pleasant face and a no-nonsense hairdo.

“Your mother is a remarkable woman,” she said, and I prepared myself for the bad news.

“She has some very special abilities. Like chess.”

“Chess – my mother does not play chess. She does not even play Monopoly.”

“Well, a couple of months ago, she played against my nephew and beat him in 18 moves. My nephew has not recovered from the loss yet.”

“Well, you take things hard when you are a teenager,” I said.

“My nephew is thirty-five years old and has been ranked fifth by the World Chess Federation.”

“You must be joking. My mother is a housewife,” I said, and I could not help laughing.

“She actually beat him three times in a row. The fourth time it was a draw. However, your mother told me afterwards that she thought my nephew was such a nice young man that she did not want him to lose his confidence.”

I just sat there and listened to the head nurse continue to tell me about my mother’s new abilities. Besides the chess, she now spoke French like a native, as well as Aramaic. She also wrote Aramaic, but with influences from the Phoenician script. The head nurse had an uncle who was a professor in Semitic languages who had visited my mother several times, and they had chatted away for hours in Aramaic. It had taken a while for them to figure out that it was Aramaic my mother was speaking, because she herself had no idea about it.

“Did you know about this?” I asked my sister.

My sister just nodded. “Anna – there is more.”

Evidently, on the 10th of March this year my mother had been very upset. She had asked the head nurse for the phone number of the Japanese Emperor. The head nurse had tried to calm my mother, but had not succeeded. My mother then handed over two letters – one written in Aramaic and the other written in Japanese – and begged them to fax the letters to the Japanese Embassy. The head nurse had then called for a doctor, who promptly came and sedated my mother. Twelve hours later the earthquake hit Japan.

In my mother’s letters, there were detailed instructions about when and where the earthquake would hit, as well as warnings about the tsunami. There was even a map in the Japanese letter with an exact position of the epicenter and warnings about what could happen to the nuclear power plants. The head nurse said that she would never forgive herself for not faxing those letters to the Japanese Embassy.

“Who would have believed you?” I said.

“But I should at least have tried!”

“So my mother is fluent in French and the new Nostradamus?”

The head nurse and my sister looked at each other and smiled.

“Well, according to another letter your mother has written, Nostradamus was a fake. She actually wrote it in Latin. But have you heard of Bernadette of Lourdes?”

“Another one of your relatives?” I said.

“Not at all – I am not even remotely related to her. She was a poor peasant girl living in the south of France around 1850. She claimed she spoke to the Virgin Mary several times. Your mother says that she does that too.”

I felt the room beginning to spin. My sister quickly got some water. I gulped it down and tried to organize my mind.

“We have performed several medical examinations on your mother. An MRI and a CAT scan of her head. But nothing is there – of course the brain is there – but nothing that should not be there.”

My sister continued, “You may wonder why I urged you to come home? Our mother claims she will die on the 11th of May this year. I believe her.”

I rose and walked over to my sister and hugged her.

“I’m sorry I have left you carrying all this alone.”

My sister took my hand and said, “Let’s go and see mother now.”

We walked side by side through the hallway. My sister opened a door at the end of it. We entered a room that looked more like the living room of an old lady than a room in a nursing home.

My mother was sitting in an armchair and when she saw me, she covered her face with her hands and started to cry. I fell down on my knees beside her armchair and gently took her hands in mine.

“I am here now, mother,” I said over and over again.

I spent the following days with my mother at the nursing home. We spent hours talking, and we spent hours being comfortably quiet. The head nurse had rolled in a gurney beside my mother’s bed and I spent the nights in it. My mother slept peacefully, and sometimes I just lay awake listening to her breathing.

On the evening of the 10th of May, my mother had one of her encounters with the Virgin Mary. My sister and I had been out buying pizza, and when we came back my mother said she had some news to tell us. We sat down beside her armchair. My mother told us what would happen at

noon on the 11th of May. She finished by saying that she had raised us to become resourceful human beings and now it was up to us to do what was required. We ate our pizzas and our mother went to bed. Five minutes after midnight on the 11th of May, she passed away in her sleep.

We signed some papers at the nursing home and arranged for a funeral home to come and get our mother. We did not cry. We took a taxi back to my sister's house. No one dared to say anything.

Finally, I said, "We won't tell anyone. As of noon today, the world will never be the same again. But maybe it will be a better world. We will never know if we're doing the right thing by not telling anyone. Only our grandchildren will know."

My sister and I sat on her couch and waited for the morning to come.

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