



It Was a Very Nice Spring

By Karin Dahlbäck

Me and my friend Agneta had one common interest: cute boys, especially if they sang with guitars. There were many of those around then; we had at least four in our class. There were parties where we danced to the latest records. They usually ended with the guys playing and singing songs like “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” “Donna, Donna, Donna,” “Tonight I Dreamed That There was Peace on Earth,” and, “If I Had a Hammer.” We sat around with them, sometimes singing along. It was a nice spring, 1965. The sun blessed us with its presence almost every day. During the lunch breaks most kids in our school went down to the waterfront of the large lake where the pier formed the most perfect setting for eating, sunbathing, reading and discussions, not always trivial. An interest in politics and culture of the day could be genuine but was also a means to impress friends and potential partners.

On this particular Wednesday midday, the sun was shining, the wind was soothing, and the pier was filled with youngsters. Agneta and I had been sitting there for at least half an hour, both with our skirts drawn up to sunbathe our legs. Faintly, I recognized the familiar smell of Delial sun cream, a mixture of cinnamon and strawberries. I was half asleep, daydreaming about dancing on a beach. The Rolling Stones, what a band! Better than the Beatles. I imagined myself dancing with Paul.

“Mm, maybe my face is burning a little. Am I red?”

Agneta’s question woke me up.

“Yes maybe, it’s hard to see in the sun. What about me?”

“Yes, definitely. I really want that tan. Why don’t we skip the next lesson? It’s only history.”

“I don’t know. No, don’t you think they will take roll? We had better go.”

I started to put my things together and rose to my feet.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, an unfamiliar face appeared.

“Hello, do you speak English?”

Agneta was interested. It must have been obvious to him, too. It certainly was to me. The boy was our age and had the prettiest dark eyes I had ever seen, and he talked in the cutest accent.

“I want to hitchhike to Stockholm. Do you know where is the best place to stand . . . for a ride?”

The voice made my knees weak. Agneta and I looked at each other. In her tight white and blue striped sweater and short jeans skirt she was prettier than ever, her long straight hair shining in the sun. I knew for sure that she was prettier than me.

Hitch-hiking was not done by good girls, so we really didn't know. We both looked at him, the beautiful, tanned boy with the dark hair, jeans, green sweatshirt and large backpack. Was he tired, or just bored?

“Well, maybe, you probably have to take a bus. In that direction.”

Agneta pointed vaguely, but her back was straight and her blue eyes very focused.

“Where do you come from?”

When he turned his eyes on me, I turned away from his gaze and felt a wave of warmth on my face. It was not sunburn. The question had just blurted out of my mouth, and now I had no control of my blushing.

“I am from Paris. Do you have a cigarette? Could I borrow?”

Agneta rummaged in her bag but I was quicker and offered him one from my small packet of Princes. Without trembling, with the match between my hands, I lit his cigarette and then my own. He sat down in front of us, with his back to the sun. Kids around us were in the process of leaving for the afternoon lessons. Our classmates were already gone. The pier was almost empty except for the three of us, silently smoking. A few seagulls were sailing above us.

“Actually, I am from Armenia. Do you know where that is?”

“Isn't that where Mount Ararat was, where Moses built the ark?”

I was definitely better informed than Agneta about such subjects. She frowned.

“Maybe.” He sighed and looked over the water.

A small motorboat was leaving its place in the dock, in front of the small restaurants that lined the embankment.

“Why are you going to Stockholm?”

He turned to Agneta and looked straight into her eyes.

“I don’t really know. I can just as well be there as somewhere else.”

Agneta looked bewildered. I didn’t understand either.

“Why, what do you mean?”

“I want to live in Armenia but I can’t. So, it doesn’t matter.”

His sadness seemed to transmit itself to me, a dark, slow feeling of hopelessness that I objected to and resented.

“How can you say that?”

“Terrible things happened in my country, to my family. Genocide. My people were killed by the Turks, you know.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“No, when was that?”

“My parents were children. Their parents and all their sisters and brothers were killed. Don’t you know anything about this? About the cruelties in Armenia? Haven’t you heard of Alma Johansson? She saw what happened. She was Swedish and wrote about it. How children were dragged through cities bleeding and wounded, being shot at by soldiers.”

“But that must have been a long time ago,” Agneta said encouragingly.

He sighed.

“What do you mean? It is not that a long time. My parents are very depressed, always. They think about it all the time. I do too.”

His whole appearance was entrenched in a strange and solid bitterness. Agneta looked at her watch.

“But surely—. You can’t let it affect you this much. You must think about your own life and try to be happy. Life can be so nice, so good.”

The look in his eyes silenced me, and I realised that there was no way that I could make him understand my optimistic curiosity towards life. He stubbed out the cigarette, raised himself and threw the backpack onto his back.

“Thanks for the cig. See you.”

He disappeared along the pier and the embankment, into the city. I never saw him again.

Agneta and I picked up our things and hurried back to school, a little bit late for the first afternoon lesson. It was history.

I couldn't find anything on Armenia in the book.

The term was close to its end. We didn't return to the pier that spring.

It was a very nice summer, 1965. I danced a lot and learned to play the guitar.

Karin Dahlbäck is Swedish but spent two years in the USA, 1966 as a sophomore in high school and 1982 as a post-doc's wife and visiting dermatology resident. Her background is as a clinical doctor. She has also worked in biomedical science and studied social anthropology.