

*In November 2008, Charlotte Rørth visited a church in southern Spain and emerged from the sacristy apparently radiating light. The following month, as she was walking the dog back in Denmark, a ray of light struck her from above. Dreams followed – and she returned to the sacristy.*

Excerpt from chapter “There Was a Man”

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February 25, 2009

It's just past mid-day on Wednesday 25th February and I'm standing before the door to the sacristy of La Sacra Capilla del Salvador. It's three months since I was last here. The door – solid oak, with a cast-iron knob - dates back to 1536, making it nearly 500 years old. It's the same door I see in my recurring dream, except that in the dream, spring leaves are beginning to appear on the plane trees outside. Now it's cold outside, and winter: perhaps a couple of weeks earlier in the season than in the dream. The branches are bare.

The hyper-activity I succumbed to during the weeks since my last visit has taken charge again, hustling me through a five-day work schedule of travel-related articles built around the two newly-opened flight routes that link my newspaper's city, Aalborg, with Malaga in southern Spain.

But I'm not on my own here. And there's no avoiding what I'm here to do.

Andrea Pezzini, the guide who saw me radiating light back in November, and to whom I wrote to when the dreams took hold, is standing next to me. I contacted him when I got home from that last trip, excusing my behavior. He wrote back with an apology for intruding.

He's a little younger than me, and softer around the edges, with a dark tonsure and the classic dark stubble of self-respecting Italian manhood. He grew up in the tiny northern Italian town of Castell Goffredo, and spent time in London, Paris and Seville before moving to Ubeda in 1994, where he lives with his wife Carmen and their four children, running his own guide business for journalists and tourists, as well as representing several churches and cultural venues such as museums. Among them, La Sacra Capilla del Salvador.

He is not a believer. That much he knows.

“But you shone that day in November,” he averred in one of the many reassuring mails I received from him into the beginning of the new year. “I was raised a Catholic, and my mother goes to church every day. I turned against religion a good many years ago. But when I saw you there radiating light...I can't explain it. I've visited that sacristy every day for 14 years and I never experienced anything spiritual in there, until you stood there with that light coming off you.”

Then, when I asked him if he would join me when I next visited, to open the door I'd been dreaming of, he said yes.

“I'm scared,” I wrote. Scared that I might not be the same afterwards. “I'm not used to dreaming about men who summon me from chapels,” I added, trying to apply some distance and maintain a cool front by making light of it.

He didn't let me off the hook then. And he doesn't now.

“Sit down here,” he says, and leaves me on the solid wood bench that stands in the centre of the amazingly high-ceilinged sacristy.

There I am all alone.

It's all just as it was before: the same stuttering sounds from the small fluorescent lights that illuminate the three white ceiling-arches, the same vaguely sickly odor of perfume and aftershave, washing-powder and everyday life left by previous visitors, the same white-washed sandstone walls, the same huge chests of dark wood stuffed with ecclesiastical papers colonizing the alcove-space on both sides. Five centuries'

worth of work, all stacked in order. Between the three alcoves, every wall and corner boasts a bust or a statue. There are eight of them, four men and four women, looking down on me. In the Hercules figure, the lion's mane represents masculine courage, while Hebe's fertile womanhood represents love. These pagan symbols bear testimony to the nobleman Francisco de los Cobos de Molinas' acceptance of other belief systems being part of the story: for several years around 1550 he and his contemporaries manifested a humanist openness and curiosity. Part of this inclusiveness involved the celebration of all things Greek, philosophy among them. Which explains why here, in this Catholic church, you will see evidence of an provocative expression of Renaissance ideas.

Pointing both backward and forward in time, there's an angel in the sky, and Jesus on a simple cross that hangs on the end wall. It's wood-covered, with little doors and drawers and a shelf that functions as an altar. At the top, high up, a small lone window faces east.

The bench is almost soft with age, striped by the passing of the centuries, its arm-rest smooth against my wrist. It is set high, but if I stretch my feet down my toes can trace the huge square stone tiles laid diagonally like a skewed chessboard. The light, soft sandstone squares are worn in layers and in places they are sunk lower than the harder squares of dark gray granite.

I close my eyes.

And meet a man.

I've never seen him before. But I recognize him when he appears a metre and a half in front of me and a little to the left. He's like a life-size hologram. My first thought is that the apparition is straight out of a sci-fi movie, the kind I almost never watch. Perhaps seeing it in film terms is my way of shaking off the idea that the image could be pure invention.

But it isn't. He is right here in the sacristy, behind my closed eyelids – inside a dome that comes complete with landscape and sky. The scene is three-dimensional and life-size. He's on a sandy road: I see the tiles of the sacristy beneath his feet. He is not transparent, but real – just as real as the tourists who have come in and now stand talking behind me. It seems hot where he is, as if it's the middle of the day: his shadow is short, the sun is white against a soft baby-blue sky. He's stopped on the road that leads along a dry hillside, topped by a village. To his right there's a valley with rows of trees.

I dare not look at his face.

I'll wait to do that.

Sitting with my head bowed, what I take in first is the bright gold dust on his worn leather sandals. They have thin straps attached around the ankles.

They're similar to mine. They're Jesus sandals.

The absurdity of it comes as a relief.

The gaps between his toes are grubby with earth but it's reddish, rather than the pale dust on the road. Odd, I think - but I find a fitting homeliness in the way the hairs on the upper side of his feet are completely bleached just like the hairs on my sons' tanned legs in summer. His tunic reaches to his knees. It's a soft medium blue and it's slung over his shoulder where the sun has bleached it in faint stripes. His hair is shoulder-length, reddish, slightly wavy, and his beard – not thick - is the same color or perhaps a touch lighter. It reaches down to his Adam's apple. He carries himself upright. He's slim, with some wrinkles around the neck, a straight back, long muscles on his arms. His hands are sinewy, clean, slim and dry, with pronounced veins on the back. With his right hand he hitches his robe into a better position over his shoulder while keeping the fabric against his hip with his left. He is about thirty, maybe a little older. He gives the impression of being tall, as he stops there on the stony path, which twists down a gentle slope from a hilltop village where I can make out canvas window-slits in the pale, low houses with their almost flat tiled roofs. Five men in tunics are coming up the road towards him, talking. Behind them are two more men, and further up in the direction of the village I see more figures, a couple of which might be women

bearing water-jars. Closer to the village there are children, and sheep - or are they goats?

The five men approaching him seem happy; they're gesturing energetically as they walk, as if planning to share something they have just experienced. They're not carrying anything, but I get the impression they are en route from one place to the next. To the left I look out across the valley where, beneath the cliff that runs alongside the road, there are rows of trees set a little apart from one another. Lemons, seemingly. Perhaps there are some olive trees in there too, but they don't look like the ones you see around Úbeda. The earth beneath them is bare apart from some thin, yellow-flowered weeds. By the roadside, tufts of grass nod in the wind that blows his hair a little. Is this Israel?

I have never been there, never seen the landscape before. But yes.

He has stopped walking. He stands there waiting for me. I can see that he's looking at me but I wait to look him in the eye. Slowly, I take in his face. He is classically good-looking, like a Greek god, the auburn of his hair an extension of his tan. When I dare to meet his gaze, I look into his eyes which are green and grey with a hint of blue and both welcoming and full of kindness. His gaze gives me the same feeling as that morning in the woods, the morning the light struck me. It's stronger than being in love. The closest comparison is with the first eye contact I had with my newborn sons. But it's more intense. Only when I have finished taking in the sight of him does he speak.

Welcome. It's good to see you.

I don't understand his words, but my mind grasps their meaning instantly. He knows me. Every gram of me. Every second of me. He can see everything and he cares about me anyway. In spite of all my lies, both big and small, my bitterness, my pettiness. He has seen me shouting at my sons, heard me say things I've forgotten I said. A tumult of small scenes from my life flits between us so fast and so cinematically accurate that there's no need for me to explain them: he has seen it all. I have not a shred of doubt in me. It's wiped away. Gone. My mental defenses dissolved, I register only that my reason has bowed to a deeper knowledge.

He speaks with a musicality that sounds a little Spanish, so I try to understand, but I can't recognize the words. I think it must be Aramaic. He speaks in a low voice, as if we're standing close to one another.

There we are in the sacristy. The two of us.

It's as if I'm seeing myself through a telescope – and there's reassurance in this: in my clothes, my yellow cardigan from Banana Republic on Newbury Street in Boston and the black pants from Ivan Grundahl that scratch my thighs, in the pink lacquered handbag on the bench, in the everyday things from home: my great-grandmother's pearl necklace around my neck, my wedding band, the silver sectioned ring from my mother and my siblings. I can also hear the chatter of other tourists. They're Italian.

He keeps talking quietly in the knowledge that I can both hear and understand him. It's as if he just wants to be sure that I know he's there. He doesn't require anything, doesn't ask me anything, just talks. By now the tears are pouring down my cheeks, down my throat, and into my shirt: my skin senses them but I don't have the strength to wipe them away. Others can see me crying, but I don't care.

Andrea comes in and rests a hand on my shoulder, from behind.

"Are you OK?"

I nod. He gives my shoulder a squeeze, removes his hand and leaves the sacristy. It's then that my reporter's instinct awakens.

I must ask the man what he's saying. I can't just leave it like that. I have to go back. Reach him. I close my eyes, sure that I have missed my chance, But he's still there, with a twinkle in his eye, as if to say, Not what you were expecting.

I don't understand what you're saying, I think at him.

It doesn't matter that you don't understand.

Relief washes over me.

It was the meeting that mattered. His gaze suffusing my body. From the neck, down over the shoulders, stomach, loins, legs, feet.

He is such a man. So masculine, so seductive and irresistible. His presence is more than erotic. He touches me deeper inside than any man ever has.

His smile is not the smile a man gives a woman during the kind of to-and-fro that leads to orgasms or children. It's a smile that makes me feel loved in a whole new way, one I have never known before.

His kindness. His sheer, simple acceptance that it's a good thing I am here.

If he can see all that I am and still accept me, then the least I can do is trust his judgement. This isn't something I think. It's a feeling, because the words to describe it seem either way off the mark or absurdly precious. I settle for cherishing that feeling before we part. It's as if we have always known each other and always will. He nods at me, smiles again, and disappears.

I'm not sad that he's left. No-one will believe this, I know, but I also know that I met him. How can I convey what happened, this thing that can't be told in words? I haven't the strength to complete the thought. My knees are shaking, fresh tears prick at my eyes. My mascara's running. My nose too. My shirt-collar is limp and wet.

I say thank you without thinking it first: it just comes.

I get up and leave the sacristy. Andrea comes to meet me. He looks at me questioningly, as if uncertain, then begins talking about the church in his usual way, but looking at me intensely as I wipe at the mascara on my cheeks.

"It's OK, you've cleaned it off."

"There was a man."

"Come."

We leave via the chapel, turn left and halfway down the nave and open the heavy little door in the paneled wall to the ticket office entrance. It feels so prosaic here, so contemporary, so appropriate to me and the times I live in. But what about what I saw? It clashes. Yet it doesn't. There's space for many eras. Inside me, there's endless space.

When we have crossed the high threshold and find ourselves out in the sunshine, I begin to describe him. I struggle to find the words. I should feel embarrassed talking about something so outrageously unlikely but I'm happy and confident and I dare tell it all to Andrea, because he saw it happen. My words aren't sufficient. My English is good, my Danish is better, my Spanish is so-so, but the story defies words in any language.

We walk through the narrow streets though sunshine and shade, from Calle Baja del Salvador out to Plaza Vazquez de Molin, up to Plaza del Primero de Mayo, along Cuesta del Losal, towards past Calle del O(p)bispo Cobos. We walk and walk amid the daily lives of others but for us this day is outside of time and space, knowledge and belief. We know the story so well, but we haven't been a part of it, and it hasn't been a part of our reality. Until now.

Neither of us utters his name.