

THE SILJA

by dominic bruno

I ended up on the Silja Serenade cruise ship from Stockholm, Sweden to Helsinki, Finland. Please don't ask how. I have mentioned that story involving armed Swedish guards and, what I thought was, just an English-Swedish miscommunication between myself, my travel companion Mike, and local shopkeepers who thought I was "crazy" too many times for me to go through the motions of spelling it out again. And seeing as the Serenade was the first conveyance out of the country, the government put me and Mike on it and asked us never to return.

Once aboard, Mike and I found our rooms, with a little difficulty, and put our bags down to immediately take advantage of one of the seven bars on the ship (excluding the nightclub on the top floor) and started out the evening with some cocktails overlooking the front of the boat. Nothing but the open sea could be seen in our near future.

Soon we engaged ourselves in a conversation with two Finnish girls, Jasmine and Yasmine, who looked 18 but who confessed to be 16 and coke addicts. Actually, they both do coke but Yasmine has also brought along a healthy supply of amphetamines that she snuck past the drug-sniffing dogs. Certainly unsure of Swedish customs, and now the added anxiety of messing up with the Finns, Mike and I decided to buy the four of us a round of vodka serenades hoping this would be perceived as an international sign of good faith. The girls, apparently not high enough to forget the name of the boat, but too high to keep a reasonable volume level, giggled hysterically at the drinks, downed them in a single swig, giggled some more, nearly retched, and then just chuckled.

I kept scanning the passengers to see if there was any security around or a suspicious looking person in plain clothes because the girls were getting out of hand and I didn't want to get busted on my way to Helsinki and then have no place to go. But Jasmine sensed that I was ill at ease, grabbed my arm, and whispered that "everything is okay" and then even softer, with piercing eyes, that she once stabbed an ex-boyfriend to death. I looked over to Mike and hoped he heard this but he and Yasmine were kissing or necking or she was giving him an ear inspection or vice versa. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that their heads were really close. And I was freaking out and just wanted to walk through the duty free shop on

the sixth floor to distract myself with cartons of cigarettes, tortilla chips (cheesy and plain), ten pound bags of Werther's Original, and a ton of Scandinavian beer.

But I didn't want to ditch Mike because I had an image of a newspaper headline in Finland that goes something like "American Butchered to Death by Two Drug-Crazed Locals" but then I realized I was thinking about this headline in English, not Finnish, and no Finnish paper would have English headlines, unless, of course, there are actually a few English newspapers in the country. While I was thinking about this, I was unaware that the three of them got up and left the table, probably just to watch the Russian Circus that had started up on the eighth floor, but when I finally stopped thinking about the papers and noticed they were gone, I began to formulate excuses to give to Mike's mother and then how I might begin his eulogy, maybe a joke or anecdote about him.

"Focus!" I told myself and got up. I didn't know where to begin, the circus, our room, the seafood buffet next to the duty free shop? I felt frantic and wondered if it was really me who was addicted to something until I forgot about it and ran to the Circus. Everyone on the boat must have been there, and everyone seemed drunk, even little Russian kids who just wanted to get back to Estonia. After 'excuse me's and 'perdon's and 'scuzzi's trying to get around the crowd without offending anyone, I knew that the search was fruitless. I checked the duty free shop and they weren't there but decide to get some Toblerones because I had never seen them this cheap, and made my way floor by floor holding the chocolate, looking for Mike or coke trails or anything which might have led me to them. I debated about having him paged over the PA system but felt that would only endanger his life more if Yasmine and Jasmine thought they had to hurry to slice him up.

Mike was not at the seafood buffet and I looked ridiculous carrying around all these Toblerones so I decided to go back to my room and drop them off. In the room I found Mike and the two girls tied up and when I rushed over to him and took off the duct tape around his mouth he said, "Why are you doing this to us?" and I put the tape back on and realized I am indeed crazy and know that this knowledge makes me quite sane.