

**Stockholm, Sweden:  
Remembering Aksel**

## Stockholm, Sweden: Day 1

After 11 hours in the air, a chicken mash-up of some kind that tasted as if it were washed with soap then recycled, a few intermittent short naps, and a LEGO documentary, I touched down in Stockholm, Sweden. 10:00am local time (1:00am PST). Outside temperature: 1 degree F.

Retrieved my bag and followed the instructions texted to me from my Airbnb host (Filip) to meet him outside of the airport. He was nice enough to agree to drive me to the apartment at about half of the price of a local cab company (400 SEK/40 EUR). We drove through the city a bit so I could understand where I would be in just an hour or so when I would meet Aksel's dad, Jesper, for the first time for lunch at a place called Urban Deli. Filip hospitably chauffeured me to the nearby grocery store so I could purchase a bus pass, hit an ATM, and load up the apartment with food to cook myself throughout the week.

We arrived at his cozy 1-bedroom home closer to noon. Before Filip took off, I received a brief tour of the place, the Wi-Fi password, and a judgmental look at the holes in my socks as my toes were now sticking out of both of them. I quickly showered to wash off the flight and hopefully quarantined myself from any airborne diseases circulating in the germ-ridden air vessel. I was now on my way to figuring out public transportation in Stockholm.

The nearest subway station is about a 10-12-minute walk from the apartment. It's odd enough for me to be dressed with double layers and snow boots, let alone hear the woman walking behind me and turn to see she's strapped into her skis with poles guiding her along the way. A regular pedestrian on a walk, wearing skis. Interesting.

I reached the subway station where the directions and stops were far easier to navigate than other cities I've visited (cough: New York). I hopped on the train and about 7 stops later I landed at Hotoorget, a 3-minute walk or so from where I was meeting Jesper. After a couple of wrong turns and the help of a local store clerk, I found Urban Deli: a hip, abnormally large, modern café with a cool vibe and a million MacBook Pros decorating the tables with the bundled up, headphone-wearing crowd to accompany them.

I greeted Jesper with a larger-than-life hug and felt myself comforted the moment he started speaking, as his vocal tonality and inflections are identical to Aksel's. We connected on our common denominator of course, and then segued into getting to know one another over lunch and coffee. Halfway through, Aksel's sisters Emily (22) and Ella (15) were able to meet us and the stories continued. I was quickly drawing

more and more similarities between me and Aksel as we both grew up sandwiched by two sisters that have names that can easily be mixed up for one another's. The girls departed for yoga and Jesper and I walked the town a bit as the sun was setting (Note: It gets dark at 3:00pm this time of year, I haven't slept in over a day, and am jetlagged – I basically don't know which way is up).

We strolled through the promenade area, seeing the residual lights and Christmas decorations complementing the storefronts, and eventually let out near the old city where we were able to see City Hall, Parliament, the Prime Minister's quarters, and old churches (dating back to the 1300s). I took photos of every sight as it became more and more breathtaking with the reduction of sunlight and the engaging of streetlights to transition the day. All I could think about now is how Aksel must be tripping out seeing me in Sweden tearing it up with his dad. Him and I were doing the same thing just over a month ago on a completely separate foreign continent.

As the temperature dove down more and more, Jesper kindly gave me a ride back to my apartment. Even though the place is heated, I was wearing sweatpants over long underwear to stay warm as well as a long-sleeve thermal shirt under my hoodie. This was my outfit for the next several hours as I would uncontrollably fall asleep for various periods of time as the dialogue of *Sex in the City*, *Summer Catch*, and *Dead Poet's Society* trickled into my slumber and influenced the content of my episodic dreams.

It's now 2:30am, I'm wide awake, and realizing I forgot my laptop charger and power converter.

## **Stockholm, Sweden: Day 2**

It's moments like these where solitude exemplifies beauty. Slowly arising late in the morning with a remarkable view of the adjacent forest, peppered with fresh snow resting on each tree. Cars and bikes buried alive, unfazed by the flakes. The virgin powder was calm, speaking a million silent words.

I made myself a big breakfast, quietly looking out the window without the distraction of a voice or a phone. Washed the dishes, took a hot shower, threw on some layers, and I was out the door to meet Aksel's mom, Maria, for the first time.

Prior to departing from the subway station, I walked to a grocery store that is about a 10-minute walk from my place. I purchased a card and a pen so I could write a birthday message for Emily on the train. It's her 22nd birthday and we are all celebrating up north in Jesper's beautiful lake house. After about 9 stops, I exited the station and found a nearby florist, had a bouquet arranged, and walked the

remaining few blocks to Maria's. I typed in the building code, discovered an old-fashioned elevator with manual door operation, and headed up to the fourth floor. And there she was, unmistakably Aksel's mom. Simultaneously greeting one another with the universal touch of a hug that requires no words to be exchanged.

She quickly took my coat as I removed my shoes and handed Emily her flowers and card, giving her an enormous hug, and wished her a happy birthday. Maria gave me a proper tour of her lovely apartment overlooking the city center. The cozy wood-burning fireplace near the piano by the entry, an arsenal of books lining the shelves of her quaint office, and a warm living room with an astonishing view of Stockholm.

Emily and Ella kindly made me coffee as Maria walked me to Aksel's room, filled with nothing but a bed, a desk, and a few bottles of cologne he didn't even care for. She described how "Aksel didn't like things", hence the room being so empty. Being in this room is surreal on so many levels and something is palpable, but unsure what it is. As I was sipping my coffee in the kitchen, Maria showed me a magnet on the fridge of Aksel's favorite comic. Two men sitting near a body of water, legs dangling over the edge, as one says, "En dag ska vi alla do" ("One day we'll all die"). The other responds with, "Alla andra dagar ska vi det inte" ("All others we won't"). I think I know what my next tattoo will be.

I arrived around 2:00pm and felt like I just woke up, getting the day started, but there was only 1 hour of light left which naturally tells my body it's time to wind down. Super weird. The girls told me that in 2014 the entire month of January consisted of 14 hours of sunlight (roughly 30 minutes a day). We sipped our coffee, catching up, sharing stories. To my right on the couch there was a newspaper opened to the page with Aksel's obituary. The reminders are everywhere.

After a while of visiting, we threw on our coats and headed out to the car to drive out to Jesper's house where we would be meeting family members and Emily's friends for a proper birthday celebration (Note: it is all limited street parking so the walk to find your vehicle could be a bit of a journey). We found the car covered in snow and Maria spent a good 5-10 minutes scraping off the windows, used to the weather from being a native Norwegian.

We stopped off at a ridiculously large grocery store called Maxi Stormarknad, so big that Emily's friends from London specifically make a trip here each time they visit because the mere size of it is worth seeing while in town. I must say, I was very impressed with the efficiencies they've put in place. When you walk in, you grab a scanner and tag all items yourself, bagging your own groceries as you go, and then

checkout with little to no involvement from supermarket personnel. Clearly my kind of place.

Continuing our drive up to Jesper's, I asked the girls how many countries they've visited after a discussion about everyone's passion for traveling. Emily and Ella looked at each other mentally trying to calculate the number, and quickly estimated, "Umm....25 maybe?" Again, I'm blown away by how well-traveled, well-cultured, and well-balanced people are in other countries. In fact, 2 years ago Emily went to go work for United Record Pressing in Nashville as an intern for 2 months simply because of her love for vinyl. She spent her summer answering phone calls as a customer service representative and absolutely loved it because of the exposure to the industry and the process. Something like this is so fucking admirable and what life is really about. Go do what you feel like doing when you feel like doing it.

When we arrived in Aksel's hometown of Salstjobaden, Maria gave me a drive-by tour of the schools he attended, the lakes he swam in, and the homes he lived in. Several. One of which burned down just 2 years ago and forced them into another down the road for 12 months.

Jesper's house is absolutely gorgeous and looks like a Gingerbread house from the outside. It's big in size with a detached 2 car garage to the left. It sits on a beautiful lake along with a private built-out sauna next to the water and a guest house steps from the dock. Every viewing angle, morning or night, is a real life postcard. I walked up to the front door and saw Aksel's room on the right. Guitars in the window and candles beneath it.

I entered the home and was welcomed in true family fashion with hugs all around, a house tour, and a cold beer. It's crazy to think how close I was to Aksel in such a short amount of time, but it all makes perfect sense as I've known his family for just days and the same thing is happening all over again. They are just so warm and inviting. Maria even invited me to stay at her Summer house on an island in the south of Norway anytime I want, with or without her. It's been in the family for 3 generations.

The girls prepped the chicken and vegetables as Jesper handled the cooking. Aksel aspired to be a chef (on the side) and I can see where he got his talent from. Pretty soon Emily's friends piled in along with her extended family to celebrate her special day. We all enjoyed each other's company, a delicious meal, and the warmth of Aksel's unrealized presence. The table of 20 sang "Happy Birthday" to Emily in Swedish, everyone dressed in a smile. I can't recall ever being so happy in such a sad moment.

20 year ago, Jesper reserved a vintage wine from France while the grapes were still on the vine. A 1997 red, the year Aksel was born. He purchased a case and saved the wine for 18 years. Even through a house fire he managed to keep it and properly store the bottles at the right temperature. On Aksel's 18th birthday, he gave it to him as a gift and then celebrated with a toast since he was legally able to drink. Aksel said in Cape Town while wine tasting that he wanted to do the same for his kids one day. Jesper still has a few bottles and we will be drinking it in memory of Aksel.

A few minutes after Emily's birthday song, Jesper raised up a glass and said he had to make another toast. Everyone immediately knew what that meant.

“To absent friends” – interrupted by tears, concluded with “Skal! (Cheers).”

Maria was sweet enough to drive me back to my place where I would wait for Lennart's midnight arrival from Cape Town.

A couple hours and a knock on the door later, there he was. Only a backpack and a pink face following a long walk in the snow.

He immediately showed me the tattoo he got on his right forearm 2 days ago in memory of Aksel. It says "Matter can never be created nor destroyed." If you knew Aksel, you'd know how this is beyond fitting.

After a long hug, we sat and caught up until it was time to concede to the prolonged jetlag and retire to the bedroom.

Staring at the ceiling, I find myself whispering the same mantra repeatedly in my head with pure disbelief:

“Fucking Aksel.”

### **Stockholm, Sweden: Day 3**

Surprise, surprise. Another unprompted biological wake-up call at 2:30am. This is how my jetlag operates. Perfect, I've been looking for a reason to not sleep and have my mind race.

After a couple of hours and perpetual focus on my breathing, I was able to drift off again (closer to 5:00am).

I bid a good morning to Lennart, my new roomie, took a shower, then made us some breakfast. We sat at the kitchen table looking out at the beautiful winter landscape staring back at us through the window while we ate eggs, turkey, cheese, and toast.

We wrapped up and I opted for an Uber to expedite our transportation to Maria's, where Lennart would meet Aksel's mom for the first time and we would await Lauren's arrival from New York.

It was a great repeat of coffee and conversing while learning from Lennart more about Aksel's newfound attention to Judaism, working out, and sunbathing (3 things that coincidentally were similarities with a love interest in Cape Town, and strangely never an interest of Aksel's before).

Lauren's flight was delayed and put her arrival time at Maria's right around 3:00pm. After a quick shower, we loaded up in Maria's car and headed to Jesper's for another night of dinner and celebratory drinks; this time specifically for Aksel.

We were welcomed to Jesper's by a collection of close friends, most of whom have been tied to the hip with Aksel since single digits. Multiple friends have already made slideshows and even branded tattoos in his honor. Truly great people.

Watching slide by slide, we all sat in silence (or laughter) depending on the image that appeared. The videos were especially impactful and difficult to watch. It's like a physical grabbing of the heart shaking your soul ensuring you know this is reality.

Maria served me a glass of wine from South Africa that the family has been drinking since Christmas. It's called Allesverloren which translates to "All is Lost" – she handed me the cork and gave me permission to keep it.

We sat together enjoying one of Aksel's favorite meals: BBQ ribs. There are intermittent periods of normalcy mixed with casual conversation and then without notice the moments are interrupted by silence and reflection. Then often bursts of audible sadness. Like the rests between a violent flu in the middle of the night. These waves will be the new norm for a while in everyone's life who knew Aksel.

When everyone was done eating I gathered each person's plate and silverware and took them to the sink with Lauren. It just wouldn't make sense to not wash dishes in Aksel's house.

Concluding the stories shared between all the friends and the videos displayed, we were all given a candle by Jesper with a black marker. We each wrote a private message to Aksel on the glass, lit the wick, and had a moment placing it beneath his bedroom window outside. As to be expected, I used up all the real estate on my candle for the novel I had to compose. Again, I feel my disbelief escaping my mind but staying trapped in my breath: "Fucking Aksel."

The crowd had thinned out quite a bit, departing with acknowledgment of seeing one another at the service in a few days, and a hug to pair with the pain. Lauren,

Lennart, Jesper, Ella, Emily, and I were the remaining ones at the table. Drinking wine, bringing up conspiracy theories, but then having them immediately debunked by Jesper within seconds. Jesper is smart as hell and I completely understand what Aksel was telling us in Cape Town about how his dad has the answers to everything.

We finally had our last sip and went off to bed. Tonight we are staying at Jesper's guest house by the lake; an insanely cool place that sleeps 6 with a small kitchenette and a full bathroom. Two of the bedding areas are elevated on separate lofts, both of which have a window with a view of the lake. He told us this was one of Aksel's favorite places. I could see why. I felt honored to be a guest.

And again, I'm solely focused on how Aksel must be tripping out seeing what is going on in his palace while he's away.

#### **Stockholm, Sweden: Day 4**

The tardy rising of the sun lurked my vision and slowly opened my eyelids half past the hour of 10. We received a text from Jesper (main house to the guest house) announcing breakfast would be served if we'd like to come up and join.

I climbed down the ladder from my 5-star loft and before getting in the shower saw the frozen lake, private dock, and barrel sauna for the first time without the obstruction of night. I can see why Aksel loved this place so much. There's a serenity mixed with magic coagulating every breath up here.

Lennart, Lauren, and I entered the main house with the reminder of home, instantly warmed up by the heated floors and genuine company of Aksel's loving family. Emily was quick to offer coffee and toast, scurrying about the kitchen (as she tends to do), ensuring everyone excluding herself is taken care of. This sort of priority of a host never goes unnoticed and exudes a sweetness that I'm very sensitive to. She reminds me so much of Eva and without my knowledge, Aksel used to tell Eva how much she reminded her of Emily back in Cape Town.

In the midst of improperly using the cheese knife to dress my toast (with a quick lesson from Emily), the entire room was interrupted by a knock at the door. It might as well have been God's fist, because after discovering what was on the other side of that wooden frame, the air felt like a jolt of thunder. A delivery from DHL containing all of Aksel's belongings from South Africa.

The box was immediately unwrapped and each item placed on the counter. Laptop, watch, phone, the list goes on. The most anticipated of which was his phone in an attempt to remember (or figure out) the passcode to access all recent photos of Aksel's last days. The battery needed a charge so in the interim we found the flash



drive containing the footage of Aksel's skydive. We instantly plugged it into the laptop as if Aksel were alive on the other side of the screen. In a way, he was. We all grinned from ear to ear watching Aksel gearing up for the jump in the plane and then laughed as we saw the freefall and his expression that simply could not be faked if he tried: pure, thrilling, amazingly exciting joy. That fucking smile. It's impossible to see it and not mirror it yourself unintentionally. When his feet met the soil, his eyes met the camera. And if the facial expressions weren't enough to convince you, his words solidified it with: "Best time of my life."

Jesper unplugged the phone, convinced there was enough juice to start cracking the code. After a first attempt, and a room full of anticipation, we all saw Jesper's face release a celebratory sigh, which triggered a "YES!" from all of us. After weeks of waiting for this moment, I'm sure it felt like discovering classified files after years of curiosity. And again, the smiles and laughs continued. They serve as a medicinal mask for the inevitable despair that we're all covering up.

It was now time to head out for the day. Lennart, Lauren, and myself planned to walk the old town area and visit places Aksel used to frequent. Jesper had to leave for the day and offered to drop us at the subway station, with the next train leaving in just a matter of minutes. As we ran to the garage, Jesper fired up the engine, and we had 2 minutes until departure. He looked at us and said calmly in his engineer-matter-of-fact voice, "We are in a rush now." I admire this about Jesper more than I could describe. Even in a stressful situation, his words are carried out steadily like he's teaching the definition of the circumstance.

Two trains, one bus, and another subway later, we landed in the city center of Stockholm where we walked to Maria's to drop off our bags before exploring. Our first stop was a place referred to us by Aksel's friends. They said it was one of his favorite burger spots in town. It's called Prime Burger. Walking into this place, ordering a beer, and sitting with friends is bizarre to say the least. The only thing going on in all our minds is the wishing that we were sharing these moments with our brother, Aksel.

We continued walking until a little after it got dark, picked up a bottle of whiskey, and ordered an Uber back to the Airbnb. After we all caught up on our work a bit, Lennart and I walked down the street to a nearby pizza place to grab dinner to go. I ordered a large pizza for Lauren and I to share and Lennart ordered a large pizza to himself with nothing but cheese and tuna on it. I've never heard of this in my life. Apparently, it's a normal thing in Europe and it's one of Lennart's favorite meals. He took down that whole pizza when we got back to the apartment as we all watched a

Netflix documentary together and sipped on whiskey, making our way through the bottle.

It was getting late and I suggested we all write a note to Aksel that we could leave with him the following day in his casket. We all tore out a piece of paper, went to separate corners, and no words were spoken for what felt like an hour. Writing this message to Aksel was the catalyst to the most tears I've shed since the incident. This was no longer a general note. This was a handwritten composition to my friend and a fucking impossibility to read out loud.

Tonight I cry myself to sleep. Tomorrow I bid farewell to my friend.

### **Stockholm, Sweden: Day 5 (Part 1)**

On my 13th day in Cape Town, I journaled about the somberness that filled the air when I walked into the classroom at Wings of Hope for the last time, specifically having to say goodbye to Beyonce. I compared the eerie ambiance to the unsettling and quiet mood of a funeral. Unfortunately, today that energy wasn't a metaphor.

Before getting suited up, I threw on some jeans and ran (literally) to the grocery store that's about 10 minutes away. I picked up a bouquet of flowers so Lennart, Lauren, and I would all have one to place on Aksel's coffin today. After getting dressed, I convinced myself that I was ready for the day, ordered an Uber, and headed out to Heliga Korsets Kapeli at Skogskyrkogarden.

We all filed into the foyer of the chapel, standing shoulder to shoulder in silence, the only communication consisting of head nods and thick hugs. One thing I will say about Aksel's friends, and maybe youthful Swedish men in general, is that they are all sharply dressed. You'd swear GQ Magazine just released their quarterly models into the venue. It's hard enough to find a man in the States who knows how to wear a tailored suit, let alone a teenager. Soon the group of roughly 250 slowly segued from the waiting area to their seats.

I was handed a program upon entering that had a photo of Aksel smiling at Wings of Hope in South Africa at the top. Everything was written in Swedish except for my name that read clearly near the bottom as one of four giving a speech.

Maria spoke to the muted audience in Norwegian, opening the ceremony with what translates to, "Thank you all for coming because you are the sole proof that Aksel was not just a dream."

Jesper then addressed the crowd, diving head first into the melancholy, delivering beautiful stories and kind words about his son. He finished by asking everyone to

fulfill a promise consisting of 3 things to honor Aksel, all of which were led by example while he spent his time here on the ground with us:

1. Be kind to others. Be quick to introduce yourself to those around you. Make people feel included.
2. Be all that you can be. Don't just sit around. Invest in yourself and maximize your potential.
3. In the process of #2, don't forget to do things that excite you often. Like skydiving.

In between the speakers, a song would play. They inadvertently served as the soundtrack to our formal goodbye. After "Across the Universe" finished, Maria looked up at me and signaled it was my turn to speak.

Approaching the podium from the rear of the room, each footstep reverberated throughout the chapel. I strapped the earpiece to my left side, took a deep breath, looked up, and then realized I needed another. And somehow I managed to get my mouth to open and my lips to speak:

*"My name is Jay. I met Aksel on our first night arriving in South Africa. Ya know, it's not often one meets a perfect stranger and establishes a brotherly bond in an instant, and through the course of days of conversation sees it birth a lifelong friendship. There's a big piece of me that is overwhelmed with frustration, overtaken with sadness, and stricken with feelings of grief. Because my lifelong friendship with Aksel was robbed from me in only a matter of weeks. Like a favorite gift that lights up a child's face being stolen from him a moment after he receives it. But as I begin to zoom out a bit, I try to observe it the best I can from a different lens. I try to set the pieces of my broken heart aside, at least for a minute, to decipher the situation with as much clarity as I can. And that reality is that there are billions of people in this world who never had the opportunity to meet Aksel. Never had the pleasure of seeing his smile. Never got to watch him laugh. Never felt his sincere presence in every conversation. Never heard the passion in his voice. Never witnessed his mature intellect beyond his years.*

*But I did. So undoubtedly, I am the lucky one.*

*Although my time with Aksel was short, our friendship was far more than I could have ever expected or hoped for. The weeks we spent together were concentrated in time, compounded into a depth and substance that might take years to achieve with a new friend, fellow volunteer, or a casual acquaintance. I'm not the only person who has traveled from another continent to be here with Aksel today after only knowing*

him for a short time. This speaks volumes about his character and how impactful he was.

There are several, distinctive characteristics about Aksel, and conversations between us that continue to play on repeat in my head and will forever remain embedded in my brain. Like the night we met in South Africa when he introduced himself to me and invited me into the group he was playing Jenga with at his table. How we walked to the convenience store that first night together and chatted about where we're from. And how I inevitably assumed he listened to metal because he was from Sweden. And how he corrected me with his natural response saying, "No, but everyone thinks that." I am constantly reliving our daily trips to Dunoon, our entrance into Wings of Hope to teach each morning, getting ready for project, and the times we'd sing karaoke together, embracing each other side by side. I also see the daily image of Aksel sitting on the step outside of his classroom with kids piled all over him, pulling his arms in every direction. He'd just stare at me from across the playground, laughing. And I'll never forget how surprisingly good Aksel was at surfing and how he put the guy from California to shame when he would catch every wave right in front of me. I'd pay every dollar I have to see him smile on that surfboard again. It was the best sight you could ever see.

Aksel was always eager to help. Whether it was getting his hands dirty with the little kids, diving into the pool to help someone swim, or even at Saltycrax when he was the first to volunteer to wash dishes for all 50 volunteers for a week. I quickly joined him on that 'dish up' duty that week. And to date, that ranks as one of the best decisions of my entire life.

Aksel and I both grew up with an older sister and a younger sister. We could relate to one another on the challenges...and later the benefits of this as we got older. The truth is, Aksel was the little brother I never had but always wanted. And I was unexplainably proud of him as if he were actually my brother. It's not often I refer to someone as smart. But GEEZ. How could you not? Not only was this my perception of Aksel, but every volunteer viewed Aksel this way. He shared his specific plans on how he would win the Nobel Prize one day. And I'd place my bet on him every day of the week that he would have. I'm happy that I have traveled to Sweden to visit where Aksel came from and be exposed to the roots that made him so unique; and to meet his beautiful family that he loved so much. One night Aksel referred to his dad, saying he's the smartest man he knows and he always has the answer to everything.

*Today I am trying my hardest to catalogue my sadness and instead trade it for the appreciation of knowing Aksel, earning his friendship, and forever storing him in my heart as one of the best people I've ever known in my life.*

*Aksel, if you can hear my voice, know that you are my brother and I will love you and keep you with me every day until I'm up there with you, where I know you will once again embrace me, introduce me to your group of friends, and invite me to your table to play Jenga."*

Numerous times throughout the speech, my eyes welled up, and the words became blurry. More deep breaths. One eye on the paper, another on the box he's in next to me. When I finally finished, Maria pulled me in close with physical appreciation and whispered repeatedly in my left ear the words, "Thank you. Lovely. Lovely. Thank you." Every time I hug her I feel like I'm hugging my own mother and it's always a wonder who will let go first.

I grabbed my seat and focused on exhaling while keeping the tears locked inside the best I could. Until Emily unexpectedly walked up to the podium.

"I didn't plan on speaking but I'm his big sister and need to do this. Aksel, today I'm supposed to say goodbye to you. But I've decided I'm not going to. And I'm never going to. Because your soul is like this (makes a circle with one hand) and my soul is like this (makes another circle with the other hand and pushes them together)."

The dam behind my eyes instantly fell apart.

I am proud of her beyond words for going up there and finding the strength to speak.

The ceremony concluded with each guest placing a flower on the casket.

On Saturday, Maria told me when looking for a casket, every option was horrifically ugly. Her other half, Erik, drew up a design and had a carpenter friend make a custom one for Aksel. It was absolutely beautiful. It looked like a flower bed with a surfboard covering the top. They even put a line down the center, making it look like a longboard.

I folded up the note I wrote to Aksel from the night before and wrapped it around the thorny stem of my single rose. I delicately set the two on top of his new roof with one hand, while touching the nose of the surfboard with the other. My jaw tightened without warning, automatically protecting myself from another outburst.

The rear doors opened to another postcard landscape, the cold hair rushing through the room, complementing the atmosphere, and out we all went.

Including Aksel.

## **Stockholm, Sweden: Day 5 (Part 2)**

Outside the chapel, 2 large charter buses picked us up to escort the guests to a reception hall up near Jesper's place in Salstjbaden.

Moving through the slow curves in the road, I'd like to think the panoramic views of the candlelit window estates and snowy roads reminded me of a movie, but it's more beautiful than that. It's not like any photo I've seen before. It's more like a painting. Something completely artificial and made up purely from the imagination of the mind. It's indescribable.

We approached the base of a hill with an exterior set of steps, each lined with candles, leading us up to a house that instantly reminded me of the Bates' house in Hitchcock's "Psycho".

Reaching the top, the hearse was parked on the oversized asphalt driveway with the rear light turned on so everyone could see Aksel before entering the reception.

We hung up our coats in the foyer and saw a television playing old photos and videos of Aksel in the main lobby area. Up the stairs was the reception, packed with relatives and friends from all over the world. Shoulder to shoulder, we introduced ourselves, toasted one another, and looked up at a projection screen near the bar continuously playing similar videos of Aksel along with his skydive video on repeat. Each time it came on, the group was glued to it, and every face was painted with a smile. It was impossible not to.

Aksel was moved to a private room downstairs, surrounded by chairs and candles where people could individually go sit beside him and share final moments with him. Lennart and I made our way downstairs to do exactly that.

In Cape Town, Aksel would often wear a hat to avoid the maintenance of styling his hair after surfing. Lennart ended up giving him one of his own to replace a previously lost one. You can see him wearing it in nearly every photo. And he misplaced that one often as well. In fact, one morning after a long night of drinking, Lennart went to Salty's to have breakfast and as he was staring out the window, he saw the hat he lent Aksel hanging in a tree outside. When confronted on how it got there, Aksel had no idea. That hat now resides on top of his coffin.

We sat there with our hand on the wooden surfboard, inches away from Aksel's face. Lennart commented on the casket describing it as "simple and beautiful, just like him."

Emily and Ella sat on the opposite side and told us they fixed his hair earlier in the day, put a pillow beneath his head, and tucked him in with a blanket so he was nice and cozy. Just the way he liked it.

About an hour later, Jesper approached me and Lennart and asked, “Would you like to come downstairs and help us carry out our man of the hour?” There are ebbs and flows to all of this, and during them there are shocks of reality that will force your emotions to exit your skin regardless of how much you may resist. This is one of those moments. I’m about to carry my brother out in a box that I will never see again. I’m as equally honored as I am deflated.

The male friends gathered around the heavy object the same way we would if we were moving Aksel’s couch into his new apartment; silently strategizing who will grab what end but without the “on 3” lift. I’m looking at familiar faces from the last few days that I’ve hugged more than I’ve exchanged words with. We’re all in the same paramount disbelief with our fists clenched around the bars surrounding Aksel’s body.

As we loaded him on the metal slide in the rear of the hearse, all surrounding cries amplified with identical realization that this is it. Maria kissed the coffin of her beautiful baby boy one last time while everyone else did the same, including me and Lennart. Again, the barriers behind my eyes are broken wide open as my hand painfully lets go. Emily kissed the coffin again. I held his sister the way I know he would have held mine.

And now it’s time to say goodbye. Not just to Aksel, but also to his amazing family and friends as this will be the last time I see them before my flight tomorrow. I went around the foyer issuing formal farewells but they were all reciprocated like I was saying goodbye to my own family after a holiday get together.

Leo told me to go on living my life the way Aksel would have lived his. I promised I would.

Dana grabbed me and said, “I’m so happy I finally got to meet the rockstar from California.”

Tove said, “Aksel was right about you. You’re just amazing.”

I’m taken back by how much Aksel talked about me without me ever knowing it.

It’s especially strange to be leaving Jesper, Emily, Ella, and Maria. They are simply incredible. It feels oddly familiar to the last night I spent with Aksel when we spent 5 minutes saying goodbye to each other at the karaoke bar in Table View.

I hugged Maria as tightly as I could, thanking her for everything.

I found myself saying, "Maria, Maria, Maria" as she responded with, "Jay, Jay, Jay." Words were just impossible, and perhaps unnecessary.

I opened the door and exited down the Hitchcock staircase.

Feeling the temperature match my heart.

Walking into the painting one last time...

### **Stockholm, Sweden: Day 6 (Final Entry)**

Last night after leaving the reception, Lennart, Lauren, Aksel's friend Alex, and I ran in the slush and periodic ice to catch the train back to Stockholm. We were on a mission to get Swedish meatballs before leaving the country.

With 0 seconds to spare, we stumbled through the sliding doors completely out of breath, relieved we didn't have to wait another 30 minutes in the freezing weather for the next departure.

We exited the train and walked several blocks for about 15-20 minutes or so until we reached a restaurant called "Meatballs - For the People". I ordered a pint of the house lager on tap as well as their classic Swedish meatballs dish with deer.

We unwound a bit from such a colossally heavy day and forced ourselves to take advantage of simply enjoying each other's company; especially while in Stockholm with one of Aksel's childhood friends.

After dinner, we collectively made a group decision to keep the night going in honor of Aksel. Alex suggested a cheap bar down the street that was one of their favorites; specifically because of the cheap part. It's called Bara Enkelt and has a great vibe to it. Two stories, yet small, energetic, and again...inexpensive. Each time I picked up a round for Alex he reacted and looked at me the same way Aksel used to in Cape Town, a combined expression of shock and gratitude. There's just no way we were going to allow one of Aksel's friends to pay for anything.

Alex mentioned having sent a Snapchat message to Aksel on the date of the tragedy and showed me how it displayed unopened on his phone. He went on to explain how sad it makes him to see him slide down the "Best Friends" list in the app because the frequency of messages is gone. Lennart objected that he won't ever let that happen. Confused by what he meant, and curious how he had any control over that, I asked him to explain. He elaborated by saying he still has been sending Aksel snaps every day. This was a beautiful slug to the chest.

We closed down the bar together and gave Alex long, extended goodbye hugs as we ordered an Uber and went back to our place for one final night's sleep in Sweden.



We saw a deer in front of our place as we walked up and my mind instantly thought about how I probably just ate Swedish Bambi's delicious cousin.

I awoke in the morning to Lennart walking in my room and hugging me while I was in bed. He said his final goodbye to me as his flight was at 9:30am. Lauren did the same 2 hours later. Tonight he will sleep in Amsterdam, Lauren will sleep in India, Alex will sleep in Sweden, and I will sleep in California. All worlds apart in proximity but connected to one another through our core forever.

When you travel, you meet people. Somehow the bond is magnified on an enormously different level and experiences are amplified to an extreme. I think this is why I feel so at home while I'm abroad. And why I long for it to never be over.

In the 1989 movie "Little Monsters", Fred and Ben Savage's characters discover an alternate reality under their bed filled with monsters living underground. Every night they go to bed they seek comfort and joy by crawling under the mattress and making their way down to meet their best (monster) friend, Maurice. Escaping from the norms of their daily lives.

This is traveling for me. It's the most beautiful escape and I'm not even running from anything. It's just a surreal and fulfilling experience that satisfies me on a different level. And I never want it to end. But like with anything, it always does.

I locked up the apartment for the last time, threw the keys in the mail slot behind me, and got into my Uber for the drive to the airport. 2 hours later, I was in the air. It's now time I transport back to my normal world above the covers.

And until my next departure under my bed, I'll continue peeking.

Out the window.

In the street.

Searching for my new favorite star:

Aksel.