

NATURAL CAUSES

BY

Naomi Bess Leimsider

Erica is driving across the Midwest on her way back to New Jersey, and to her mother, who is a self-proclaimed expert on what is and what isn't good for the Jews, in an ugly used Volkswagen she bought for a few hundred dollars. She is going home. After twenty years together, she is leaving Russ, her not Jewish up-and-coming rock star boyfriend of twenty years -- more like up-and-gone he liked to say after a few drinks and a poorly attended show -- and their nomadic life on his band's tour bus after he cheated on her with Emma-Klara Svenson, the infamous Swedish model and tabloid star, who has a history of one night stands with show business ne'er do wells, has-beens, and aging musicians down on their luck looking for one last rock n' roll moment.

Erica knew Russ didn't think the Volkswagen was a good idea. He had suggested something sturdy, maybe Swedish. A solid Saab or a wholesome Volvo. Erica was furious Russ would even suggest buying anything Swedish after he had sex with Emma-Klara Svenson, but he reminded her that, according to her mother, any car manufactured in a country like Sweden, one that supposedly protected and nurtured the Jews during World War II, would be acceptable even if Sweden's neutrality during the War was -- and Erica's mother has very strong opinions about this delicate subject -- highly debatable and worthy of argument.

It has been two decades since Russ promised Erica's mother that if he was going to take her only child away from her to join him in his rock n' roll escapades all over the godforsaken anti-Semitic United States, he would keep her Jewish daughter safe from her idea of Midwestern Americans -- dull-eyed WASPs, murderous Aryan Nation members, evangelical cults -- and never purchase anything made in Germany or any former Nazi strongholds.

Even though the United States is as guilty as sin for what happened, and there are as many murderous racists right here as there are anywhere in the world, one still wants to make a concerted effort not to contribute to the descendants of the German war machine, her mother told him.

They were so young then, and Erica knew that Russ, Irish and sort of Catholic, didn't really understand why it was so important, but he wanted to make her mother happy, wanted her to accept him even though he wasn't Jewish, so he promised her he'd only buy products created in a former Allied power or neutral sympathizer.

In the end, her mother relented. Russ was not really the kind of man she wanted for her daughter, but Irish was acceptable. It was certainly not her first choice, but she had no real quarrel with the Irish. They were sensible people from a neutral country where it was too chilly and damp to really be happy. They like to drink and fight, but that's only because they come from a long line of hungry, anxious people.

The potato famine and all that, her mother said. Understandable. You can hardly blame them. They have a difficult history; they are our kind of people.

She could almost forgive Russ for dreaming of being a singer in a rock n' roll band, a silly occupation, as far as her mother was concerned, that non-Jews participated in. However, her mother did listen closely when Russ told his tall tales about rock star fame and fortune. She thought he had a special kind of get-up-and-go. He had moxie, which is a word she usually reserved for Jewish boys from the neighborhood she thought her daughter should date. Erica knew her mother loved Russ and believed in him, in spite of herself, for his effort, his non-Jewish love for her Jewish daughter, and his loyalty to the noble cause of Never Forget.

The Volkswagen was Erica and Russ's last formal purchase as a couple. She let the not-handsome used car salesman greet her with a substantial kiss on the mouth, place his sanitizer slick hands on the small of her back, hug her to him in a smooth practiced way when she finally agreed to rely on what was left of the car and the promise of modern German engineering for her journey back to New Jersey. When the salesman sensed Russ's hesitation, he focused on Erica. Told her affordable was the name of the game and this was the most car for the money. Russ didn't acknowledge the salesman's kiss or the hug or the gravity of the moment when Erica became the proud owner of the verboten Volkswagen that would take her far away from him and their life together in the back of the old tour bus.

Just be aware that your mother is going to have a fit when you pull up in front of her house in that car, Russ said. Tell her it's not my fault. She shouldn't blame me.

Erica is a new driver, a middle-aged novice who didn't get her license until the day before her fortieth birthday, and then only because, even before Emma-Klara

Svenson, she knew it was finally time to leave. If she was being honest with herself, she'd admit Russ had been distant and impatient with her for quite a while, maybe even a few years. If she was being honest with herself, she'd admit she knew it was time for Russ to move on and Emma-Klara Svenson would show up one day. It was inevitable. If Erica left him and went back to New Jersey, she'd have to find real work, get one of the only kinds of jobs uneducated middle-aged people are fit for, and the thought of being forty years old and having to rely on her mother for transportation drove Erica to take driving lessons and buying a car seriously. She finally passed the road test in a small town where Russ's band was playing at the only halfway decent venue in the area. Russ never asked her to drive the tour bus, he wouldn't even let Benny and Francis drive, and they were his bandmates, his best friends, so she hadn't had the opportunity to practice her new skills since she got her license.

But now she is on the interstate driving fifty-five, while everyone else cruises eighty or ninety, across half the country on her way back to her mother, who long ago ran out of patience for flights of fancy, dreams of rock n' roll fame and fortune, and her middle-aged daughter's middle-aged rock n' roll boyfriend who, it seems, will never make good on his promise that talent and ambition would turn him into a rock n' roll star.

Erica parks the car at an empty rest stop by the side of the highway. She is relieved not to be driving, to be able to remove her clenched and tired hands from the sweaty steering wheel. She keeps her hands firmly at ten and two at all times. Finally, she can unwind with a stale bear claw, a cup of truck stop coffee, a month-old tabloid magazine she nicked on the way out the door, and an off-brand cigarette she bummed from the flirty convenience store cashier boy. She and Russ quit smoking years before, they both had nightmares from those pervasive television commercials bombarding viewers with snapshots of rotten meaty lungs and the astonished faces of hip young smokers receiving bad news, but Russ wasn't around to scold her anymore. Erica never told her mother she smoked -- nice Jewish girls don't have filthy habits like cigarette smoking -- and even Russ, a smoker, a sometime ex-smoker who did enjoy his cigarettes, didn't quite understand her lust or her explanation that it's not about nicotine; it's about love. Erica has suffered so many times through night sweats, crawling skin, sugar cravings, and bone-crushing nausea that she's used to it. She knows that cigarettes demand a full-time commitment. They want a life together. A house in the suburbs, the white picket fence, two point five kids. Her cigarettes put time and effort into their relationship; they've earned her love and devotion. Since Erica doesn't want to live without her cigarettes either, but doesn't want a commitment, they do the same dance every day. Today, maybe, she won't smoke,

but tomorrow she might rush back into its strong comforting embrace. Now that Russ has abandoned her because he obviously wanted Emma-Klara Svenson more than he wanted a life with her, Erica smokes freely and unapologetically.

Maybe she'll sleep on the side of the highway like a vagabond or a truck driver or an exhausted prostitute. Someone on their way somewhere they don't really want to go but know they have no other choice. She unzips her jeans and pushes her right hand down into her underwear. Her fingers are cold and damp. Pruned with moisture. She presses them into the warmth of her inner thigh. For the first time in twenty years, she doesn't know how to lose herself in her imagination. There has always been Russ, or her hand coupled with thoughts she wouldn't share with anyone, not even Russ, but now there is nothing. Her daydreams and fantasies and her desire to get herself off alone in her German car -- something a nice Jewish girl would never even consider doing -- on a dark deserted highway in the middle of the big, lonely, anti-Semitic United States have vanished too, as if they never existed. Or only existed because of Russ.

Russ decided Erica should go back to New Jersey. She agreed but didn't admit she'd been thinking about it for a while. About what life might be like without Russ. She couldn't stay if they were no longer together. If he was going to have sex with Emma-Klara Svenson. If he didn't love her anymore. He insisted he loved her very, very much, but maybe her presence created too much stress for him. Maybe he was confused. Tired. Bored.

You should go home to your mother, Russ said.

Why would I do that, Erica asked.

Because you don't have anywhere else to go, and so I know you're safe.

With my mother? That makes sense to you?

Your mother is a complicated woman, Russ said. But she's a good person who means well.

You can say that because she's not your mother, Erica said.

Go home, Russ said. And don't blame me for all the things you haven't done in your life.

I don't, Erica said. Why do you think I blame you?

Isn't that what you've been trying to tell me for the last couple of years? You start to talk, I think I'm going to get something out of you, something important, something real. And then you disconnect, get lost in your little head, and who knows what's going on in there. Maybe you hate me. Maybe you resent me. Maybe you want to be with other men. How am I supposed to know?

Don't be ridiculous, Erica said.

Erica, be honest with yourself for once, Russ said.

What do you want me to say?

I don't know, Russ said. What would you like to say?

I don't know, Erica said.

Would you like me to guess for you since you seem completely incapable of making this simple decision on your own?

Russ, don't be mean, Erica said.

I'm not being mean. I'm being honest. There were things you wanted to do. You could have gone to college. Whatever you wanted. But you didn't do any of it. Why?

I don't know, Erica said.

Don't blame me, Russ said.

I don't, she said. I really don't.

When Russ suggested the split, they were having the kind of night they hadn't had in a long time. The kind of night that had stopped long before Emma-Klara Svenson. The kind they had enjoyed when going out on the tour bus with the band and exploring America was still a thrilling adventure. After a show, and Russ played thousands and thousands over the years, they would get a few six packs and sit in the empty bleachers of some high school football stadium. Sometimes Benny and Francis joined them, but mostly it was just the two of them drinking and dreaming about all the things that might not ever happen in a future that might not ever exist. They discussed management styles and debated hypothetical business deals. They talked about buying a house with record company advance money. Russ's band had always traveled across the country on tours headlining shows in small venues, but mostly they opened for more successful bands, and sometimes, lately, in a nasty twist, they were bands who had once opened for them a few years before when it looked like their gamble might pay off, when Russ's band garnered a bit of attention, when it looked like they just might get to sign a record contract, when they were told by important people they were good enough, that it was only a matter of time before the whole world knew about them, when it looked like Russ's talent might, someday, earn them millions. When they were signed by an important record label, things would be different. When they were rich, things would be different. When they were famous, things would be different. They didn't know what life would be like, but things would be different.

Erica knows Russ is devastated that the only significant money his band earns is playing covers of popular hits from the sixties, seventies, and eighties under the name "The Oldies but the Goodies" – Russ wanted to call them "The Has-Beens", but Benny and Francis didn't think that was funny-- in bright Midwest family-style restaurants, collecting tips for food, gas, and guitar strings at

closing time from glass mason jars and the clammy palms of drunk insurance salesmen trying to impress their no longer pretty stay-at-home wives and attention-disordered children.

Maybe, with or without Emma-Klara Svenson, their relationship had simply come to its organic end. Died a natural death. Erica wasn't sure of the appropriate language to use. She and Russ had never gotten married, so no one offered her specific language for the end. A trial separation of sorts. A kind of divorce. Start at twenty; end up at forty. Math makes everything terribly simple: without a diamond ring and a slim gold band, they were just finished.

It was a long time coming, her mother said when Erica worked up the energy to call and tell her she would soon be on her way back to New Jersey. What did I tell you? You can call it whatever you want. It's too bad, these things happen, but just like I always told you, Erica, there are only two ways relationships can go: marriage or a split. You and Russ had a good, long run, more than a lot of properly married couples, but you can't deny the laws of physics: what goes up must always come down.

At first, they didn't tell anyone except Erica's mother. Erica didn't want Russ's parents to know because they were still experimenting with the idea. Trying it on. Russ's parents had never liked her. It's not that they have anything against Jews; she's just not Irish. Russ's mother told Erica she respects and admires Jews, but she also asked her if she could eat ham and cheese sandwiches because she couldn't remember if Erica was the kind of Jew who refuses to eat a nice ham and cheese sandwich. They were pleasant enough to her face, but Erica knew they were glad Russ had never married her and settled down in New Jersey. His parents wanted something better for their talented son. Something glamorous and special. They were sure he would eventually settle down, after fame and fortune struck, with a lovely young Irish lass. Someone who still has plenty of time to birth a few Irish babies.

Erica would never tell Russ, but there were a few long nights on the tour bus when she let her mind wander to a place where, maybe, somehow, Russ was injured in a highway collision, or in a neglected airplane, or an out-of-control taxi, or, perhaps, in a senseless violent attack by a schizophrenic homeless man or a murderous teenager determined, for whatever reason, to end a struggling middle-aged musician's life. After all, these things have been known to happen from time to time. Something serious enough to send him to the hospital or make the evening news, but, in the end, wasn't fatal. Sometimes it wouldn't be an injury; it would be a mysterious temporary disappearance: a terrorist kidnapping in a foreign country with a questionable government. A ransom note from a Nazi stronghold or a militia

group from the Pacific-Northwest. Or, when she was really in a loopy mood, an alien abduction on a dark stretch of a deserted American highway. In these scenarios, she, Russ's significant other, his longtime lady love, is interviewed extensively about being a working musician and living on the tour bus. Their life-on-the-highway existence. Their hopes and dreams for fame and fortune. Their fears and disappointments. She is sought out, stalked, by inquiring minds and hungry paparazzi types eager to sell a tragic story. The police officers and newspaper reporters recount these important statements on air. The locals post crude pencil drawings of Russ's face on trees and telephone poles. Russ's parents are grateful, and on television, in front of the watching world, call her the daughter-in-law they wished they had. The daughter they always wanted.

But this is not because she doesn't love him or wants him to disappear. Or wants, necessarily, the freedom to live her life on her own or have sex with other men. What Erica wants is for something to shake Russ to his core. What she wants is a miraculous rescue effort of some kind. Doctors flown in from all corners of the world. A neighborhood watch group finally successful. Musician friends who put together impromptu concerts to raise money. A psychic with real powers. Then Russ would be free to return to her, free to make decisions like a man who saw death. He'd greet her, relatively unharmed, bewildered, ruffled, and just a touch traumatized from his brief journey into the unknown. But not too much. Nothing a prescription for painkillers and a brief stint in therapy couldn't cure. He'd hug her tight, and, for the first time in a long time, she'd feel the full unabashed impact of his love and desire for her. His need.

Erica, if you can't think something nice, don't think anything at all. It's not very nice to wish that bad things happen to Russ just so you could feel good about yourself. Be careful what you wish for.

If her mother knew, this is something she might say.

You need to live in the real world, my dear. You're a dreamer, Erica. The brutal truth is that dreamers often grow up to be losers. Russ, even if he is Irish Catholic, is a good boy, but you both need to grow up. You want stupid things, worry about stupid things like being rock stars and being famous. You are my only daughter, my only child, Erica. Why didn't you get married? Why don't I have any grandchildren? All I ever wanted for you was to do it the right way, Erica. You think you can go your own way, do your own thing, but you can't. It has a price. If you don't, it's bad for the Jews. And bad for your Jewish soul. Which is why you're so miserable all the time and you feel the need to create horrifying little dramas in your head.

But it was just a harmless daydream; a harmless fantasy, and Erica tried not to lose herself in it too often.

Erica turns on the Volkswagen's overhead reading light, which is one of the few things that works properly and gives up trying to masturbate. Her brain is not interested. She drinks the cold coffee and smokes the below average cigarette down to the filter. She eats her king-sized bear claw in a few sloppy bites and licks the icing off her fingers. She thinks about going back for another one, or one of those microwavable fruit strudels in a basket by the cash register, but embarrassment keeps her in her seat and forces her to get back on the road. Back for another sugar and nic fix, the flirty cashier boy might ask, offer her a second plastic-wrapped pastry and another cigarette in exchange for one tiny little kiss, making her feel dirty, aroused, and curious all at once -- and she might not be able to refuse.

Emma-Klara Svenson is on the cover of Erica's stolen tabloid magazine. Erica turns to the centerfold to get a good look at the Swedish model. Emma-Klara is topless. Completely flat-chested and unashamed. She stretches, her polished claws extended, her small, pink nose wrinkled and fierce. Her long torso pulled tight and taut; ribs poking out beneath her browned spotless skin; legs like long, tanned straws; a shiny, slippery bikini bottom tied on with strings. She is content, sleepy, grinning.

In an exclusive interview, Emma-Klara admits she was tortured in school for being super skinny. Concentration camp skinny, Emma-Klara states for the record.

No matter what I ate, she said. I've always looked like I'd been through the Holocaust. It wasn't that I developed late: I had hips, I was interested in sex with boys and girls, but breasts never appeared. Nipples and bones, baby, that's all. I've never worn a bra and I don't even know how to work one. I tried on one of my girlfriend's once, she's got big, fake boobs, stuffed it with toilet tissue and clementine oranges and put on one of her sweaters. I looked strange, kind of like a fat, bumpy alien. I don't care that I'm skinny and flat-chested; I'm all woman.

Every time Erica thinks of Russ and Emma-Klara Svenson, it is as if she is hearing and understanding it for the first time all over again. She can't wrap her mind around the truth of the matter. Russ met Emma-Klara Svenson at a party held at a model and her financier boyfriend's house. Russ's band was the opening act for a more popular band they had toured with years before. Erica had the flu, so she didn't go to the show that night. Despite the fact that Emma-Klara was known for her transparent blue eyes, her salty Scandinavian smile and her almost complete lack of breasts -- not Russ's type at all -- Russ had always had a funny little crush

on her. He bought magazines when she graced the covers. Paid attention to tabloid talks and celebrity rumors when she was mentioned.

To Erica, Emma-Klara was always an idea, not a real person who might show up at a party looking devastating in a tube top and short-shorts. A figment of her and Russ's imagination. Part of Russ's rock n' roll fantasy. A shapeshifter who became flesh and blood for one night. Not a real person who would see Russ across a crowded room, see him the way a woman like Emma-Klara Svenson might see him: a still youngish looking man in new jeans and a leather jacket. A man rapidly approaching middle-age even though he can still pass for thirty if he's had enough sleep. A tired man dragging himself around the country in a tour bus. Emma-Klara Svenson knew what Russ needed to hear. She told him she loves his band but thinks they haven't gotten the right breaks. They don't have the right management. She told him he is talented. Still sexy. Still hot. They had sex in the fifth-floor bathroom.

Russ perched at the end of their hotel bed like a sick bird. Twittery, anxious, shaky. He acted like this when the world didn't offer him what he thought it should. Erica didn't see the excited young man she left New Jersey with two decades before. Her spicy rock n' roll boyfriend. Full of wanderlust. Cocksure. Instead, she saw a weak middle-aged man who has been fighting mild insomnia and depression for a few years and was full of apologies for having sex with a model. Something he had never had a chance to do. Something he may never get the chance to do again. He seemed to shrink, grow smaller and smaller, until he disappeared into her disappointment.

I had sex with Emma-Klara Svenson, he said.

Erica was sweaty. Her eyelids heavy, her brain thick and overheated.

I have the flu, she said.

You can have sex with someone, he said. Anyone you want. Even Benny or Francis.

Why on earth would I want to have sex with Benny or Francis, she said.

I don't know, he said.

You had sex with Emma-Klara Svenson, and I get Benny or Francis? You know what, Russ, I can't believe you fell for her. She's the kiss of death. What happened to you?

I don't know what to do, Erica, he said.

That's what you say when you don't want to talk about something. You sulk like a child and say I don't know what to do, Erica, or I don't know what to say, Erica, and then you try to barter with me. As if I can be easily persuaded to trade something with you.

Russ didn't move.

You fell for a woman who seduced you with silly flattery, Erica said. Did you tell her about your little schoolboy crush? Did you tell her how you collect her magazine pictures, how you paste them on the wall like a teen-aged girl?

Don't be mean, he said.

Fuck you, Erica said.

Fuck you, too, Russ said.

Maybe he had sex with Emma-Klara to punish her for falling victim to the flu and to this life with him on the bus, and, maybe, to him. Erica didn't go to college the way the other girls did, didn't get a job, didn't earn her own money. He had sex with Emma-Klara Svenson because he couldn't wait to get rid of his common-law ball n' chain. They'd been together for so long, maybe Russ thought he'd never be able to get rid of her. Emma-Klara Svenson wouldn't live on a bus for twenty years. Erica is the kind of woman who lives with a man on a bus until they are both middle-aged.

Ten years ago, she and Russ had considered going back to New Jersey. They had a few difficult months together when they turned thirty. Russ found his first gray hairs. He had a cancer scare, but his stomach aches and the small amount of bright red blood in the toilet turned out to be what the country doctor in some Midwestern town's emergency room called a nervous, aging stomach and a nasty case of hemorrhoids.

There was the ticking of her biological clock. It started as an almost unnoticeable whispering, but it quickly became louder and insistent. Erica knew it was coming; she had heard about it from her mother.

It starts ticking earlier for Jews, she told Erica. Your Jewish babies-to-be will haunt you, visit you in your dreams, demand to be born. Remember: if the mother is Jewish, the babies are Jewish.

But there was a show in a different city every night. The sound check, the set list, the problems that needed to be tweaked and remedied. At one point, success was so close. There were a few television appearances, a few private interviews, a few headlining concerts, a few decent paydays. Russ's face on the cover of a third-rate magazine. But it ended quickly and for reasons Russ, Benny, and Francis never fully understood. They lived in an almost constant state of disappointment broken up by brief periods of elation, pure happiness on stage, but if they went home, there would be nothing but the ticking of the Jewish mother clock and the everyday world of car payments, late electric bills, and angry landlords in New Jersey. The

palpable disappointment from Russ's parents. The inevitable decline in health as they age.

There was nothing to look forward to in New Jersey. Nothing even came close, so they stayed on the road.

Somewhere in the middle of Ohio or Pennsylvania, Erica stops for the night at a bar and motel where they advertise cheap rooms, half-price cheeseburgers, and live rock music. It's ladies' night: two pink mixed drinks for the price of one. An old vending machine offers filterless cigarettes and discolored condoms. Moshing, slam-dancing, disrobing, and public displays of affection are discouraged.

She should call her mother. Her mother refuses to call her because she claims she won't be able to handle the stress if Erica doesn't answer her phone. If Erica doesn't pick up immediately, something catastrophic has obviously happened. It is as if her mother forgets she's been out on the road, out in the vast stretches of the United States, for a good part of the last twenty years, and nothing of any note has occurred. As if she can't grasp the fact that Erica is forty years old. As if so much time hasn't passed, and she still needs to explain the world to her sheltered daughter.

Erica sits at the bar in the tiny basement room and sips a pink mixed drink. She watches the band play favorites from the heavy metal heyday and some below average originals. The girls in tight jeans in the front of the stage are loving every minute of it. Under the dim lights, the cheap blue and purple gels, the lead singer looks the part of a weathered would-be rock star: long hair, muscular arms, just a hint of sag in the stomach. He shakes his ass. He wears a black mesh shirt, tiger print pants, thigh high black suede boots. There are slabs of blush across his cheeks. Thick grainy eyeshadow. Long silver earrings. The girls in tight jeans, some of them not old enough to buy the pink mixed drinks they are drinking, ring the stage.

At one point during the show, he leans forward on his knees and pushes his crotch into one of their faces.

Erica smiles, almost laughs out loud. Once upon a time, she and Russ would have had mocked a place like this. A lead singer in a band like this. She and Russ would have laughed themselves silly.

After the show, the lead singer sits next to Erica at the bar, orders her another pink mixed drink, puts one of his hands on the small of her back.

I saw you from the stage, he says.

Erica nods.

What's your name, he asks.

Erica, she says.

How old are you, Erica?

Thirty-two, she says.

He smiles at her.

I'm thirty-two myself, he says.

He pulls out a pack of cigarettes from the front of his spandex pants.

Cigarette? he asks.

Yes, please, Erica says.

When he leans over to light her cigarette, he kisses the side of her mouth with his chapped lips and puts one cold calloused hand on her right breast.

Under the grayish-white lighting in his apartment, Erica can see he's much older than thirty-two or even forty. Maybe forty-five or fifty. His face is clay-colored. Wrinkles and smoking stress around his mouth. Bluish fat deposits under the eyes. A few liver spots on his hands. A tarnished silver wedding ring on his left ring finger.

I'm not married, he says. To a woman. It's a spiritual marriage. To rock n' roll.

He lives in one room. There is no kitchen. In one corner, he has a chair with a cushion, a mini-refrigerator, and a hot plate. One bowl. One square serving dish. Two plastic cups and two wineglasses. Everything is neat and tidy. There is one bathroom for the entire floor at the end of the hall. He keeps a basket filled with toiletries and hair care products by the front door. A pair of cheap rubber flip-flops. A well-worn bathrobe hangs on a hook next to a drugstore hairdryer. His full-sized bed is covered with a thin, folded black satin comforter pulled tight and tucked under at each of the corners of the bed. There is one deflated pillow.

I try to keep the place as clean as possible, he says.

Erica looks at his photograph collection. They are all framed and arranged in size order and in neat rows on an old, damaged bureau.

You like this, he asks, caressing the bureau. I found it in the garbage out back. Some asshole threw it away. I couldn't believe it. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was mine. When I have some time, I'm going to fix it up.

It's great, Erica says.

The pictures in the front row are mostly of girls with large, fake breasts shoved into string bikini tops or completely naked with their young mouths covered in red lipstick and opened just a little, their eyes half-lidded in simulated pleasure, lying on car hoods or single beds with pink blankets.

Fans, he says. They used to like to give me pictures.

Erica looks at a few of them as a little boy in swim trunks by a lake and all bundled up in a snow suit under a Christmas tree. She picks up a photograph of an

older couple in front of a mobile home. A giant Confederate flag looms over the satellite dish on the roof. There is a heavysset woman and an unsmiling man on the makeshift front porch. They wear tomato red t-shirts with airbrushed black swastikas on their chests.

That's mom and pop, he says. Step-pop. He raised me. My real pop left when I was two.

He hugs her from behind, crushes her into him, kisses her neck.

Take off your shirt, he says, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She takes it off and stands in front of him in her jeans. He cups her breasts. Runs his hands down her stomach, over her ass.

Nice, he says. You have the body of a much younger woman. You shouldn't be ashamed of your age. I'm not your typical rock n' roll man. I especially like women over thirty. They understand that the decision to have sex with a man they don't know isn't the end of the world. Young women don't understand this. They think everything revolves around them. But everything doesn't fucking stop because a nineteen-year-old community college student who just declared her elementary education major -- she just loves little kids, you know, and can't wait to have a hundred brats of her own -- decides to go out and celebrate, decides to go see a fourth-rate rock band, drinks too many of those fruity shots they pass out free to the girls -- the ones that make them vomit in the parking lot then they try to shove their nasty tongues down my throat -- and thinks she'll fuck the lead singer. I'm the souvenir. A reminder of a crazy night out on the town. I'm the lead singer in a fourth-rate rock n' roll band. It's not just that they lie there expecting you to fuck them like they're the last fuckable girl on Earth, it's that they don't know how to enjoy it. Some of them pretend to. They fake it, whatever. But they really don't know how. They think they do. That's the annoying part. And they ask too many questions. Don't ask so many questions, girls, just keep your fucking mouths shut. I'm the fourth-rate rock star. I'm going to do all the fucking talking.

When they finish having sex, he grabs one of her hands with both of his, brings it up to his open mouth, kisses it, almost sucking on her wrist, before he holds it securely to his chest. Erica can feel his racing heart in her veins.

It's pretty great to be alive, isn't it, he says.

Yeah, Erica says.

Think of the alternative.

Erica nods.

Want a beer?

Sure.

He walks naked to the half-sized refrigerator. His sparse body hair is curly. He has thin zigzagging stretch marks like a child's scribbling on his torso and the

meatiest part of his thighs. He is spray tan orange. His ass used to be round and firm.

I'm writing a bunch of new songs, he says.

Cool, Erica says.

When he finishes his beer, he curls up next to her and falls asleep. She should leave. She doesn't know exactly where she is, and she still hasn't called her mother. If she doesn't call her soon, her mother is going to think she's been kidnapped or murdered by Nazi sympathizers or members of a Midwest state militia.

When you stop for the night, don't tell the motel clerk you're Jewish, her mother said. They're all in cahoots and they all own guns. They don't like Jews, they don't know any Jews, and they've never met any Jews. Don't drink the coffee or eat their free pancake breakfast. You don't have Russ around to protect you anymore. Keep it casual. Don't answer any questions about your last name or where you're from. Make sure your door is locked.

In all the pictures on his bureau, his parents are wearing the same swastika t-shirts. Ill-fitting cheap cotton t-shirts they bought at the nearest mall. They must have brought them to a t-shirt shop, which is located between the corn dog stand and the Slurpee machines because every mall in middle America -- Erica has been in hundreds of them -- has a food court and an iron-on shirt shop where they can airbrush any design on a t-shirt. Erica doesn't know if there are swastikas in the big book of pictures that sits on the counter padlocked to the cash register alongside the landscape scenes, teddy bears, and cartoon characters, but people bring in their own pictures all the time. And this is Mid-America, so someone might request a swastika.

Erica creeps out of bed slowly so as not to disturb him. She removes one of his hands from her right thigh and another from her stomach.

Her clothes are in a pile on the floor across the room.

She has to leave. Russ might call her. Wonder where she is. Her phone is lost in the confusion at the bottom of her bag. Erica looks at this aging rock n' roll singer sleeping in his bed with the thin, black satin coverlet he's obviously been using for years. She and Russ used to laugh at guys like him. Fancies himself a rock star. All dressed up and living the dream, Russ used to say about rock n' roll guys who never left their small hometowns, who never even tried. Without his make-up, this guy has a fair Nazi complexion and frown lines along his pink mouth. Aged Aryan blond hair. Orange and gray strands stuck to the side of his face with something

goopy: oil or Vaseline or moisturizer. He is thick and beefy; his breath is sour and meaty.

His parents are Nazis. They have that disgruntled Nazi look; their faces bent in permanent frowns. His mother's eyes are bright blue, like her rock n' roll son's, but they are flat and icy. Her husband stands next to her, but they do not touch. His face is pale and still. Resolute. He knows what is what. He's sure his stepson is a fairy because he never married and has no children. After all, his stepson lives alone and dresses like a cheap street hooker. His mother and his stepfather know their marriage is a disappointment, but they try to make the best of it. Everything, in the end, is a disappointment to them. But not Nazism. Nazism gives them hope and a purpose. Keeps them close and connected in a way that nothing else can.

Is their disappointment of a son a Nazi, too? Erica doesn't see any Nazi paraphernalia. She opens his closet door very slowly, inch by inch. Clothes and costumes on hangers and neatly folded on built-in shelves. Cheap bargain store shoes for men and extra-large women's boots with chunky heels are arranged in size order on the floor. She looks through his bureau. Men's and women's underwear and stockings folded, socks balled and stacked, clean and pressed faded rock concert t-shirts. Under the t-shirts, Erica finds large white pills in an amber plastic container, diet soft gels from the drugstore, assorted condoms in primary colors with funny names like "Giant Red Corvette" and "Root for Big Blue", extra strength anti-fungal cream, and pictures of his mother when she was a much younger woman. She was a pretty slim girl, even when she was pregnant with her disappointment of a son, and she smiles big and bright for the camera. In one of the pictures, she is standing next to a handsome young man no older than nineteen or twenty. He is obviously the father who left when he was a baby. They hold ice cream cones up high and proud in front of them to toast their wonderful future. They laugh with their mouths wide open.

Under the socks, Erica finds lingerie catalogs and cheap porn magazines. There is nothing under the bed or behind the mini stove. There are no swastika t-shirts, no Nazi newsletters, no well-worn, dog-eared copies of *Mein Kampf*. Maybe they are all in cahoots and they are a few steps ahead of her. She'll never find where they hide the evidence. Maybe her mother is right. There is a secret lair somewhere, another dwelling dedicated to and indicative of their Nazi mission. The seemingly innocent son does the dirty work for the Nazi parents because he wants to finally earn their love and attention. Make them proud. Maybe this is why he picks up middle-aged Jewish women playing with his shitty band in shitty bars. Perhaps this is all part of his evil plan -- the banter, the shared cigarettes and beer, the attentive sex -- to lure her into a deep dungeon of hate and deceit, to torture and

kill her in the name of the new, powerful Nazi movement alive and well in America.

He stirs in his sleep. Opens his eyes.

Hi, Erica, he says.

He smiles without seeing her, his sleepy eyes wandering and unfocused -- for a moment he looks insane -- before he curls up again under the black coverlet.

In the morning, he cooks eggs in an old frying pan.

He kisses her on the mouth and hands her a fork.

So, Erica, he says. Where do you live?

New Jersey, she says.

Do you have a husband, he asks.

No, she says.

Good.

He smiles and takes one of her hands in his. He plays with her fingers. Massages the center of her palm.

You're going to tell me you have to go, aren't you, he says. You have to be somewhere, right? You're terribly sorry, but you can't stay another minute.

No, that's not it, Erica says. Well, actually, I do have to go. Someone's expecting me, but I can stay for a while.

He puts the dishes in the sink.

Come here, he says and lies back down on the bed.

When she joins him, he pushes his left arm under her and pulls her close. He kisses her forehead and the length of her collarbone.

Did you have fun last night, he asks.

Yes, Erica says.

I'm glad we met, he says.

I'm glad, too, she says.

I have something I want to tell you, Erica, he says.

Okay, she says.

He lies on his side to face her; his breasts push together and form cleavage.

I live for rock n'roll every day, he says. Everyday. But it's all over by twenty-three or twenty-four. If something doesn't happen by then, if you're not half-famous or have at least one song the whole world knows by then, it's too late. There are people who have careers, they earn their living playing music, and that's great for them, but they're not rock stars.

He strokes her face and smooths her hair.

It never happened for me, he says. A few years ago, I met a woman at a show. A woman passing through on her way back east, just like you. She was a

woman who reads auras and sees the future in crystals, and she told me I'd never make it. She said I'm good, really good, even terrific from time to time, but I'll never be a rock star. When I asked her why, she said I don't have that certain something. That's what she said. It's not in the cards for me. I'm not a complete clown, but I'm not special. I should accept my fate.

He sits up.

So here I am, he says. Then I saw you at the bar. A little tired. A little bored. And you noticed me. For a split second, maybe you saw me as a young man, a fresh piece of meat, and you smiled. I saw you smile. I didn't know why you smiled, but I hoped it was because of me, because of what you saw when you looked at me. When you smiled, I almost stopped singing. I choked up. I didn't know what to do.

He grabs her hands.

What did you think of me, Erica? he asks. What did you see when you looked at me? Did you see something special?

She nods.

I knew it, he says. I could feel it.

Erica closes her eyes.

If you're tired, we can sleep here all day, he says. You don't have to go. You can stay here with me. I don't have anywhere I have to be.

While he's in the shower at the end of the hall, Erica packs up to leave. She steals a few cigarettes from his open pack. On the way back to his apartment, he told her she could have as many as she wanted, she never had to ask, he'd like to give her the whole universe, but Erica prefers to take his cigarettes when he isn't looking. To scurry them away like nuts for a long, cold winter. Before she gets back in the Volkswagen, she kisses his disappointed mouth.

Someone on the local rock n' roll radio station, the same one she and Russ used to listen to long ago, announces that the beautiful, the wild and crazy Emma-Klara Svenson has shown up -- unannounced! -- and is in their studio. She wants to apologize for her remark about being concentration camp skinny.

Her voice is soft and sweet. Her apology is accepted immediately by the morning disc jockeys who are eager to change the subject. They try to change the conversation to important topics like when is she going to get breast implants and which on-his-way-out rock n' roll guy she's having sex with these days, but Emma-Klara insists on apologizing. She wants to be forgiven.

In my country we are still horrified by what happened, she says. In Sweden, we understand that this topic should not be taken lightly. We are, as a people, still disgusted by what happened in Europe during World War II. The genocide of

millions, the murder of so many innocents should never be taken lightly. I am a proud Swede because I know my country did so much to help the Jewish people during the war. I am a proud Swede because even today, even sixty years later, the wounds are still fresh and raw and what happened still affects us all as human beings. My comment was cruel and insensitive. I equated my own silly, trivial life with something tremendous and awful, and I apologize from the bottom of my heart.

The morning deejays are stunned by her intensity. They giggle and mumble about her being immediately forgiven for everything and anything she has ever said or done.

In Erica's new favorite scenario Russ tells her that he and Emma-Klara Svenson have fallen deeply in love. Perhaps they go to another model's party, like the one where they met, and the model's rock star or hedge fund manager or stylish CEO boyfriend goes slumming and hooks up with a regular girl. Just to see what it would be like. The model is angry, furious, beside herself with rage. Indignant. Her rich, important boyfriend wanted to fuck some ugly nobody! The model wouldn't stand for it. She'd take the gun he'd bought her for protection and shoot into the air a few times to get the feel of it. Just to know the power and the glory of being able to demand the attention of everyone at her party: the hangers-on and the sycophants who smother her night and day but never really listen or care about her troubles. When people see she means business, she's not just some gorgeous skinny girl who walks down slabs of hastily constructed wood platforms in fragile-as-icicles six-inch stiletto heels in the middle of a cavernous room full of fat fashion writers and fawning admirers of her legs -- her thighs like toothpicks! Broomsticks! -- and her empty slate runway face, they'll finally take her seriously. For once they'll be running from a model instead of to her, they'll trip over each other trying to get out. The model will drown in despair when she realizes that her boyfriend, who is supposed to love who she is on the inside and not just what he wanted her to be, has left her for a regular girl. The model will shoot wildly at someone, anyone. Remind her boyfriend of who she is. Remind him what is important. Remind him what is what. The model will hit Russ in the temple or the gut or just to the right of his heart. Emma-Klara Svenson will grab at the first opportunity to abandon Russ and save herself. She doesn't love him. She doesn't care about his safety and well-being. If Russ dies, she will run as fast as she can to the next guy on his own personal sinking ship.

Erica moves into the rush of people on the New Jersey Turnpike flying past her at breakneck speed in a terrific rush to be somewhere, anywhere, but in the middle of their journey on this stark, gray highway. If Russ were signed to a label and had

people to take care of him, Emma-Klara Svenson wouldn't exist at all. She'd disappear into thin air, evaporate, return to her former shape as a figment of Erica and Russ's overactive imagination. But that mythical occurrence that sometimes happens to others will never happen for Russ, for them. The signing that would save them from their lives. She knows this, and with every second, Erica, with a Nazi cigarette in her mouth and both middle-aged Jewish hands on the wheel at ten and two, moves farther and farther away.

Author Biography

Naomi Bess Leimsider has published poems and short stories in On the Seawall, St. Katherine Review, Exquisite Pandemic, Orca, A Literary Journal, Hamilton Stone Review, Rogue Agent Journal, Coffin Bell Journal, Hole in the Head Review, Newtown Literary, Otis Nebula, Quarterly West, The Adirondack Review, Summerset Review, Blood Lotus Journal, Pindeldyboz, 13 Warriors, Slow Trains, Zone 3, Drunkenboat, and The Brooklyn Review.