

Fisk in the Sink  
by Natalie Burg

How bad could being a housekeeper for a cult leader be? Maybe not overly so, I reasoned with myself. It's not like Ulla's cult was a freaky, sign-over-to-us-your-wages-and-firstborn-daughters sort of cult. It probably wasn't even technically a cult; it was probably a sect.

And it wasn't as if she was asking me to join her little religious club, or camp or business or whatever it was. She'd just asked me to move to Sweden and spend a year of my twenties cleaning her house while she ran the thing. Well, to be honest, she'd asked me here to be a nanny and English tutor for her three children, but after arriving and realizing those children were teenagers who spoke excellent English, it became clear that my duties were more of the janitorial variety. It'd been two weeks since I'd found out I was to be a maid, and the shock from that reveal had still not settled in. The added bewilderment of learning my new boss was a teacher of some barking religious philosophy felt strangely like a drop in the bucket.

I was no longer pretending to pull the freshly washed whites from their proper machine and the colors from theirs, but was instead allowing my eyes to wander through the window, out and over the Swedish farmland to the backyard. Of course, there was farmland, or åkerjord rather, through the windows in the front and either side of the åkerhus too. I was really in the middle of nowhere with these people.

What really should have been bothering me was this: the fact that I was doing my fourth set of twin laundry loads today, an activity interrupted only by the living room dusting and mopping of the hallway. This was supposed to be my fantastic year of overseas adventure. So far the most fantastical event had been just an hour ago when Ulla sat me down to show me a "miraculous video" that explained her beliefs and burgeoning career. As a cult leader. And now I was supposed to be resuming my daily activities. Ulla would have to forgive me for being a smidge distracted.

At least there was relative peace here in the basement, my personal wing of the farmhouse where both my sleeping quarters and the laundry resided. I shook the temporary paralysis of being lost in thought from my shoulders and began to pull damp

clothes from the machine and pin them to one of the lines running through the cement laundry room. Ulla didn't believe in clothes driers (in addition, according to the video I'd just watched, to human bodies, which are figments of our imaginations), so the family's multiple loads of laundry per day all had to be hung individually. I was lost in a jungle of suspended damp cloth as I tried to sort out how I had lived and worked here for two weeks without realizing what my boss did for a living.

Purposefully or not, Ulla had lead me to believe she was some sort of therapist, seeing clients in her office and taking them through "processes." Sometimes, she'd told me, entire busloads of these clients come to the farm for the weekend for intensive, three-day group sessions. Now I'd learned that these "processes" taught people that their bodies don't exist and there is no sin – yet there is God and Jesus, but they don't know about humans – so all people have to do is choose love and joy and everything will work itself out. According to the cult/sect/thing's founder and guru, an atheist Jewess from New York who channeled Jesus to write a revised Bible, which she reveals to the world via VHS. Right.

It wasn't freakout-and-run-away worthy though. As far as I knew, no matter what batshit philosophy gets you there, being a peddler of love and joy can't be all that threatening. And the rest of the family seemed to be immune from indoctrination. The kids were pretty normal, and her husband Eric the farmer was far too simple for craziness on that scale. Ulla had referred to Eric once as a "true Swede" in a bizarrely pejorative tone. This revelation seemed to bring that odd label into new focus. She had been derogatorily branding him as sane. And she brought her "retreats" to his farm? Where he did honest-to-goodness manual labor every day? Poor Eric.

"Natalie?" Ulla called down the stairs. "Do you have a moment?"

I jumped. A feeling of guilt welled up in my throat, as if she would be able to see from my laundering style how utterly damaged my opinion of her had just become.

"Sure," I said as she walked down the stairs. How could I not have a moment? I'm doing her family's laundry in her basement between all of the other chores she had specifically asked me to do. And as she didn't pay me enough to leave her house afterhours, so I was clearly not booked. She owned my moments; asking only added

insult to this fact.

“Would you be comfortable preparing Eric’s dinner for him this afternoon? I have an appointment in Helsingborg.”

Predictably, I had no argument with this. I did, however, silently wish she would at least pretend to be helping me learn Swedish by using the words I knew in context, as I’d started doing myself. It’s not dinner, I mentally noted, it’s middag.

“Wonderful!” said the enormous, red, crazy-person grin. “Do you know how to prepare fish?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “I make fish at home all the time.”

She was delighted, as always. She left “everything I would need” right on the counter for me, and if I could make some potatoes, a dill sauce and some salad, that would be great too.

Frankly, I was so relieved she was leaving the house, I hardly listened to her instructions. A little physical distance was definitely in order.

So fish right? Or fisk, should I say? I’ve done this a hundred times. You take it out of the package, defrost it, pop it in the pan – I needed 15 minutes at most to prepare the whole meal, as Ulla said it was defrosting in the sink already. Best if I gave myself a half an hour to boil the potatoes, I decided. Taking full advantage of Ulla’s absence, I sat in my cellar bedroom for an inappropriately long time doing all sorts of nothing until I figured it was time to get started.

Up to the kitchen I went.

OK. There was the frying pan on the stove. There were the breadcrumbs. There were the potatoes and the dill and I knew the lettuce for making “sallad” was in the fridge. Huh. Where was the fisk? Oh yeah! The sink.

When I think back on this moment, I like to put it in slow motion with some horror-movie-esque, don’t-go-through-that-door music in the background. Because as I got closer and closer to the sink, I began to realize that I had made a terrible, irrevocable assumption with regard to this middag preparation.

Oh yes, there were fisk in the sink. There was a shit ton of fisk in the sink. They all had heads and skin and fins and scales, floating around in the huge sink as if this whole being dead thing was completely incidental.

Oh. My. Gosh.

And we're not talking lake trout here. These fuckers were what the Swedes call "flatfish." It looked like a regular fish that had gotten run over by a truck. And then attacked by a zombie. And did I mention both eyes were on top, staring starkly skyward from its flattened, graying carcass? They weren't just little eyes, either. They bulged out of the tiny, pointed head and were astonishingly non-symmetrical, like each floater was a freak of its own species. Those eyes. They were insane. And they were all looking at me.

"Holy shit," I said out loud with a sudden realization, "I have to cut their heads off."

After a moment of frantic deliberation over how one removes a head from a fish, I found a knife, placed a fisk on the cutting board, took a deep breath and cut its head off.

OK. That worked. Six more to go. But then they still had skin and bones. And though I couldn't see very well down their little severed throat holes, I could imagine there were guts inside those disgusting little bodies too. So utilizing every distant camping memory I had of my dad cleaning fish, I pried and pulled and gauged. Scales flew everywhere. Long blue sacks of something burst all over the place. After removing everything I was sure not even a Swede would eat I now had a pile of massacred, yet semi-cleaned fish, but I also had a cutting board full of organs. What do you do with spare fisk organs? Black market? Save a guppy foundation? I started to make a "gross shit" pile and put off deciding how to dispose of them until later.

Pulling their bones out was about as difficult as it should be for any decently evolved vertebrate. Even after yanking out the spine, there were plenty of skinny little bones to dig out one by one. After spending way more time than seemed prudent on dissection I rationalized that perfection clearly was not the theme of today's middag, so I might as well just move on to the breeding.

The dill sauce I had going was not smelling good. I hadn't even added the dill yet, so the fact that it smelled like anything was probably not a good sign. I rushed over to the stove with sick fisk shit dripping from my hands to give it a good whisk. Would enough dill cover the taste of scorched milk? And fucked up fisk? Sure it would! Good thing the Swedish definition of salad was literally just sallad – iceberg lettuce – sitting on a plate. Not only would that be a quick fix, I felt pretty confident that it would be my best dish.

By the time Eric came up to eat, the potatoes were overdone, the dill sauce was lumpy (in addition to stinky) and nothing was even on the table yet.

Eric waited patiently. Once he finally had something resembling food before him he said it all tasted wonderful while smiling at me with potatoes squishing through his teeth in his usual, simpleton style. I don't know who he thought he was kidding, since I was eating the same crap, but it was gracious of him.

Cleaning up the kitchen afterward, I was oddly proud of myself. Sure, I'd made a pretty mediocre middag, but I'd just taught myself how to clean, batter and fry a terrifying run-over zombie fish in under an hour. It was a carnal, look-at-me-surviving-life-in-the-wilderness type satisfaction – something new to me. And considering I'd done this while still being confounded over learning my foreign guardian was a theological nutbag, I concluded that it all went sort of OK.

Had I known this was Ulla's way of introducing Eric's middag preparation into my daily routine, perhaps my warm, fuzzy feelings would have dissipated. But as it was, I didn't even feel my three and half hours of free time a day slip down to two and half. And it was a good thing, as the feeling of levity I was enjoying while cleaning up after myself in the kitchen was my first since arriving. I even started to chuckle about Ulla being a cult leader. Honestly, there really wasn't anything more horrifying to me than the prospect of spending my twenty-third year as a maid on a farm, foreign or otherwise. At this point, the weirder things got, the better the story would be in the end. Sort of like fisk in the sink.