

Maja (the sofa)

Your name is Maja Beskow and you're sitting in the sofa at Kungsgatan 2 in Umeå. It's 1905, in the beginning of March and you are 27 years old.

Even though it's below freezing outside a stubborn sun is melting the icicles that one by one lets go from their hold on the roof tiles. On the table in front of you is a coffeepot and two cups and in the wicker chair at your left sits Miss Julia Byström. Except for the dripping and clinking of the ice you just hear the clock on the wall that slowly counts it's seconds. Other than that – it's silent.

The first time you spoke to Julia was this Wednesday at the meeting with the Swedish women's mission association whose meetings you recently started to attend. Julia is a teacher at the training collage and one of the driving forces in the association. You think that she is one of those women who move and take place with such an assurance that it's hard to imagine her ever not knowing the answer to a question or having trouble finding herself. A sort of austerity mixed with a charm that must be irresistible to her students.

You are also used to be in the centre of attention. Both among your friends but also among your students in school. But in the association you are among the younger and newer members and until recently you have stayed in the background. But then, this Wednesday, during a conversation about weather Christian faith is a precondition to man's moral, you jumped in to take part of the discussion. You had noticed that the other women seldom disagreed with Julia even though she sometimes made a careless statement or was actually wrong. So, just as she had finished a long ramble about a detail in Leviticus you said that the Bible would be extremely dangerous if it wasn't for people's own inherent moral. Everyone turned silent. Terrified and exited eyes wondered what kind of comment from Julia that would crush you.

But there was no comment. Instead she seemed interested, even exited to get some resistance, an equal debate partner.

And you felt the same way. Finally a person who resembles your exitment to discuss and who doesn't bend for uncomfortable subjects or feelings. And when the clock struck seven and the other women had started to get ready to leave you were still deep into your conversation.

But it wasn't until you were out on the street that you invited Julia to the Sunday coffee. You made sure to tell her that several of the other women from the association would be there. That this was something planned. Why did you do that? Because it would just seem to pushy to invite a new acquaintance for coffee? Because it would be easier to get turned down if you had pretend guests to think about if Julia said no?

On the bicycle home you enjoyed the cold March air kissing your cheeks as you pedaled through town. Wonderful taste of iron in your mouth, lovely lactic acid in your legs, perfect smiling winter cracked lips.

But now, quiet and alone in the livingroom, you think about the lie about the coffee. Why did you have to be so specific about all the guests impediments? Just as Julia come through the door you lined up all the ailments, childhood diseses and commitments that in the last second had hindered the others. Everyone knows that you lie when the explanations are a little bit to detailed.

Now you at last dare to look at her. Her green dress looks like it has been sown directly on her body. Just as you think to yourself that she is very beautiful her eyes meet yours. You look down in your lap and suddenly you feel shy like a school girl. Is this how her students feel?

You still don't know that that Julia will move into your apartment before the summer. You know nothing about your life together. About all the days with excursions to Holmön, skiing tours in the Gammlia forest or your evening walks along the river. All the fights about you thinking that Julia travels too much, that she thinks that you are reckless with your health, about that hideous easter table cloth that she so stubbornly takes out every year. All the free summer days. All the breakfasts, dinners, days, nights and winters. All the springs together.

You don't know that you'll live together until Julia passes away in 1946 and that she will leave all her assets, even though it's not a lot, to you. And after you pass away in 1964 you two will rest in the same grave at Västra kyrkogården (the western graveyard) only a minute from here.

You don't know anything about this.

Because now you have to say something. Maybe something about work, about how fast a semester passes and how you have come to be so fond of your students who are graduating soon. Or about the weather, that the spring is on its way and that you have already seen the budding willow down by the river. Yes! Say the thing about the willow. You look her straight into the eyes but just as you are about to open your mouth she says: "What a beautiful smile you have, Miss Beskow."

Julia (the wicker chair)

Your name is Julia Byström and you're sitting in a wicker chair that makes you feel short. The year is 1905 and it's Sunday. The sheepskin that you're sitting on is soft but together with the March sun shining through the window it's a little bit too warm. Who is this woman who has invited you and who now sits in the sofa on the other side of the table?

Even though she is so young Maja Beskow seems to feel like the world belongs to her. She has even become a sort of celebrity by being the first woman in Umeå to become a teacher at the town's secondary school, a job that used to be dedicated to men.

During Wednesday's meeting at the Swedish women's mission association you ended up having a discussion about moral and Christian faith. And immediately you were struck by how easy it was to talk to her. How you understood each other. How she, as you started to say something, already seemed to have thought about the same thing and eagerly filled in her opinions on the matter and then smiling confirmatory as you continued. And that smile. That suddenly turned her face and body to something more than human. That saw you and that let you see her. The words were easy and came without any effort. Now on the other hand – you can't find a thing to say.

You lean forward to even out a fold on your dress but stop yourself when the wicker chair makes a surprisingly loud creaking sound. In fact, the smallest movement makes the chair sound, which makes your body tense. It doesn't matter how slowly you lean back. The chair makes its sound. This time the creaking is just a little more extended.

The sheepskin is really warm now and all of a sudden you notice how sweat is starting to run underneath your arms. You knew this would happen when you chose the dress. That the green dress, even if it is prettier than the brown one, is a little bit too small and sits too high up under the arm pits and around the belly. Walking around in it was fine but when you sit down it is too tight over the chest and belly and makes you take shallow breaths.

Now Maja takes her coffee cup, gently blows on the dark liquid and carefully puts it against her lips. You decide to defy your enemy – the wicker chair, to again lean forward aiming for your coffee cup, but not as far so that you can reach the sugar. Usually you take two pieces, three if you are alone, but to get up from the chair, open the bowl of sugar and take a couple of pieces is now way too risky. You put the cup to your lips with your arm pressed to the side to hide the sweat underneath it. The coffee tastes bitter but now it's really too late to reach for the sugar. Maja looks down in her cup, like there was something interesting there to look at. Something in the dark to study. You do the same. You stir it with the spoon by old habit. Stopping when you realise you're stirring black coffee without sugar.

How long can you sit like this without saying anything?

She's looking at you now. Straight into your eyes. You didn't think about it during the Wednesday's meeting but now you suddenly see how beautiful she is. The hair, in a loose bun. The hands carefully twisting the cup's plate. The shoulders. A gentle smile. Suddenly she looks down. Is she shy?

Except going to church you didn't have anything special to do today so this morning you took a long bath. As you were lathering your body you suddenly got aware of how different it must feel for other people when they wash themselves. That other people's arms, bellies, breasts and thighs feel thinner, fatter, hairier, longer, shorter, rougher, softer than yours. For a few seconds you allowed yourself to imagine Maja sitting in the bath tub in her kitchen. As you stroked your under arm you pretended that it was Maja's hand stroking her under arm, shoulder, neck, breast and belly.

With your closed eyes you stayed for a bit in Maja's body. Salty sweat on the upper lip, wet and cold locks of hair tickling her neck, thin soft skin around the collarbone.

You don't know that you'll soon move into this apartment. That your and Maja's thoughts, routines, days and feelings will interlace with each other's and that her presence soon will feel so natural. Like there was never a time when you were without her. The next time you'll see each other you will make an excursion to Holmön together. Maja will have made sandwiches and coffee and you will sit close to each other and be a little less scared than you are right now.

You look at her again. She is really beautiful. Such a beautiful smile. You want to say something. Something about how tall the priest's twins have gotten. Or about how beautiful Maja's home is. You open your mouth and without thinking you say: "What a beautiful smile you have, Miss Beskow."