

## **Ana's Note**

**by Suzana Tratnik**

**Translated by Matevž Kersnik and  
Kristina Zdravič Reardon**

I'd already spent almost a whole week in the Netherlands. Just another week and I'll be home, I reassured myself. It really is a bit funny because even when I'm at the grocery store, I think of returning home. It was as if I had been away for two months or two years, not a mere two weeks, which should go by in a flash. After all, I used to travel a lot, all around Europe, and I'd even been to Morocco with friends. But back then I'd still been a student; I'd rather have traveled all summer than worry about fall exams in the heat. As students, we were always dreaming of foreign lands. We all wanted to become actors, athletes, musicians, or even scientists, abroad. And now here I am, at a European university—at a seminar for European biologists. I'm disappointed in myself because I don't know how to appreciate what I used to want so much. It stings even more that I've apparently aged, not just gotten more serious, though I adamantly refuse to admit this to myself. After all, forty is not old, really. No, this is all my wife's fault. Actually, I've never been away from her for more than two days. To be completely honest, I had to talk myself into it; I had to force myself even to go to the seminar in Utrecht. Although I've only been married for four months, I used to say to myself every day on the way to work, before I left for the Netherlands: this doesn't mean that I'm not capable of going somewhere on my own. The sooner that Faith and I get used to the idea that we also lead our own lives as well, the better; we shouldn't be confined within the narrow walls of our everyday married life. Faith completely agreed with me, but I know it hurt her. Despite that, she was genuinely happy to see me off at Brnik airport, saying this seminar would prove useful for the both of us: you're sure to get some excellent references, and then, in time, perhaps a better job. After the fleeting kiss that followed the second boarding call for the flight to Amsterdam, I couldn't believe she was gone and that she wouldn't be by my side for whole two weeks. While in line at customs, I kept glancing around, as if I expected her to run after me to give me another kiss.

The first two days in Utrecht I just slept. I spent almost every free hour between lectures sleeping. I don't know, I wanted to whip time with a switch so that it would pass more quickly.

On the third day, in lab exercises, I quickly grabbed a Slovenian as my partner—Matej from Ljubljana—even though we'd been politely but firmly encouraged to foster international cooperation in practically

everything we did, even peeing. I needed contact with Ljubljana; I had to listen to the language Faith and I shared.

Fortunately, Matej and I had enough in common that during the evenings, when none of us had anything to do, we started meandering around Utrecht, and over the weekend, we hopped over to Amsterdam. Matej convinced me that we should hitchhike. I felt a little bit dumb, but I agreed. Matej was 33 years old, so his college years didn't seem quite as distant as mine seemed to me.

Only in the second week of the seminar did I relax and start to look around me. I also discovered that my days passed more quickly if I spent my free time after working at the university with Matej. I no longer had such an obsessive urge to write letters full of longing to Faith everyday and send postcards every time I went to the store. And so, Matej and I meandered through Utrecht and sat around at local bars. We drank coffee and beer or ate Mexican and Vietnamese food. Once we even smoked pot—this was also something we'd dreamed of in college, having constant access to soft drugs. The next day, I felt terribly sick; I was no longer used to morning-after hangovers, so from then on, I refrained from fulfilling my youthful illusions.

After Matej and I ran out of science and career-related discussions, we moved onto more personal things. Of course, I was delighted to be able to explain to him how I'd met Faith nearly a year and a half ago, back when I thought that I'd never become emotionally attached to anyone. I would have talked for hours, of course, but I finally noticed that Matej had fallen strangely silent. Maybe I'm not letting him get a word in edgewise, I thought, and asked him immediately why he was single—had he never been married or maybe in a long-term relationship?

“Let me tell you a story,” he said. He ordered a beer and began: “It's easier for me to tell this as a story. Then I can imagine that it didn't happen to me, and I'm able to talk about it. So: I was married. Seven years ago. According to what other people say about their relationships, I could say that I was happily married. Ana and I had known each other since our student days. We were college sweethearts, and then we got married. I don't like to look back on memories of the time we spent together, so I'll tell it straight: Ana died in a bad car accident. She was pregnant...”

“I'm sorry,” I interrupted him. “You really don't have to keep going. I'm afraid I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

“It's not that bad anymore,” Matej said, touching my arm. “After all, I have to get used to talking about it. Do you want a beer, too?”

I nodded and thought that, actually, I was the one who couldn't handle hearing this undoubtedly tragic story out. Of course, I prattled on

about my marriage, without really wanting to hear about anyone else's misery. I didn't allow anything to come near Faith and me, as if personal tragedy were some kind of contagious disease that could affect your brain as it took in horrors of which it had previously known nothing.

"I won't go into detail," continued Matej, wiping foam from his moustache. "We are sitting here, in Utrecht, like two earnest little students, and it would really be a shame to talk about painful loss. After this great tragedy, something else began to trouble me. My agreement with Ana. Back in our college years, early one May, we agreed that each of us would write down which realization in our lives had been so difficult that they'd forced us to grow up. Each of us wrote that on a slip of paper and hid it from each other. The agreement was that we would only find out about the content of the other's note when one of us had died. We just thought and somehow believed that we'd be together for a long time, all our lives if that was possible, so the agreement with the notes was only an exciting little game. And if we broke up earlier, we would each destroy our notes so that the other would never find out what our most difficult realization had been."

This story about their agreement was interesting—almost fun. It was easier to swallow than the image of pregnant Ana amidst the wreckage of her car...

"So what was her message, I mean, which realization had been the worst for her?" I asked impatiently.

"That's the one thing I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Didn't Ana... well..."

"Yes, she died, but I haven't told you yet what our full agreement was. We also agreed that we would never tell each other where we'd hidden our notes—and also that we wouldn't look for them. Now do you understand? We'd each written down our most bitter realization in our note and hidden it so that the other wouldn't be able to find it. But the hiding place couldn't change; the note had to stay in the same place we'd put it the evening when we'd agreed to this bizarre game. After one of us died, the other would have to find the note alone. This was Ana's idea. 'If you really love someone, then you're on the same wavelength. Always, even after death,' she said. That was supposed to mean that you'd be able to find the dead partner's note. Maybe not right away, but eventually it would dawn on you, and at some point you'd just get up off your chair or lift yourself, all wet, from the still-full bathtub, and simply take the note from its hiding place. I agreed to go along with it, though I'd never quite believed that anyone could share the same frequencies, be on the same wavelength, or other similar hocus pocus. But I found it so amusing, as if we were flirting with destiny. So, all those years when we were moving from one apartment to another in Ljubljana, the notes moved with us. They were always with

us—somewhere. And after her death... Only after a half year did I find the strength and willpower to think about her message. I didn't start to look for it right away. It meant too much to me. You know, in my deepest sorrow I was consoled by the thought that I was going to hear something from her again, that I would have something of her after her death. One last word. But I couldn't find the note! I haven't been able to find it in the past seven years."

"Are you still looking for it?"

"No. It would be meaningless now. I've searched everywhere; I didn't even want to move because of the note. Now I know that only chance can reveal it to me. That's why I let it rest."

Naturally, I immediately imagined myself nervous and crazed, searching every day for Faith's note. But we hadn't made such an agreement; something like that had never crossed our minds.

"No," Matej said seriously. "It's better you don't tell Faith about it. And don't even think about making the same agreement."

I didn't want to think about that or flirt with destiny either. In order to change the direction of the conversation, I asked him what his note said.

"I burned it. That had also been part of the agreement. The one who survived was supposed to destroy his or her own note without telling anyone what it said. That's why I can't tell you what I wrote. But I can tell you that I mentioned a realization linked to an event from my childhood. Now I certainly wouldn't put that down as the worst thing that ever happened to me, as the thing that devastated me the most. Now that Ana has died, I don't feel the same way anymore."

Matej's story left me restless. I probably thought about it late into the night. Even I was trying to remember where Ana could possibly have hidden her note. But Matej was right: he was going to find the note only by chance, or not at all. I imagined how I would tell Faith this story despite Matej's warning. In any case, we weren't going to make an agreement, I decided. What if it brought us bad luck?

Finally, Friday came: the day to return to Ljubljana. The previous night at the European biologists' farewell party, Matej and I drank a bit more beer than usual—I, of course, out of happiness that Faith and I would soon fall into each other's arms. The next morning I found myself awake at five-thirty. I called over to Matej's room, and within a half hour we were in a taxi on our way to Amsterdam's Schipol Airport.

During the flight I was barely even able to listen to Matej, as I was already counting down the minutes till we landed at Brnik, though we managed to exchange addresses and phone numbers.

At Brnik, Matej took a cab. The last thing he said to me was to call him sometime so that we could get together and talk over a beer. I absentmindedly nodded, my eyes scanning the crowd for Faith amidst those waiting for passengers. Then I saw her parents. They looked so exhausted and serious that a cold shiver ran through me.

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I think almost two whole years have passed since Faith's death. The house where we last lived together has already been demolished. That's good. Right after the funeral, I moved into a boring, bleak one-bedroom apartment. Like Matej, I didn't want to talk about her death for a long time. And even less about the two months following her accident, when I hoped in vain that she'd awaken from her deep coma. Even if she wakes up, the doctors told me, we don't know how she'll be. She would certainly never speak again. Her potential inability to talk didn't worry me at all. I knew that the silence after our final parting would be deafening...

At the beginning of May of last year, Matej wrote to me unexpectedly. I was very surprised and in my numbness, even happy. It was weird to me that in those worst months following Faith's death I had never called him. He probably would have known how to comfort me better than anyone—if in such moments talk of comfort is even possible. But I had been too weak, even for comfort. And—if I'm being honest—I resented him a little because at the seminar in Utrecht he'd told me that morbid story, which somehow crept into the life Faith and I shared.

With shaking hands, I opened Matej's letter:

“Dear friend! An ex-classmate of mine in biology told me what happened to Faith. So you know that I'm aware and that you don't have to explain anything. I didn't want to call earlier, as I thought that you needed peace and time, at least for the first stage of mourning. To be honest, I wouldn't have known how to help you. I wouldn't have had anything to say, just as you were at a loss for words in Amsterdam when you heard about Ana's death. Unfortunately we can't be brothers in grief: our pain is too similar.

Do you remember the agreement between my late wife Ana and I that I told you about in Amsterdam? I left it to fate and ended up finding the note. It was hidden in an Indian wallet she once gave me. She'd sewn the note inside the wallet, which is why I couldn't find it for so long, though I was carrying it with me the whole time.

I give you her message, which comes from the heart.”

I snatched up the envelope and took out a yellowed sheet of paper, torn out of a plain notebook. I imagined Ana as a college student in her room, stuffing the note into the hidden compartment of the wallet, and anxiously listening for steps in the hallway as she sewed, in fear that Matej would take her by surprise.

I took a deep breath. I unfolded Ana's note, all nerves, because I was finally going to find out which realization had been the most bitter for her:

"I GREW UP THE MOMENT I LOST BELIEF. SO THE WORST THING FOR ME WAS LOSING FAITH. YOUR ANA."