

*The splitting of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe ... If only I had known, I would have become a watchmaker. –Albert Einstein*

## **Chapter 7**

### **A summer changes my life**

*June 1997*

#### **Amsterdam**

On the outskirts of Copenhagen I hopped on board a transport truck and twelve hours later the driver dropped me on the highway outside Amsterdam, somewhere between Rotterdam and The Hague, at five in the morning. I'd made friends with a man who worked in the transport company – his job was to do the routes for the drivers – so anytime I needed to reach a destination I asked for his help and he arranged free travel for me on one of the trucks.

At nine that morning I was already at work in the WISE office preparing for the Euratom Summit demonstrations, and the next day went on to the Alternative Euratom Summit. Put together by European NGOs, we took part in workshops and meetings, and held a huge squat in a former silo, with dinner served courtesy of Rampenplan Kitchen. Rampenplan, a field kitchen serving activists vegetarian and organic meals, started back in the early 1980s during a time of mass action and blockades to stop nuclear power. I spent a long night in one of the silos painting an enormous banner for the Euratom demonstration the next day.

The atmosphere in the city was tense. Amsterdamers took this Euratom Summit as pure provocation. The most liberal city in Europe, Amsterdam was probably the most important bastion of active left radicals. The upper crust of world politicians flooded in, willing to spend millions of guilders in two days just to walk on the red carpet. The city was 'cleaned up' (many arrests and high police suppression). People came from all over Europe to ask for the abolition of the obsolete Euratom Treaty because many aspects of the Treaty were acting against public wishes. We wanted a non-capitalist Europe, a nuclear-free Europe, a Europe for refugees, a Europe for employment, and a more enlightened social policy for Europe.

#### **Post-romantic wedding**

*July 1997*

Paxus gave a speech for the opening of the international blockade at the Temelin nuclear power plant:

“Today I am honoured to join together in legal marriage two extraordinary people: one an old comrade, the other a new friend. Here is a small part of their story. Vladimir comes from the cold Russian Empire. Katell was born and raised in France but escaped to Denmark. They have both been fighting nukes for years: one in the East, the other in the West. They met for the first time two weeks ago, at a beautiful castle in Budmerice, Slovakia. Vladimir was explaining how, again, he was having trouble with border police who this time pulled him from the train and sent him many miles and many hours in the wrong direction. Katell suggested to him, ‘If you marry a West European it will solve this problem. I will marry you.’

“I think these were the first words she ever spoke to Vladimir. They have been falling in love ever since. Everyone loves the idea, except Katell's mother. We all know the East and the West must force nuclear power to stop, and it is especially important to stop the

French and the Russians. In the last few days Vladimir and Katell have written wedding vows:

‘Vladimir, do you promise to tell Katell your life story as a revolutionary in Russia, with all your triumphs and failures?’

‘Da!’

‘Katell, do you promise to testify in the European Parliament when Vladimir is arrested by the Russian secret police, and demand his release while wearing your wonderful wedding dress?’

‘Oui!’

‘And do both you Vladimir and Katell promise to fight nuclear power with all your force until every one on the continent is closed?’

‘*Da! Oui!*’

‘I now pronounce you, Vladimir and Katell, husband and wife. And I wish you a very pleasant honeymoon at the Temelin International Gates.’”

## **Prague**

Two weeks earlier Paxus, Tycho, Vladimir and I were on the Bratislava night train to Prague. Paxus and Tycho slept in a coupé along the corridor, and Vladimir and I together. Vladimir lay on the couchette above me, recounting all his exploits and campaigns and direct actions in his deep monotonous voice. After a while it became boring ... nothing to hang onto ... endless... and I fell asleep.

“Prague! Prague! shouted Paxus, throwing open the door of our coupé. “Wake up! Throw everything through the window.”

Bare feet, jumping onto the train platform, counting bags, boxes and shoes ... we had nearly missed our Prague stop. Sleeping bags? Were they still in the departing train? Ah zut!

Two trams took us to Paxus’s PIANO office-apartment on the fifth floor of an old building, in a narrow and hilly cobblestone street of Prague 3. The area reminded me of Montmartre in a way. Vladimir made us coffee and we watched the city slowly waking in the dawn crepuscule of light.

The next night about thirty East European activists and guests began arriving. They had no idea where to go for hospitality so they ended up at the small PIANO office with us, squeezed onto yoga mats on the floor.

## **Paxus**

In Bratislava I had already spent some time with Paxus, sharing his dreams and faith for a better world – a *revolution in Eastern Europe*, at least in people’s mind.

“You’ll see this summer at Temelin, we’re gonna make a revolution. There ‘ll be a thousand people and we will stop this NPP. It will never start.”

Paxus would leave anarchistic poems on my bed. And he told me the story of the PIANO project, managed by foreigners and women to counterbalance the male-dominated office at Hnutí DUHA (Friends of the Earth Czech Republic). Nuclear *plus* women activists *plus* foreigners: the magic potion to succeed.

Paxus and I made plans for the wedding-of-the-year at the Temelin NPP (nuclear power plant) blockade. Still very intimidated by Vladimir, I repeatedly asked Paxus questions about him. Is he a visionary?

“You should look at your life as an open book, a fairy tale. You can write as many chapters as you

wish. I have found that the most important and effective political alliances are built on personal bonds of trust, friendship, and a desire to share other parts of your life,” said Paxus.

I wanted a paragraph of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” speech to be read at the ceremony but I never found an English edition of it in Prague.

Vladimir and I had dinners together at possibly the only vegetarian restaurant in town, Radost, sharing passionate conversations about French and Russian *MOX* nuclear programs and low-level radiation. We both ran workshops for the Eastern European activists, and I contacted as many news agencies as I could for maximum international press coverage on our Temelin blockade. I called my mother at ten at night from a public payphone with the wedding news and she almost had a heart attack.

## **The Temelin international blockade**

From my diary:

I took the 4:30 morning train to Všemyslice village and walked four kilometres to the camp where the delicious Rampenplan Kitchen is already set up. Hourrah, we are sure to eat well for the coming days!

We’ll be sleeping under the stars. The idea is to block the different entrances of the nuclear plant so construction is prevented. Every day that the workers can’t access the plant is costing the Czech electricity company and gives us an opportunity to make another press release. Being an international group means we’re receiving international press attention.

It will be a peaceful protest, and to make sure it remains peaceful each participant has to go through Non-Violence Training. I love it. Eye-opening. We all sit in a field with Tycho and Krysta, our two group leaders. Each of us has to answer, among other questions: What is violence? What is violence for a Dane? For a Russian? An Italian? What is violence if you are a woman? If you are a man? Answers range from “pointing the finger,” “sex,” “shouting,” to the more obvious acts of violence like killing, beating, or throwing things at someone.

It is important for each of us to understand what violence means in its widest definition, to not perpetrate it, to understand what our attitude should be at the blockade, be prepared, be centred and not respond to police provocation (if any), and have dignity and presence. What we are doing is legitimate and all we want is to block the entrance and bring international media attention to it. There will be no vandalising on the site, no violence for the sake of violence.

Saturday morning and the blockade officially starts. Heavy rain ... catastrophe ... I set myself up for my job in the check-in tent. It’s a headache to figure out how much each activist should pay for food expenses – everyone is allowed to pay in their own currency – so my cash box is looking like the World Bank. Dinner time. People come in from the heavy rain, starving and cold. Anybody who hasn’t signed the non-violence agreement can’t take part in the blockade – 417 people have signed so Hnutí DUHA is happy. Those who haven’t signed it are probably anarchists who don’t want to adapt to the rules – and there are many of them, Ukrainians and Russians, who have seen an opportunity to come to our camp to ‘be against’ and blindly fight, to spoil the camp.

Sunday 2pm. All tents are down and packed away. We make a huge circle, holding hands, one hundred people or more. Psychologically it is very good, we can see we are big

and powerful all together. From the camp we walk the few kilometers to the entrance of the nuclear plant. Three Sri Lankan Buddhist monks have joined our protest. For hours they will be humming and drumming, adding a peaceful feeling and dignity to our request. We pass the church and cemetery, the only remaining signs of the village once there before the building of the nuclear plant began. The Sustainable Energy Tour (SET) is also with us, happy and dancing to music on their high stilts, dressed colorfully with big hats and red noses. I've been wearing my wedding dress since this morning (an immaculate white *déshabillé*, something I found on top of a trash bin in Prague).

Vladimir and I escape into a cherry tree field and put on our *Just married to fight Nukes* t-shirts. Then comes Paxus's speech to officially open the blockade and express our statement: *Why we are here from all over the world!* The Czech ex-Minister of the Environment is there, and international press too. Vladimir and I are on stage near Paxus, who begins the wedding ceremony. We're looking out at our 600 guests. It is impressive. The media and our international friends are surprised.

Now it is time to trespass the plant property. Making a circle to empower each other, as we did in the non-violence training, we split off into groups. A nuclear power plant has many gates that need to be blocked so we organize Russian gates (led by Vladimir), the international gate, and the Czech gate. Communication is important at times of action. We sit on the ground until evening comes.

Rampenplan Kitchen gives us wonderful hot food for dinner. We are asleep on the bitumen in front of the gate when the police intervention forces take advantage of the dark (bad pictures and bad videos for reporters) and the withdrawal of the journalists to evict everyone at my gate. It is three in the morning. We are held in custody until the next day in a nearby school; the police station is too small for all of us. The Buddhist monks are taken away, with respect, in a police car and held in a comfortable place. The Russians resisted and their gate is still holding firm. This is my 'wedding' night.

## **Summer with Vladimir**

Having our wedding story and spending a lot of time together, Vladimir and I become lovers. Of course I am mesmerised by his charisma, his ideals, his strength and his no-compromise attitude. Physically, I also like him – he looks like Jesus, so tall and thin with porcelain skin, long blond hair and blue eyes. As founder of the NGO Ecodefence in Kaliningrad, he has led campaigns for the closure of a polluting pulp paper mill. Their "Save The Trees" campaign succeeded in preventing clear-cutting of about thirty percent of the forest in the Kaliningrad region. And they stopped the illegal transit of nuclear material and uranium shipments from crossing Kaliningrad. Environmental education, forest protection, whistle-blower for chemical weapons dumping in the Baltic Sea after World War I, and preventing oil drilling in the Baltic Sea and an oil terminal being built in Kaliningrad – all these were difficult projects for Ecodefence.

Vladimir grew up in Kaliningrad oblast (a region squeezed between Poland, Lithuania and Belarus, and perched on the edge of the Baltic Sea). The oblast has a strange history, once belonging to Germany (as Königsberg) then back to the Russian Soviet Union. After the independence of the Baltic states from the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s, Kaliningrad became geographically separated from Russia – a little Russian singleton in exile, away from "motherland Russia," as they like to call it.

Vladimir is an expert at climbing walls and chimneys to hang up banners. He gives me a one-to-one training at the Temelin camp. I love climbing up the tree with the safety harness fixed on my hip bones.

But as soon as I reach the top I am overtaken by vertigo and dizziness, my mind blank. I cannot move. Stuck on a high branch I can hear him giving me instructions from the ground but I am paralysed with fear. And the truth is, there is no escape and no helicopter will rescue me. It takes a lot of reassurance to pull me out of my stupor. *Never again!*

While Vladimir has been steering Ecodefence on the Kaliningrad front and working as a nuclear campaigner for Socio-Ecological Union in Moscow his life is always at risk. (1. Footnote) Questioning the nuclear industry in Boris Yeltsin's Russia means he has been under threat of arrest by the Federal Security Service (formerly the KGB). He has been threatened many times. "In a society like ours, work against nuclear power is human rights work for us," he often says.

Many people have been saying I'm crazy to marry Vladimir because he is Russian: "You don't know him," and so many other conventional reasons. But he makes me vibrate and the idea of marrying a 'Nikitin II' particularly makes me shiver. (In 1996 Alexandr Nikitin spent six months in KGB custody for "espionage," prompted by a report he co-authored about the nuclear hazards of the Russian North Fleet. The report detailed information about accidents on their nuclear-powered submarines and his actions provoked international attention and a call for his release.) My life is about daring and carrying through my convictions without compromise, and with Vladimir I let myself be carried away by the momentum.

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(1. Footnote)

In 2014 Ecodefence was declared a "foreign agent." The organization has done just as environmentalists all over the world are doing: advocating against nuclear power and working for nature and the environment. A new Russian law gives the Ministry of Justice the right to put NGOs on a list of "foreign agents." Failing to register as a foreign agent can lead to prosecution. Foreign agents will no longer hold any legal, political or social status within schools, municipalities, libraries, and other state organizations. Sadly, this loss of status will cause the Russian public to no longer trust NGOs. Though not written in official documents it is absolutely clear the "foreign agent" status is there to isolate NGOs completely from civil life. This is the man I married – so he can have the security of one foot in the Western world, never knowing what could happen next.

### **Eco stationery at the organic market**

Back in Copenhagen, again I manage to find a house for us. Owned by a French expatriate couple, it will only be for a month but I'm happy to have a home to welcome Vladimir to. He comes along with me to the Saturday *økologiske* market (organic market) in Nørrebro I've been invited to.

I am proud to have an opportunity to show my stationery. My booth is definitely the most beautiful: a drying line full of handmade envelopes, pouches in retro wallpaper, vintage notebooks with family pictures on the covers, greetings cards in a metal basket I found in the street, and wooden fruit boxes full of photo albums made from raw cardboard. I feel like a fruit vendor. Everything is infused with the Robin des Bois nostalgia and reused imprint. And everything sells. The "Trash is Gold" idea sells well. The market is over by lunchtime and Vladimir and I go to Props Coffee Shop on Blågårdgade, a place we both love for its atmosphere and the owner's friendliness.

For Vladimir, life is never "just for fun." Fun is *serious* fun for us. But our work emails to each other are always full of poetry and Russian and French sarcastic humor. We meet with representatives of The Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and investigate possible funding from other NGOs. We're directing all our efforts towards strengthening the burgeoning Russian environmental movement and training young people as environmental campaigners, setting up exchange programs and internships for young Russians within Danish NGOs. Hours of proposal writing and designing budgets.

## September Stockholm wedding

On September 25 I arrive in Stockholm, Sweden, at four in the morning with the Roland Munch company truck driver. What a luxury to sleep behind the driver in the couchette, knowing I am travelling safely. Vladimir and I have planned to meet up here for the Baltic Sea Youth Forum, and to get legally married. I wait at the airport for his flight from St Petersburg but it is delayed ninety minutes. Rushing to the train station we leave our backpacks in storage, Vladimir whips off his dirty t-shirt for a clean one with *Wolf* written on it and we ‘run’ to the City Hall; I’m wearing a long wraparound batik skirt borrowed from my friend Sophie so it is too hard to run in, more like a scamper. Four other couples are waiting to get married: a Pakistani couple (she’s nine months pregnant); an unmatched couple (she is eighteen and he is fifty); a ‘normal’ couple; and us, the international couple.

“Yes I do!” And we’re off to the French restaurant L’Escargot on the street corner to celebrate. Vladimir wants to order salmon. I can’t let him make this mistake. I have to lecture him about the latest article I’ve read in the Robin des Bois magazine, *La Flèche*.

“Do you know nine out of ten salmon are actually from fish farms?”

“Ah, really!” says Vladimir.

“By the time it reaches the market your salmon has already eaten three kilos of fishmeal. Five kilos of ocean-prey fish are needed to make three kilos of fishmeal. And half a million tons of salmon is sold every year. Do you know this? So when you eat *one* salmon fed on this fishmeal, the cost to the ocean is five fledgling fish (caught too small) that could have grown into adult-sized fish to be eaten as *fish*, not as fishmeal. It’s a waste of energy and food calories.”

“Oh!” says Vladimir.

“And the true origin (farmed or wild caught) isn’t usually mentioned on the packet. But you can sometimes tell with the color – if your salmon is fluorescent pink it was probably farmed in cages and soaked on its last days in a synthetic food colouring. What about this?”

“But I still feel like eating a salmon, darling.”

We pick up our luggage and walk to the Al Chapman youth hostel, an old marine school ship anchored on a small island in the bay of Stockholm. It is lovely to look through the porthole window, feeling surrounded by sea. We spend the rest of the day there in the Indian summer warmth.