

SWAP

A short story by Jeannie van Rompaey

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Eva and I were sunbathing topless as usual.

‘Katy, how do you fancy a change tonight?’ Eva stretched her tanned arms up towards the deep blue Spanish sky, as if she wanted to snatch a slice of it for herself.

‘A change of restaurant?’ I asked, but I knew exactly what kind of change she meant. I turned over on my sun-bed and buried my face in my arms.

‘No darling, a change of partners. We swap husbands. Is that how you say it? “Swap”?’

‘In England we call it wife-swapping.’

‘You do this in England? I thought it was only in Sweden that we did such things.’

I turned on to my side, propped myself up on one elbow and smiled. ‘You’d be surprised. In certain quarters, so I understand, they used to have key parties. Not our generation. A sixties phenomenon, along with flower power and make love not war. A kind of suburban rebellion. Keys were thrown into the middle of the room and whoever picked up your key became your lover for the night.’

Eva pouted. ‘I shouldn’t like that at all. It’s a lottery. I like to choose my own man.’

She ran her little pink tongue around her lips and looked long and hard at my husband, Jonathan, who was in the sea playing beach tennis with her husband, Sven.

‘Look at them. Men are such kids. But these two are pretty gorgeous.’

They were both tall men, but there the resemblance ended. Jonathan, dark, slim and bearded was clearly an academic. Sven, golden-haired, broad-shouldered and clean-shaven was a muscular hunk.

‘Jonathan and I would never dream of taking part in anything like that,’ I said.

‘Think about it.’ Eva sat up and began to smooth sun oil on her long legs, pointing her toes with their red painted nails to show the shapely arch of her foot. ‘But you mustn’t call it wife-swapping, darling. That is so demeaning. We women must take the lead in this day and age. It is the men who must be swapped.’

Two weeks earlier, on the first evening of our holiday, Eva had appropriated us. Positioned stylishly on a hotel bar stool, she had raised her glass of champagne in a toast. ‘Here’s to us, the beautiful people.’ One elegant leg swung gently to display a crimson stiletto-heeled sandal. ‘Let’s make this a holiday to remember for the rest of our lives.’

Jonathan and I raised our glasses and pledged our allegiance to the goddess of pleasure, without reservation.

‘Your first time in Marbella?’ Sven asked.

‘Absolutely,’ Jonathan said.

‘This is our fifth visit,’ grinned Sven. ‘We know all the hot spots.’

‘I think,’ Eva said, running an immaculately manicured red nail round the rim of her glass, ‘We’ll start with *Club Roja*.’

Jonathan threw me a quizzical look. In Cambridge, we didn’t go clubbing. We left that to our students. But what the hell, we were on holiday.

We were easily impressed by the flashing lights, erotic murals and loud music, apparently a blend of techno, jungle, garage, disco and salsa. After a few drinks, carried along by the energy of the pleasure-seeking Swedes, we found ourselves dancing as frenetically as every one else. We jerked up and down to the beat, tried out a few tricky bits of footwork, waved our arms in the air and threw our bodies about with the best of them.

Later, Eva and Sven took us to a more sophisticated night spot, a place with soft lights and slow, sweet music. Jonathan and I danced together for the first time since the last May Ball that we’d bothered to attend, at least three years earlier, if not four. Our bodies pressed against each other with comforting familiarity. Then Eva asked Jonathan to dance and I danced with Sven and a pattern was set for the holiday. The husband swap, at least as far as dancing was concerned, had begun on that first night.

Sven had hired an overlarge silver Mercedes, which he drove at a pace and style more suited to Brands Hatch than the coast road, with its tortuous bends and busy traffic. One mistimed slip could have sent us crashing into another car or over the rocks into the sea. The odd thing was that neither Jonathan nor I, though cautious

drivers ourselves, uttered one word of protest. The recklessness of Sven's driving did scare us, but, we seemed to thrive on it. We gripped hands in the backseat, nails biting into the other's palms, and grinned at each other through clenched teeth, as Sven clung on to the steering wheel with savage zeal and put his foot down hard on the accelerator.

Back at the hotel, in bed, I decided to make the most of the highly charged atmosphere that the evening had generated. Jonathan was in his usual sleeping position, his back towards me, so I fitted myself into the chair of his back and began to run my fingers over his chest. His hands placed themselves firmly over mine. There was the usual little sigh of dismissal and the usual excuse, 'Forgive me, darling. I'm absolutely wrecked.' A peck on the cheek, followed by the familiar sound of regular breathing, indicated that he was well on his way to sleep.

I lay on my back, eyes wide open, and thought about the state of our relationship. For some months, we had not made love. We'd found a multitude of plausible excuses: we were tired, overworked, had lectures to prepare and editorial deadlines to meet. I tried to remember why and how this *impasse* in our intimate life had occurred; but my traitorous imagination strayed to Sven and I fantasized a little about what it would be like to have sex with him. I smiled. If his lovemaking were anything like his driving then God help me.

Jonathan and I had met ten years earlier, when studying in Cambridge. He was reading for a doctorate in philosophy. I was a classicist. We drifted easily into a relationship that suited us, intellectually and physically. When it became clear that we were both going to stay in Cambridge and lead an academic life, marriage seemed the logical next step. We bought a Victorian terraced house, which we vaguely thought might be peopled by children one day, furnished it with antiques and lined the walls with shelves overflowing with books. We entertained and were entertained by a close circle of friends, mainly colleagues from the university. A pleasant enough life.

Quite early on, we had laid down certain ground rules regarding our relationship. We agreed that jealousy and possessiveness were unattractive qualities, that marriage should not be a prison. We were not looking for opportunities to be

unfaithful, far from it, but we had seen too many all-consuming relationships in which one partner, or even both, had felt trapped. If one of us did feel the need to have a relationship with someone else, the other would not stand in the way; but there were to be no secrets, no furtive affairs. If such a situation arose, we would be frank with each other. Like many of the academic theories that permeated our work, our personal ground rules had not yet been tested.

The holiday had been my idea. After a busy academic year in which increased administrative responsibility had been added to an already heavy teaching load, I thought we were entitled to forget work and relax. Jonathan agreed readily enough and left all the arrangements to me. It had occurred to me that, in the relaxed atmosphere of a holiday in the sun, something might happen to redress our flagging sex life.

Eva and Sven might well provide the key. The stylish modernity of the Swedish couple was a far cry from the serious, politically motivated, progressive stance adopted by most of our Cambridge friends. Eva was self-obsessed, outspoken and brash, while Sven had more brawn than brains, but they proved excellent company. The two weeks we spent with them turned out to be, as Sven expressed it, “a real blast.”

It was Eva and Sven, Eva in particular, who made the decisions each day: where to eat, drink and dance. We were only too willing to drift along with whatever diversions were suggested. Day after day, night after night, Jonathan and I threw ourselves, with all the fervour and ingenuousness of first year university students, into a hedonistic lifestyle that, by all the usual terms of reference, should not have interested us in the least.

In the small hours of the morning we stripped off our clothes, and ran naked into the darkness of the Mediterranean. The startling impact of the cold, black water lapping against my naked body was matched by the sensual danger of the cat and mouse game I was playing with Sven. His huge arms threatened to envelop me in a passionate watery embrace. As for Jonathan, skinny dipping was completely out of character. At home, the nearest he came to public nudity was a towel tucked round his

waist after a shower on his way from bathroom to bedroom. Yet, he seemed uninhibited about the naked night swim, an experience that was repeated several times. No doubt the proximity of Eva's beautiful body acted as a stimulant to his pleasure, as Sven's did to mine.

As the holiday progressed, the relationship between the four of us grew stronger, including the friendship between Eva and me. Lying on adjacent sun-beds, neither of us being keen on swimming or playing beach games, we became quite close in a kind of superficial, feminine way, a type of closeness that I had not shared with any other woman since my teenage years. We discussed clothes, hair styles and beauty treatments, concerns that were at the centre of Eva's life, but very much on the periphery of mine. It was Eva, as much as Sven, who made me aware that I was attractive. As petite and dark as Eva was tall and fair, I had never considered myself more than average in the beauty stakes.

'Do not underestimate yourself,' Eva said. 'You have eyes to die for. Dark and mysterious. If you made the most of yourself, dress-wise, you would be stunning.'

We wandered round the shops in *Marbella* and *Puerto de Banus* in the early evening, while the men propped up a bar. Eva was the "shop until you drop" sort of woman, although, during the time we spent together, I never saw her drop. I hadn't been shopping with another woman for years. In Cambridge, it wasn't done to take too keen an interest in what we put on our backs.

Eva held dresses, trousers, skirts and tops against me, as if I were a Barbie doll. It was, 'Oh no, darling, that's not your colour' or 'Yes, you must buy that. It's just you.' Often we returned to Jonathan and Sven laden with bags of new clothes. Just as often, we turned up wearing new outfits. 'We'll wear these, this evening,' Eva would inform me as she stuffed our old clothes into a bag or asked the assistant to bin them. 'You won't wear those any more,' she would say to me. 'Not now I've given you a makeover.'

That's what Eva did. She gave me a makeover and I not only looked better, I felt better. Even Jonathan noticed. 'You look good, Katy. More feminine,' was his comment, which made me wonder about his previous impression of me when dressed

in the usual female Cambridge garb of long dark skirts or trousers, plain tops and loafers.

Eva flirted with Jonathan and he responded. His keen blue eyes narrowed as he gave her the benefit of his cynical wit. They sparred with each other, scoring points in a game of slick repartee.

‘What is a gorgeous man like you doing wasting his life with his head buried in stuffy old books?’ she would ask, leaning against the bar in some nightclub or other.

‘I haven’t looked at a book since I’ve had the chance to feast my eyes on you,’ was his reply.

‘I’m as good as a book, am I?’

‘You are as good as some books.’ He leant forward to light her cigarette. ‘You are, what shall I say, light fiction. Good holiday reading. I could entertain myself between your covers for a while.’

She laughed as she dragged him, not too unwillingly, on to the dance floor, put her sun-tanned arms loosely round his neck and laid her cheek lightly against his.

Her cigarette, in red taloned fingers, hovered dangerously near his neck. ‘This is good for my ego,’ said the wink that Jonathan gave me over her shoulder.

Sven and I did not try to match the verbal banter in which Eva and Jonathan indulged, but when we danced, Sven held me very close and our bodies talked to each other as fluently as any words. I learnt, from the way he held me, that, in spite of the ruthless manner with which he drove the hired Mercedes, he would prove a tender, considerate lover, given the chance; but I made sure we played our sexual power games in public. The night swims were the most tricky. We kissed and held each other in our arms, as did Eva and Jonathan, but when Sven became more demanding, I splashed water up into his face and darted under the pumped up muscles of his arms, a tiny fish escaping from a shark.

The mindless flirting with Eva and Sven continued and maybe it was these flirtations that led to Jonathan and I making love one night - or rather having a perfunctory fuck. It didn’t take long and he was fast asleep a few minutes later.

A couple of nights before we were due to go home, Sven swung the car inland, put his foot down and drove in his usual crazy fashion, up the zigzag mountain roads. When he had gained some height, he ground to a sudden stop. Like the hedonists we had become, we climbed out, piled on top of the car and bayed to the moon. Our howls must have been heard for miles. Jonathan and I stood on the roof, Eva was spread-eagled on the bonnet, begging the Moon-God to take her womanhood now and spare her no mercy. Sven leaned against the open driver's door and grinned at our idiotic postures. There was a bit of discussion about whether the moon deity was a man or a woman, particularly as her name was Diana. Eva said that gender wasn't an issue that He/She should take her anyway and damn the consequences. Jonathan and I, caught up in Eva's impassioned fantasy, began to sing, or rather belt out, all the songs we could remember about the moon: "Moon River", "Moonlight Mama of Mine" and, of course, "K-k-k Katy" amongst others. The words we couldn't remember, we made up. While we were concentrating on our operatic rendering of the chosen love songs, we failed to notice that Sven had slipped back into the driving seat. He revved up the engine and careered off at breakneck speed. No time to clamber off the roof on to the rocky verge or to lever ourselves through the window to the comparative safety of the back seat. No chance to do anything but to fall down, kneel down, sit, lie, sprawl across the roof, cling on to each other and on to any bit of the car we could manage to grip, while we screeched abuse at Sven and shrieked in terror. Sven swerved round the mountain bends like a maniac. Vertical rocks confronted us on one side, a dark chasm of nothingness on the other. We imagined ourselves crashing against the sharp-edged cliff face or hurtling down into an abyss from which there would be no return. We clung on to the roof of the car, certain that our last moments had come, while Eva screamed her death cries from the bonnet. When Sven finally pulled up and allowed us back in the car, he was flushed with excitement. We were grey with fear. Eva lashed out at Sven with tongue and hands. Her curses were in Swedish, but we had no trouble understanding what she was saying.

Sven treated us to his captivating grin. 'OK,' he said. 'So I went a little too fast but we are all here. All safe. You accept my apology, yes?'

The incident upset me, but Jonathan appeared unmoved.

‘He must have a death wish,’ I said as I sat on our hotel bed, hugging my knees.

Jonathan lifted his eyebrows. ‘We’re still here,’ he said dryly. ‘Shall I use the bathroom first?’

‘How can you be so calm about it?’

‘He’s a crazy driver. You know that.’

‘Crazy. I should think he is. I don’t want to drive with him ever again.’

Jonathan smiled and ruffled my hair.

‘Until tomorrow night,’ he said.

He was right. The next evening we found ourselves back in the Mercedes, racing along the coast road to *Marbella*. It was clear that we were on a joyride from which we did not want to escape.

It wasn’t until I was in Sven’s arms on the dance floor that I had a chance to challenge him about his outrageous performance the previous night.

‘I thought you liked to be frightened,’ he said. ‘You’ve never complained before.’

‘You nearly killed us. I don’t know how we managed to hang on.’

‘I was angry,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘You know why.’

I assured him I did not.

‘You and Jonathan, arms round each other, laughing, singing.’

‘You don’t think we sing well?’

‘You know what I’m saying.’

‘I’m not sure that I do.’

‘You know, you two, such a perfect couple.’

‘You wanted to kill us because we’re perfect?’

‘I wanted to scare you a little, that’s all. Make you remember me.’

I stared at him. ‘You were jealous?’

‘Yes, I was jealous. It is true.’

He pressed his body against mine and swirled me round, lifting me off my feet.

‘What are you doing? Stop it.’

He was immediately contrite, transformed from jealous maniac into the gentle giant that I was learning to appreciate.

‘I’m sorry. You would like a drink now, yes?’

We returned to the bar to join the others. My hand shook as I sipped the fruit juice I’d ordered. Sven was suffering from jealousy, the one emotion I despised.

On my back on the sun-bed, I stared up at the cloudless sky, thinking about the proposed husband swap. I asked Eva with professed innocence, ‘What makes you think Sven would want me?’

‘For Christ’s sake, darling, you know he wants you. He’s already made that clear.’

‘You’ve discussed it with him?’

‘I don’t have to, darling. I know him. I see the way he looks at you. The way he dances with you. Take my word for it, he’s in lust with you.’

‘Oh Eva, you’re impossible,’ I giggled.

‘Darling, we are talking about one night. Just one night. What’s the problem?’

Incredibly, I found myself thinking that Eva’s proposal to swap husbands for the last night of our holiday might not be as preposterous as it had first seemed. The sexual atmosphere between Eva and Jonathan, as well as between Sven and me, was already charged. In one sense, it seemed logical to carry things through to a conclusion. Perhaps the excitement of the swap would be the stimulus Jonathan and I needed to generate a bit of sexual energy into our marriage.

It might seem strange that I, a supposedly intelligent woman, would consider such a proposition. I can only say, that being an academic doesn’t mean that you are imbued with a bountiful store of common sense. Over the last two weeks, falling in with Eva's suggestions had become a habit and the close relationship the four of us had shared made such a proposal less unconscionable than it would have been in other circumstances. If I had needed an excuse for agreeing to such a proposal, I would

have said that both Jonathan and I had been behaving out of character for the entire two weeks. One more rash act would make little difference.

Eva was lying on her back, her lovely breasts offered to the sun. I turned over on to my stomach again, my head resting on my arms.

‘You really wouldn’t mind if Sven and I...?’

‘Not if I can have Jonathan in exchange.’

In spite of the heat, a little shiver ran down my spine.

‘I lend you Sven. You lend me Jonathan. It’s as simple as that. The next day we’re all friends again. Don’t look so worried. I’m not going to steal him. What would I do with a university professor, apart from fuck him? One night of lust, that’s all I ask.’

Eva was right. The following day we were all friends again. Nothing had changed, except that the verbal banter, the flirting between Jonathan and Eva, had stopped.

Eva appeared determined to ignore my husband, maybe to convince me that our closeness had not been affected by whatever had gone on between them the night before. She took every opportunity to link her arm in mine, assuring me of her undying friendship. I suppose, to be honest, I also behaved differently. I focused my attention on Eva and took little notice of Sven.

We exchanged addresses, as everyone does on vacations, and promised to write. We would go to Stockholm. They would visit us in Cambridge. There were no passionate embraces when we parted, just the usual pecks on the cheek between two couples who had enjoyed a holiday together.

Their flight left first and, after they’d passed through the barrier to the departure lounge, Jonathan guided me swiftly towards the bar.

‘Back to sanity,’ he commented, as he ordered a double whisky and downed it in one gulp.

Jonathan was rather quiet and uncommunicative during the flight, but it wasn’t until we were at home in Cambridge, that I realized something was seriously wrong.

‘It’s good to be back,’ I said, gesturing at the book-lined walls of our living room.

‘Is it?’ he asked.

‘I’ve enjoyed the holiday, of course, but it’s great to be home.’

‘Is it?’ he said again.

I pulled him down on the Chesterfield and put my arms round him. ‘What’s up?’

He looked at me. ‘I don’t know you. You were a different person on holiday.’

‘What about you?’

He looked away.

‘I thought perhaps you were tired of me,’ he said, picking at a loose thread in his jeans. ‘I must be a bit dull for you.’

‘Look,’ I said, taking his hand in mine. ‘We’ve done some bloody stupid things on this holiday, but now let’s forget all about it and get on with our real lives.’

He shook his head. ‘It’s not that easy.’

I stroked his hair and tugged his beard, a familiar gesture of affection. ‘Yes it is. We’re home now. Together. That is all that matters.’

‘I shouldn’t have agreed to it,’ he said.

‘Agreed to what?’

‘To that stupid swap.’

‘That was my fault. I’m sorry.’

‘Are you?’ he asked. ‘Are you really?’

The way he looked at me made me realize that he was truly upset.

‘I only went along with it because I thought it was what you wanted, that you wanted Sven. And we’d always said that if...’

‘I thought you wanted Eva.’

He shook his head.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

Jonathan stood up, snatched up our bags and started up the stairs. Half way up, he stopped in his tracks, and, without turning round, asked as casually as he could manage, ‘Was Sven a good lover?’

I began to laugh, but he looked over his shoulder at me with such suffering on his face, I stopped immediately.

‘Well, was he?’

‘I thought we agreed not to talk about this,’ I said.

‘That was playing by their rules,’ he said. ‘I think we should play by ours for a change.’

Eva had said, that, in her experience, it was better not to hold a “post-mortem,” as she expressed it, on what had taken place in the intimacy of the two bedrooms. Our rules, on the other hand, were to have no secrets, to be open with each other.

I didn’t answer.

He disappeared upstairs. I heard him banging about, opening and closing cupboard doors. I followed him upstairs and stood in the doorway of our bedroom.

‘Was Sven a good lover?’ he asked again, not looking at me, intent on unzipping one of the bags.

‘You are the only lover I want.’ I moved to put my arms around him again, but he began throwing clothes and shoes on to the floor, determined to create chaos.

‘Jonathan, let’s put all this behind us. As Eva said....’

‘Damn Eva,’ he said, scooping up an armful of clothes and forcing them into the linen basket.

‘Yes, damn Eva,’ I agreed.

He threw shoes, trainers and beach shoes, one after the other, into the bottom of the wardrobe, where they landed in an untidy heap.

‘There. That’s my unpacking done. The rest is yours.’

I stood still, in the middle of the room. ‘Let’s go downstairs and have a drink.’

He sat himself down on the bed, shoulders hunched.

‘I have to tell you something,’ he said.

My heart was pounding. This was far worse than that crazy trip in the mountains. Far more dangerous. ‘Jonathan, perhaps it’s better not to....’

He wasn’t listening to me.

‘It’s strange,’ he said. ‘We’ve always said that jealousy was an unattractive emotion and possessiveness an ugly characteristic. But I’ve discovered that I am both jealous and possessive.’

I took a step towards him, but he put up his hands to keep me away.

‘No, hear me out. Please. I have to tell you how I felt last night. I couldn’t get my head round what we were doing. Couldn’t bear the thought of you and Sven together. I wanted to bang on the door, tell him to take his filthy hands off you, tell him that you belonged to me.’

I stiffened. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

First Sven, then Jonathan, eaten up by jealousy, such a stupid, childish emotion. I was almost as angry with my husband as I’d been with Sven.

‘I know it was ridiculous,’ he said. ‘That’s what Eva told me.’

‘You told Eva that?’

‘I told Eva I couldn’t make love to her because I couldn’t get the thought of you and Sven out of my mind. There. Now you know.’

‘I bet that went down well.’

‘You know Eva, she wasn’t going to let me get away with that. “I’ll show you darling,” she said. “I’ll show you what good sex really is.” She made me sick.’

His imitation of her voice was uncannily realistic. ‘Are you saying that you and Eva didn’t have sex?’

‘She tried. Believe you me. She tried every trick in the book.’

‘Are you trying to make *me* jealous?’

‘She told me about Sven. She said I didn’t need to worry about you being with him because he was impotent. She said she’d asked for the swap because Sven couldn’t satisfy her. She really believed that telling me that would make me feel sorry for her, that it would turn me on. It did just the opposite. All I could think about was that you wanted Sven and how disappointed you’d be when you realized that he was incapable of making love to you. I was furious with her for tricking you. See how illogical I’d become? One minute I was out of my mind with jealousy, the next I was concerned because you were not going to have your “treat” after all. One thing was

certain. I had no desire for Eva at all and told her so. She called me all the names under the sun, “a boring old wanker” being one of the most graphic.’

‘Oh Jon, I’m so sorry,’ I said, kneeling down by him. ‘It was my fault. I shouldn’t have put you through all that.’ I tugged his beard. ‘I thought you wanted her. I really thought you wanted her.’

He pushed my hands away and grabbed my shoulders, keeping me at arm’s length. ‘I don’t blame you. Don’t think that. I blame myself. I know I’m not the world’s best lover, that we’ve got a lot to sort out between us, physically, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you.’

‘I know, I know.’ I wanted to cradle his head in my arms, but again he pushed me away, stood up and began to pace round the room.

‘One thing has been worrying me. At the time, I believed her. About Sven, I mean. She was very convincing. You know what she’s like. But since then, I’ve begun to wonder. Was Sven really impotent? Or was that something she invented because, in her warped mind, she believed that such a story would make me stop thinking of you and concentrate on her?’

I didn’t understand his jealousy, but I realized, for the first time, that the rules we’d agreed on as the basis of our marriage were my rules, not his. I didn’t know what it was like to be jealous, but the expression on Jonathan’s face was one of such anguish, I felt physically ill. I couldn’t believe I’d caused him such pain.

‘You have to tell me. Was Sven able to make love to you?’

That is when I looked into my husband’s eyes and told him the first and last lie of our very special marriage. A lie I knew I would never regret.

The End

Award-winning author, Jeannie van Rompaey MA writes short stories, plays, poems and novels. If you enjoyed this story, why not check out her novel, *GONE* about the effect on the parents of missing children.

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