



Sarah Sunden in her Millersten apartment. Photo by unknown.

REGARDING THE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH WOLFGANG GRAY SEWALD

In late August 2008 I was going through my grandfather's belongings and I came across a couple of old family photo albums. I was immediately struck by a particular series of photographs depicting my great aunt Sarah Sunden. A third of the photographs depicted an intriguing, life-sprawling personality, comfortable in social gatherings—usually with a cigarette in hand—always laughing and conversing. The rest of the photographs showed a more serious Sarah Sunden where she was either with parts of her family, or seemingly alone in the natural setting of her apartment. This version of her seemed so separated from the other photographs; she looked incredibly sad. I

spent weeks trying to find written information about her. Finally my work paid off and I found a distant cousin who, two years earlier, inherited her grandfather's genealogy records.

The more I learned about my great aunt, the more obsessed I became. I had an urgent desire to get closer to her and to imagine what her life might have been like. In my imagination I had soon built up her whole life—I knew the rituals she kept in her small apartment in Millersten's second floor brick building, what flowers she particularly liked to smell when she walked around in the nearby botanical garden, and what her daily walk was like when she left early in the morning for her day job at the tailor shop six blocks away. I imagined her lying on the striped Victorian sofa for an afternoon nap after the six o'clock news. I

wintertime I would picture her all bundled up, skating on the nearby pond. But all of this work, trying to imagine her life, did not bring me any closer to Sarah. At least not for more than brief emotional moments, which could at best be classified as pretentious and deeply self-assured.

Halfway through my investigation into her life I came across some documents stating that Sarah Sunden was diagnosed with manic depression with a tendency to have epileptic seizures. With this newfound information my fascination for the photographs I had once found suddenly changed drastically in its nature. And the stories accompanying each image naturally changed as well. In the photographs where I saw her smiling and laughing, I suddenly saw her as a crazy and manic lunatic. Showing no sign of neglecting her outer appearance, she was most confident at showing as much of her skin as possible. This exposed tendency would later on work against her, and finally lead to a great state of depression, preferably spent

alone or around her close family members. Hospitalized, I would imagine how she would simply stand by the window looking out, giving the impression of being in deep grief. I could not depict a more melancholic person than Sarah Sunden. Every word she spoke, every gesture, her whole being would be completely distant at these instances in her life.

I have obviously come to the conclusion that none of the stories that I conjure up in my deeply self-absorbed imagination will be even close to any actual events or circumstances. But as I am a curious person, I have no problem trusting my imagination, just as I have trusted the photographs and documents that first triggered this journey. They are both equally correct and incorrect. I only wish to keep on fantasizing with intensity so extreme it makes the distinction between them meaningless. And then I write this down, as I want to create my own version of my great aunt Sarah Sunden.



The hospital is no longer in use. Photographic composite by Wolfgang Gray Sewald