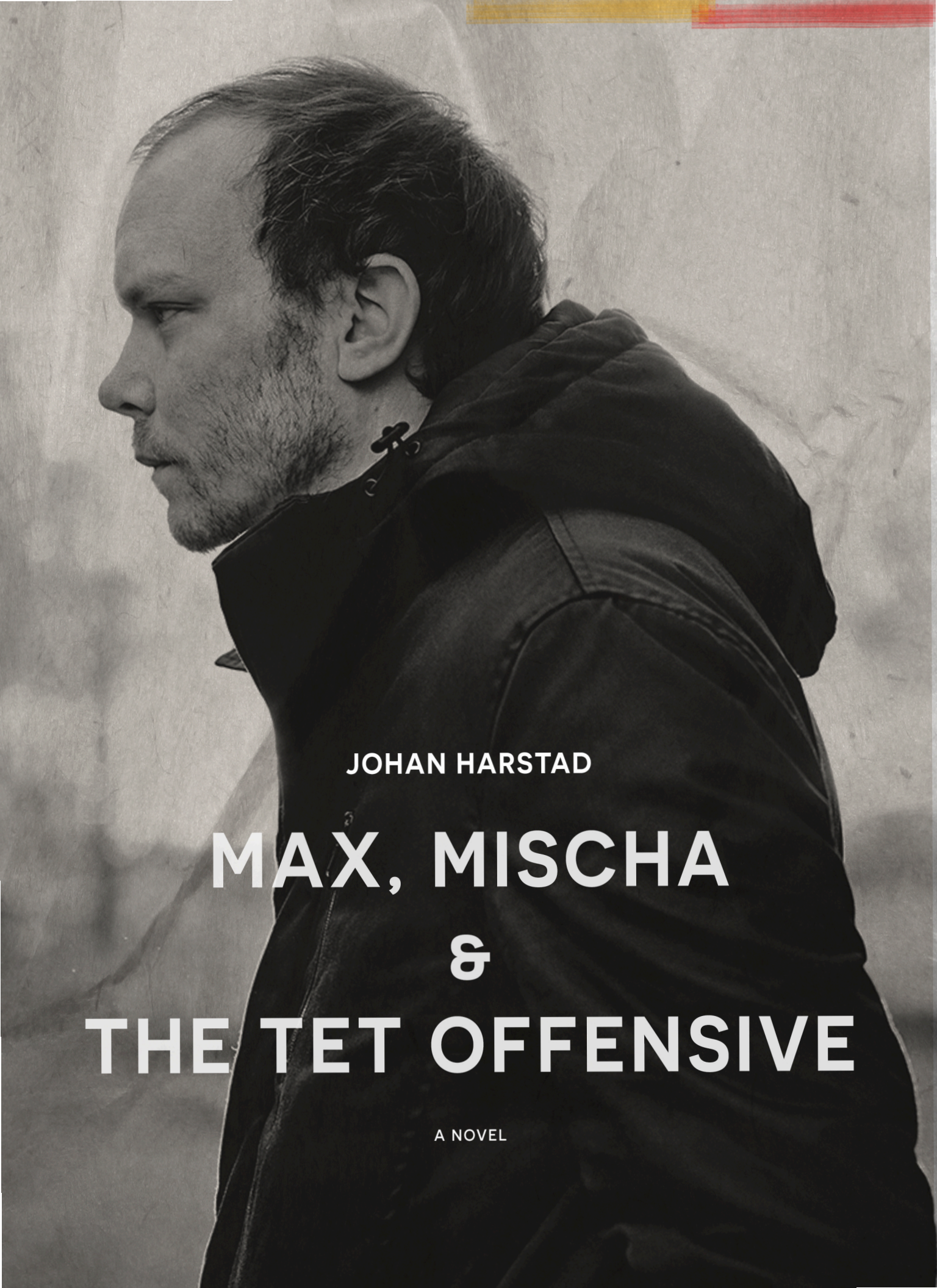


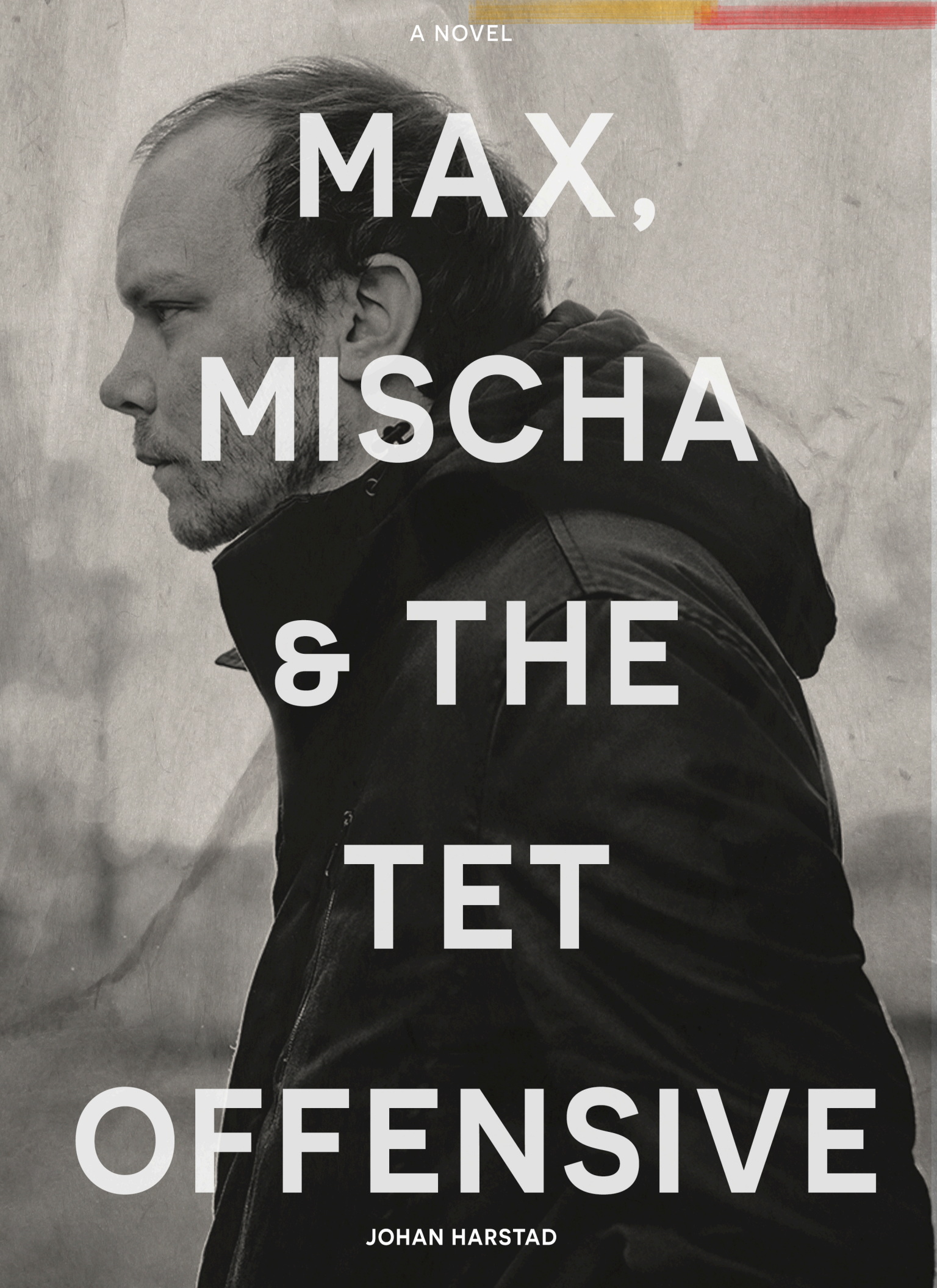
JOHAN HARSTAD

MAX, MISCHA & THE TET OFFENSIVE

A NOVEL

A NOVEL

MAX, MISCHA & THE TET OFFENSIVE



JOHAN HARSTAD

"Sometimes I think if David Foster Wallace had finally been able to write the novel he'd dreamed of, it would read something like Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive. *It's a sprawling novel of ideas and information and pop culture, but it is also a love story folded into a tale of political change. What a big gulp of history Harstad takes on, and brilliantly shows what it feels like to live through – the unseparateness of it. The eerie feeling of inevitability giving way to a new reality frame. This is also one of the best family dramas I've read in some time, because it remembers that a story is essential to family life. Who are we and what are we for? Harstad asks this question of his cast so many different ways the novel begins to feel, in its sprawling uncertain outcome, like it has the grainy flicker of life itself."*

– JOHN FREEMAN (author/editor/critic) –

"There are many ways to say this, but this is probably the simplest:

Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive *is a great novel."*

– *JO NESBØ* (Author) –

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TRANSLATED VERSION OF DUTCH ADVERTISEMENT PROMOTING THE BOOK IN THE NETHERLANDS

The all-encompassing novel by Johan Harstad

'Rarely have I read a book that got under my skin like this.'

Wim Opbrouck

'The literary event of the year.'

★★★★★ **HET NIEUWSBLAD**

'One of the most interesting writers of our time.'

★★★★★ **STANDAARD DER LETTEREN**

'An engrossing novel that makes you work for it and leaves you exhausted, but impressed.'

DE VOLKSKRANT

'A literary tome by Johan Harstad that you simply have to read.'

Bart Moeyaert

€ 29,99
1232 pag.

'A monumental novel.'

TROUW

'For this novel book printing was invented.'

Walter Jansen, boekhandel Jansen & de Feijter

'Fucking brilliant.'

Fleur Speet

'The worlds Harstad creates are so alarming, full of love and addictive that I have trouble returning to reality.'

Arjen Lubach

'The human condition portrayed in a both modern and timeless way. Readable, yet dense. A rare event.'

Henk Pröpper

'A story like a painting by Rothko.'

HET PAROOL

'Rarely has anyone written more alive and heartfelt about jazz.'

★★★★ **NRC HANDELSBLAD**

'There's no doubt that Harstad's *Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive* is the most spectacular novel at the moment.' **Theo Hakkert**

'An enormous, sprawling story about homesickness, art and the question of what *home* means.'

JAN MAGAZINE

'The talk of the town.' **Jeroen Vullings, DE NIEUWSSHOW**

PODIUM

Further praise for Johan Harstad's

MAX, MISCHA, AND THE TET OFFENSIVE

"Open your eyes wide! This is a novel which aims high, overflowing with the joy of storytelling, sharp reflections and a deep knowledge of the human being (...) Brutally clever!"

- *VG* (6 out of 6 stars)

"A gigantic novel about war, love, flight and art which takes your breath away (...) Harstad brings to life the most complex themes with a literary ease, orality and originality which make this a hypnotical read."

- *Dagbladet* (6 out of 6 stars)

"A novel can do so many interesting things to you. It can induce laughter and tears, reflection and doubt, forgetting and remembering, understanding and empathy, impatience and irritation. Harstad's novel does all of this. I have only one thing to say: Respect!"

-Aftenposten

"Outstanding (...) It is an incredible achievement, and almost impossible to describe. You would have to experience it yourself – which you can if you read this novel."

-Dagsavisen

"Harstad's masterpiece (...) A truly great novel."

-Adresseavisen

"Brilliant colossus."

-Stavanger Aftenblad

"Listen to Harstad's magnificent song."

-Vårt Land

"A literary achievement of a rare kind, enforcing Harstad's position as one of the leading Norwegian writers of his generation."

-Morgenbladet

Rights to MAX, MISCHA & THE TET OFFENSIVE have been sold to:

Germany (Rowohlt)

Italy (Iperborea)

The Netherlands (Uitgeverij Podium)

Spain (Tres Hermanas ediciones)

Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive

Quick overview

Max Hansen is sleepless in the Midwest. He is a theatre director on tour across the US. It's possible that he has turned into an American. He hasn't been home for over 20 years.
If it was up to him he would never have left the place he was born, a suburb of Stavanger on the west coast of Norway called Forus, where kids could make as much noise as they wanted while their fathers were working on the oil rigs in the North Sea, and where a heavy silence descended on the houses when they returned. But no one gets what they want. In the summer of 1980, just as Max turns 13, his family leaves Norway behind and migrates to the USA where his dad's new job awaits. In Long Island, NY, Max is forced to find new streets to call his own and meanwhile his family is breaking apart around him. It is here, in this place, that he will meet Mordecai, the best friend anyone could have – at least when he's actually around; and Mischa, the Canadian girl seven years older than the boys, looking like Shelley Duvall anno 1970 and spending her summers out on Fire Island; and finally Ove, Max' uncle, now calling himself Owen and living at the Apthorp on the Upper West Side; the reclusive member of the Hansen family who migrated from Oslo in the late '60s to be a jazz musician among the top names in New York, but failed or arrived too late, ended up volunteering for Vietnam as the war was winding down instead, got lost for years in Northern California and who no one in his family has seen or heard from since 1970. (Some of the novel's sections are told from from Max's point of view and some from Owen's.)

Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive (original title: *Max, Mischa & Tetoffensiven*) is a sprawling novel about belonging and migration; about homesickness, East coast vs. West coast, sun and hurricanes, snowballs and leaf blowers and growing up in suburbs surrounded by golf courses; about those who went to war and those who marched against it and the applicability of Vietnamese guerilla warfare tactics in everyday life; about visual art, exhausting stage productions and generic library music; about Norway and America, washing machines and helicopters and a much sought after workprint copy of Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now*. But most of all it's a novel about the one question anyone who has ever walked out the front door sooner or later will have to ask themselves: *How long can you be gone before it's too late to come home?*

– Novel contents –

(continued)

PART III

PART IV

Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive

A novel by Johan Harstad

Samples translated by Tara Chace

Original Norwegian title:

Max, Mischa & Tetoffensiven

-Sample Pages & Synopsis-

(Note on samples & synopsis: The following text covers every chapter of the novel in order, as if you're reading the book as a whole. When there is a chapter translated, there is no synopsis for that chapter. The synopsis picks up where the sample ends.)

Sample 1, from part 1

(start of novel)

YOU ARE HERE

(NEW DAY RISING. THE BATTLE FOR HUE)
FALL 2012

1

The day begins.

Nothing to be done. Nothing, not about it, not about anything, not about that either. That's worst of all, not a single morning without this all-encompassing disappointment: *yet another day*. And every single time, so help me God, it has to start all over again from the beginning. It never just picks up where when it left off last time, a Tuesday that keeps being Tuesday until the snows come, but the whole thing starting all over again, plodding and without exception, every twenty-four hours, to the minute and second, like a self-satisfied, smart-alecky child trying to impress someone with his abnormal sense of punctuality. At the very least there could have been some experimentation with a week that was twice as long. Then if nothing else at least there wouldn't have to be one Monday after another right in your face. The day and week have only just been there when here they come again, identical and with that same mediocre quality, delivered right to your door, shoved through the mail slot, tossed in open windows, plunking down the pipe, shoved down your throat, down your gullet, like a subscription you just can't cancel and

that the company responsible for can't fathom that someone would rather do without.

Daybreak over Minneapolis/St. Paul. It seems like it's going to be a nice day, that's how it looks, not a cloud in the sky yet. But it's not really definite, the weather is often nicer in the hours before sun up, clearer, milder, and nicer; I bet there's a meteorological explanation for it, I could have asked someone about it and found out, but then I'd be afraid the person would shake their head, set their pages of analyses and weather forecasts aside and smile bravely as he said: *Morning weather? It's only like that so we can bear to put up with one more day.* The same with morning light, one can imagine. God must be in the advertising industry, a trained scenographer at least. Hard to imagine otherwise. Most things look better in the morning, actually. People are the exception. People definitely make their best showing in the evening. Not until it's pitch black out do they show their true faces. Later the blue numbers on the digital alarm clock on the nightstand glow: 4:44 a.m. I should be asleep, I can't sleep. It's been a long time since I slept well, for more than a couple of hours of uneasy rest each night. I'm awake in the darkness and surrounded by crackling silence, or not silence, but an unsettling stillness. Anonymous footsteps on the soft carpet in the hotel hallway on the other side of the door, a key card being carefully inserted into or pulled out of a nearby lock, someone clearing their throat or a fragment of lovemaking farther away (hard to tell the difference), maybe five or six rooms farther down the hallway. Hard to know which one. There are lights on in two of the windows across the street at the university, surely overzealous or desperate students who've been up all night and will soon go home. They're in a different stillness, a softer stillness, anticipating some reward at the end of their all-nighter, whatever it might be. Lots of things, probably. Potential nakedness. For all I know one of them might even show up tonight at the last performance of the play I'm touring with, it's not inconceivable; *Better Worlds Through Weyland-Yutani* was sold out here in Minnesota as well, long before the tour brought us here. My eighth production in thirteen years. That's not that many, I really should have worked more, been faster, more efficient. But you leave the theater after the last show with an inevitable miasma of decay hovering around you, as if the audience has nibbled up everything you had your

actors serve from the stage, there's only the doubt that they'll spit it back out, that's your take away when you move on, half-consumed and with a growing sense that you don't consist of much else. Early in my career I made the mistake of putting my soul into my work. You shouldn't do that, because you don't get it back, not in the same form anyway. I carry it out of the theater with me and it feels less and less like my own, more like a forgotten prop that out of politeness I take the trouble to put away before the lights go out.

The list of performance locations sits on the bedside table next my hotel bed, the cities we have behind us, the weeks we have ahead of us: New York, NY; Boston, MA; Cleveland, OH; Chicago, IL; Minneapolis, MN; Milwaukee, WI; Houston, TX; Albuquerque, NM; Wichita, KS; Denver, CO; Phoenix, AZ; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Los Angeles, CA. Apart from the Mark Taper Forum in L.A., the theaters we're booked at are mostly small, that was one of my specific conditions for agreeing to take the play out of New York and Minetta Lane. I've never trusted theaters that seat more than four hundred people. I've always felt that something happens to the audiences when they're too big, it's like they become some dreadful, monolithic organism reacting collectively to everything they see and hear, while the actors for their part just get worse and worse in a vain attempt to broadcast energy to the hordes in the orchestra seats and up in the balconies. I would rather we play only houses of fifty people at a time and not take more than ten dollars a ticket; theater for the hoi polloi. I would rather have audiences of tightwads, people who were disinterested, people who had other plans, people who had better things to do and other places to be, people who just showed up because the ticket price was so low it seemed stupid not to take advantage of the opportunity. I would have loved to have those folks in the seats and let the actors loose on them; an audience with no expectations at all other than to lose two hours they're convinced they will never get back. People who don't usually go to the theater, who can't list their favorite playwrights or compare different stagings of the same play, people who don't know the difference between Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill and have never heard of Chekov or Ibsen, let alone Yasmina Reza; an audience that doesn't know quite what to do with themselves during the intermission and what that chiming they suddenly hear means; people who clap at

the wrong times and believe in walking out in protest, people who come poorly dressed and cram their shopping bags under their seats, people who are not seeing the shows primarily so they can tell other people they were went to the theater. That would have been something. That would have freshened things up a bit.

Next to the list of venues sat the magazine containing the big interview I gave before the show left New York on tour, which sums up and revisits—or dissects—my entire career. I already wasn't sleeping by that point.

The headline said, "*My Dinner with Max*." Not particularly original. Although, sure enough, we did eat while we talked. You have to take what you get. Nothing to be done about that either. Perhaps I talked too much about Grotowski, perhaps I have myself to thank for the paraphrasing. Peter Brook. Jerzy Grotowski. The whole Artaud business. *The deadly theater; the holy theater; the rough theater; the immediate theater*; the rich, the synthetic, and the gruesome, and the path toward *a poor theater*: Everything was clear to them, those guys. Hats off to them, but I've always stuck with the inconsistent theater instead. Or the skeptical theater. Free of all dogma that wasn't imbued inadvertently. By the way, it was Wohlman who first got me into Grotowski, he loaned me a couple of his books along with Louis Malles's *My Dinner With Andre*, which I saw several times (unlike the third-generation-quality video tapes he also sent me containing long, unintelligible recordings of Japanese Noh theater and an only sporadically subtitled, single-camera recording of a production of Peter Weiss's experimental play from 1968, *Diskurs über die Vorgeschichte und den Verlauf des lang andauernden Befreiungskrieges in Viet Nam als Beispiel für die Notwendigkeit des bewaffneten Kampfes der Unterdrückten gegen ihre Unterdrücker sowie über die Versuche der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika die Grundlagen der Revolution zu vernichten*, also known simply as *Vietnam Discourse* and far less interesting than Peter Brook's experimental Vietnam play *US* from 1966, well documented in workshop form in *Benefit of the Doubt*, 1967, and as *Tell Me Lies*, the feature film the 1968 Cannes festival refused to air), first out of a sense of duty, then later out of self-interest and because my mother really liked it. She was fond of everything that had to do with theater. Wohlman was my and Mordecai's first drama teacher, at Garden City High in the early nineties, when the years and days were still ahead of us and lit up

in completely different colors than they are now. I lived in my new neighborhood on Long Island and I missed Norway more than was good for me, that's probably why I clung to everything I was told and could use. And Wohlman said it like it was: *Nothing to be done*, he said. I think he meant to comfort us. Or himself. I think he spoke from experience, more than just a need to quote Beckett. I'll tell more about him later. About Mordecai, too. And about my mother. And my father. And my Uncle Owen and Antichrist the doorman (of course his real name was something else) at the corner of 78th and Broadway. And about Mischa. I'll tell about her in particular.

I'll tell about all of you.

After all, I'm writing this for you, for us, for myself. I'm writing it before it's gone for me, the way it's maybe gone for you already, the way *sooner or later everything turns to shit*, as Wohlman also used to say (Mordecai had a theory that he really meant □□, the Japanese word *shite*: the protagonist in the Noh dramas). I'm not writing because what happened didn't also happen to other people; our lives weren't spectacular or significant in any way. They weren't, they never were. They aren't now either. But they were our lives, they were the truth, and I've become so afraid of losing them. I've started losing you guys already. Owen is dead, I have only his papers left, a kind of journal meant for no one. And Mischa went back to Canada, to Montreal. Mordecai is in California, I should have called him more often. My father, at the parking lot at LAX. And my mother? Clinging tight in Howard Beach.

We're disintegrating. So are the places we came from. It may be that I've done my last production, that this is the last. In many ways I hope so, I don't know if I can handle another, if I'm up for one more. Can I stand it? Or not? Won't this do now? How many times do you have to clock in before they stop asking you, even on opening night, what your next project is? Like Beckett: *I can't go on, I'll go on*. You approach your work in the hope of exploring and preserving something of yourself, in the, I don't know, hope of understanding more of yourself. But it never fails: When you emerge again on the other side, you understand even less than before. I know myself less well now than ten years ago. I understand less and less.

The only thing I feel sure of, after more than twenty years in this country, is that no one is at home here. America is a country for the homeless.

That's why I'm writing this. Before we're lost to each other completely, transformed into something we didn't used to be, without the ties that once held us together. I think that's why Owen wrote, too. It's not meant as sentimentality, it's meant as survival, and this is the hand I place over you guys, protectively, an attempt to embrace us once and for all, one last time. I'm writing this in Norwegian because I have to. Some of you will need it translated, but it has to be done this way because that was once my language and I need to hear my own voice now. I am writing in Norwegian because I've been speaking English for twenty years and there was so much I was never able to say. I'm writing in Norwegian because this is the language I left behind, I thought it would be mine forever. I'm writing in Norwegian even though so often during those first years in the United States I heard that the language sounded like someone was talking with gravel in their mouth, and there was a time when it made me self-conscious, so I gave it up, set it aside, and only used it when my mother and I were alone. But now I know that that's right, I can hear it myself, how my language is reminiscent of pebbles crunching between your teeth. And that's how it should be. That's what happens to a language that has survived millennia, ground down from Old Norse by glaciers scraping along the mountainsides, washing sediment out the fjords, caught and hauled away by the wind to then lie snowed in for months at a time in the steely cold, to be rediscovered in the spring along morainal ridges and in deep, narrow valleys, dragged homeward in heavy backpacks and unpacked on the kitchen floor, word by word, sharp syllables, with the consonants rising like sharp mountain peaks, a silhouette in the background behind a moose at sunset. I'm writing in Norwegian because I'm homesick and it's too late to go home. I'm writing in Norwegian because I was once Norwegian. I'm writing this in Minnesota, where Norway is being kept alive artificially on an i.v. drip, I'm writing in a room where nothing happens, where I'm just exhausted. A room like all the others. A room where exhaustive work has been done to remove any trace of life from its previous guests. This is the final admission of failure for socialism in practice—we don't want to know about each other. We can't stand each other—a stranger's nail

clipping on the bathroom floor and you lunge for the phone to call the front desk and change rooms, immediately. The cautious hum of the minibar and the whir of the air conditioner; we breathe each other in, and are involuntarily connected in the night, as if we hadn't already become one earlier, taken out of circulation from the world outside; as hotel guests we exist outside of time and the consequences of everything, put in our temporary rooms, pinned down and stretched out like insects until we pay our bills and break out of our cocoons.

The day begins.

Like a stage direction.

When I was a kid, I used to envision the day needing to be started manually, that night would just stick around forever if no one took charge. I pictured a kind of deputy of the Lord, a sturdy fellow, who every morning before any of us even woke up would reluctantly get up before dawn and walk down the straight path into the woods, alone, with his rubber boots gurgling in the marshy ground, in filthy coveralls with the butt of a hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth, trudging off to a cabin way in there that only he knew about, and there, there he would he would set about turning the creaking hand crank that would start the new day, crotchety, complaining to himself. He made the sun rise over the land and caused the traffic to start flowing, with his help news poured out of the radios and TVs and birds once again began singing in a way that made it seem like they were doing it enthusiastically and voluntarily; he made us all wake up and get dressed. Only once the morning rush hour was a fact would he trudge, exhausted, back the same way he had come and go to bed, and not care one bit about his neighbors criticizing him for basically being a worthless, unemployed bum who couldn't even be bothered to pick up his bills from his mailbox or mow his lawn in the summer. When I was a kid we scoffed at God in our family, so that was the closest I came. A man of the people. A clandestine worker. If my parents worshipped anything at all during the first years of my life in Stavanger, it was the dream of the impending failure of market forces and final victory of solidarity, and it would have been easy to tease them when they later stashed their banners in the attic and forgot the slogans and ideals, but it would never have crossed my mind to do something like that. The shame in my father's eyes when as an eighteen-year-old I asked him what the

Khmer Rouge was after I found a flag in a box and a stack of well-used copies of Mao's little red book along with Viet Cong regalia from the years he and my mother had opposed the Americans' warfare in Vietnam, was more than enough. By then he had become an airline pilot with SAS, my mother had her own knitting shop, they earned plenty, we lived well, and we all pretended as if nothing had happened. But it had of course. For ten years, both my parents had been active in what was reputedly Norway's most dogmatic and revolutionary political party of the time, the Workers' Communist Party (the Marxist-Leninists), better known for the sake of expediency by its Norwegian abbreviation as AKP(m-l). I actually think my mother took the whole communism thing less seriously and literally than my father. Not that my mother, who came from a far more well-to-do family and had grown up in Stavanger's Eiganes neighborhood, wasn't also deeply preoccupied with workers' rights and people's latent ability to rise up against the bourgeoisie she herself belonged to. But it wasn't so important to her that the great, armed revolution took place, or that the movement's instructions be followed exactly and accurately to the letter. Truth be told, I think sometimes she secretly shook her head and smirked at the lengths her comrades went to in outdoing each other at each trying to appear like they were the most authentic, self-sacrificing socialist in the Party—whether this involved denouncing absolutely anything that might smell the least bit bourgeois or like a nonproductive distraction or dropping out of their degree programs after many years of study and throwing it all away by signing onto a ship, going to sea, and really putting their back into it with the workers. Of course, according to my mother, that was a fundamental problem among the AKP(m-l)s, that most of party members weren't workers at all, but well educated students and intellectual academics with bourgeois careers ahead of them. If I were to guess what fascinated my mother so much about the Party and the movement, apart from her concern for North Vietnam, which is how the youth wing of the party, the Socialist Youth League, lured her in in the beginning, I think the answer lies in the show of secrecy the AKP(m-l) surrounded itself in, the code names many of them operated under, and the elaborate, breathless, circuitous routes to the various meeting locales in Stavanger, often including changing cars or buses along the way, convinced as they were that they were under constant surveillance, being

trailed, their phones bugged, and government employees in trench coats going through our trash at night. And more often than not they were right, too. But I think this life offered my mother a sense of belonging she had wished for her whole life. It may have been the only place she ever felt like she authentically belonged. In the movement she was surrounded by friends comrades, love, and mutual sacrifice; they stood together through thick and thin against power and they must have felt so invincibly, trailblazingly happy. For as long as it lasted anyway. Before Mao's cultural revolution fell apart. And Pol Pot showed his true face, and a common man with grocery bags stood up to a line of tanks at Tiananmen Square and turned the world upside down again. But by then it had already been over for ages. I've often thought I was a child of the last generation that believed they were making a difference; I belong to the first generation that realized that we weren't.

My mother was a different kind of radical from my father, I guess. She valued personal liberty at least as highly as socialist responsibility and it must have been challenging both to him and the movement how one minute she stood out as an example to be followed where party life was concerned by showing how Lenin's models could be implemented by the collective knitting guild for grandpa's wives and the other shipyard workers at Rosenberg, and then the next minute she would come sashaying into a meeting in colorful, homemade clothes and a big felt hat, like a flower child bearing a message of peace and reconciliation, humming songs by Melanie Safka or Lovin' Spoonful and filled with enough love and laughter to share with everyone over the course of the evening. My father must have really loved her a lot. For as long as it lasted. The Party must have, too, and I've seen pictures of her when she was young, from back then, she doesn't look like the mother I grew up with, she doesn't even look like the mother who ended up on Long Island where her greatest pleasure was to constantly visit the same Italian restaurant at the end of the street. But when I see these old pictures, it's also not hard to see why most people looked through their fingers at her idiosyncrasies and accepted her as she was. She was strikingly attractive in a natural, I almost said unwashed, way and with a smile so self-confident and roguish that people didn't dare exclude her, for fear her smirk would linger even after she'd been kicked out of the movement and that it would cause the majority to begin to doubt absolutely everything.

That must have been what made my father fall in love with her. That must have been it. Maybe he'd never met anyone like her, I can imagine that she represented something he had hardly believed existed. She could talk like a waterfall, about everything and with everyone, never said no to coffee, she was affability and good nature personified, open and curious to even the worst ideas, and she laughed a ton. At any rate until we arrived on Long Island.

But what did she see in him, my father? A care-worn man with a kind of fear-tinged respect for authority figures, evasive and taciturn, deliberate and firm. Had she felt sorry for him? That's not a given. She could have just fallen in love with him, that kind of thing happens, hard to explain, and people don't ask themselves what in the world they were thinking until it's too late. I think he might be the saddest person I knew, and saddest of all was that he didn't realize it himself, because he wasn't one of those men who asked himself how he was really doing. Perhaps the political visions he grew up with and had personally fought for rendered that type of self reflection unnecessary, as long as he was fighting for a new world order I think he thought most things were in their proper places and those that weren't would fall into place the day a classless society became a reality. At any rate when that turned out not to happen, and he and my mother turned their backs on that struggle and put their faith in a more traditional life with a focus on family and career and personal liberty, he came up short. I don't think he had any idea how to proceed, let alone regulate the pleasures in his new existence. So he kept following the path he'd always been on, working too much and putting in too much effort, without looking around and without it mattering to anyone. And maybe as he sat there with a cup of coffee in the captain's seat of his 747, on his way from LAX to CDG and two nights in a hotel in Paris, with the sunrise at his back and twilight ahead of him, the irony never dawned on him that he was miles above the people he had decided so long ago to fight for, and that in reality the notion that pilot was a labor career was pretty much just a necessary self-delusion.

My father's shaky relationship with the ghost that had haunted Europe was also evident in the names he gave his children. If not my own, then my sister's. I've disliked my name for as long as I've had it: Max. It's German, of course, my great

grandfather's name, but Dad used to say that was a coincidence, and that he gave it to me to send a signal to my mother. My sister is four years older than me and Dad had thought he was finally done with diaper changes, poop, and sleepless nights, and that he was closing in on the chance of having a more or less sensible conversation with his offspring when I announced my arrival. So I guess he needed to say something about two kids being enough. But in reality my sister was just as unfortunate, she was named after Ulrike Meinhof. I think Dad wanted to set an example, something about how those who tear down the world, also change it. And may also rebuild it. Sometimes I wondered if maybe he wasn't a little in love with her, and maybe he dreamt that Ulrike Meinhof would someday stand there in his cockpit, legs apart, gun over her shoulder, and kidnap him away to a totally different existence. I think he thought she was pretty, he must have, and that was really the only reason, which you have to admit is an extenuating circumstance. Come to think of it, he looked a little like Andreas Baader, too, at least in older pictures. But then most people back in the seventies did. But when Meinhof died in '76, Dad had just started looking around for a way out of his Marxist-Leninist phase, which meant it wasn't so cool to have a daughter around who constantly reminded him of who he'd been. So on the sly, without consulting anyone, he filed the paperwork and changed her name, added an extra K—to Mom's relief—and then told his three-year-old her name was Ulrikke.

While Dad had the final say about his children's names, my mother had veto rights when it came to our upbringing, and I can't discount the idea that the authoritarian and painstakingly regulated life AKP(m-l) represented may have been a contributing factor in my sister Ulrikke and I having been given as much freedom during out our childhoods as we were, as a contrast. Or I guess maybe it was the result of my mother's nature and my father's unwillingness to contradict her smirk, when he came home from work and found that instead of making dinner the kitchen converted into an amusement park and saw that Ulrikke and I had changed clothes and apparently genders as well, or when I announced that I wanted to set up the tent in the yard and camp out, even though it was already past what father thought was my established bedtime and he knew that there wasn't going to be any sleeping going on out there and to the contrary that he would be

the one who would have to go out there and get me when I ended up in tears a few hours later, he who would have to stand out there in the dark and make sure he had all his tent stakes. While my father always dictated how far from the house I could go when I was outside playing and demanded to know exactly where I was, Mom's rule was simpler: *Don't go so far that you can't remember the way home. And come home before you get tired.* As it happened I longed for a father who set boundaries for me, who enforced limits. A father who got permission from my mother to go out and look for me, bring me home at night when he thought I'd been out too long and was worried about me. I don't know if I remember the way home anymore. I don't think my parents do, either.

The day begins. Time passes, but now I know that the day isn't set in motion by a reluctant worker, it isn't cranked into play by the strength of anyone's hand or breath, most things are automated now; at best time is a shabby karaoke machine, fifty-two albums that repeat ad infinitum, with seven tracks on each of them, and an electric jolt that pokes you in the back at the crack of dawn, forces you to grab the microphone and sing at the top of your lungs to a yawning audience whose eyes have started wandering toward the exit. But it's still quiet here, almost totally quiet. And sometimes I stand still myself, completely still in the stillness, so to speak, so that I am incorporated into it, or encompass it myself, the silence, standing up straight on the hotel room floor, barefoot on the low carpet that has dutifully had a vacuum quickly run over it, in the full knowledge that it would take more than that to actually get it clean, which there isn't time to do, there are too many rooms, there's always too little time, that's the only thing there's too much of, the lack of time, the carpet isn't clean, it was vacuumed, skin cells and other remnants from previous guests have become a part of it and cling to its fibers, the way I have become a part of the silence; I stand still in the middle of the room and after a while it feels like the world has been paused, a glorious respite from it all, where thoughts of the work that needs to be done in just a few hours, probably on no more than a handful of minutes of sleep, fail to materialize, and the tasks that are waiting, the dinners and conversations and meetings and meals and showers and bills and airplane tickets and telephones and shirts from the hotel laundry which will arrive between nine and noon and whatever else, all the obligations and

expectations, for a few wonderful minutes it's like it's all paused and I imagine that if I look out the window, down at the road, then the cars will have stopped, locked in the asphalt, fixed at a point between here and there, with immobile drivers behind the wheels in the dark, on their way toward a bridge over the river that won't run until the world is set in motion again, the molecules temporarily stripped of their ability to vibrate, a lull all the way down to the level of the elemental particles, if something like that is possible without the world coming unhinged, and across the street, the students who are no longer turning pages or taking notes, the throat clearing or sex five or six rooms down the hallway that slows down and stops. Only after I move in my hotel room does everything go back to normal and start up again.

The day begins.

(End of sample/end of chapter)

SYNOPSIS

(Continues from end of sample)

Chapter 2

New city, new theatre, still no sleep. It is a draining play, for the audience and cast alike, and every night it grows longer.

Chapter 3

Wisconsin. The streets of the different cities they visit all seem the same to Max, but a rainy Lake Michigan offers a variation. He flicks through a magazine in which he's interviewed, and reflects on his career and how all along he has been driven by his doubts and hesitations and profound fear of finding himself homeless.

Max falls asleep in his car by Lake Michigan, and wakes up to his phone ringing: A Mr. Tobias Meyer at Sotheby's is pleased to inform him that his painting, *Vietnamization (Colby)* by Mischa Grey, has been sold for $1,515,000, to an anonymous buyer in California. The painting was a gift from Mischa. He sold it because he was angry, but now, he feels it might've been the worst thing he's done to her, he's simply tired. Driving back to the hotel, he prepares for the night in the theatre.

Chapter 4

Houston, Texas. Watching *Brewster McCloud*, where the streets of Houston are almost unrecognizable compared to the streets outside his hotel window, Max realizes how he might have gotten lost in Stavanger, had he gone back there now ("you know, most people dream about escaping the place where they were born, you and Mark Rothko are the only people I know of who can't let it go," he remembers Mischa once saying). He's given up sleeping in hotels, but as they reach new places on the tour (Max has insisted on driving, not flying with the rest of the cast and crew), he's from time to time able to catch a few hours – sometimes as much as six or seven, in the car. Three more weeks to go.

Chapter 5

Stavanger, 1988, the forest between the factories in the Forus area. Max, age eleven, is dead for the eighth time in a role-play game of the Vietnam War (having watched plenty of films not

meant for boys his age, including *Apocalypse now*). To his parents' frustration he even plays at being American, not the NLF. It was Max's father who sparked his interest in the Vietnam war after Max found a few NLF buttons in the attic, and now – in these last days of the summer holiday – all the games they've played, strategies (some of them) have worked out, costumes they've made and films they've watched culminate in one last, great battle of Hue. This final battle results in a frenzy of shouts, fire extinguishers and – somehow – CS gas, resulting in Max falling out of a broken second floor window, breaking his wrists and collar bones.

He misses out on the first days of school, and having both of his arms in a cast, he depends on his mum to help him out in the bathroom – which, Max states, is not as bad as one might think, it gives them time to chat. But a few days before the casts are to come off, he realizes that there was one thing they didn't talk about: lying awake he overhears his mum and dad talking about moving to the US as soon as he finishes primary school.

Sample 2, from part I

YOU ARE HERE
(NEW DAY RISING. THE BATTLE FOR HUE)
FALL 2012

6

Marin in the morning. I sit on a bench, surrounded by tourists with iPhones and SLR cameras with limitless memory cards and the ability to snap pictures with the rate of fire of a Minigun. Like me, they're looking down at the Golden Gate Bridge. They're happy to be here. We're all happy to be here. We all have our reasons. Our smiles are a language with a million dialects. It's quarter to eight in the morning and the night's chill is still in the air. It hasn't let up even though the day has long since begun. The city at the other end of the bridge, San Francisco. Alcatraz, and Berkeley farther away. I haven't been here before. It's a beautiful city, not like Los Angeles. In San Francisco, I would have really fit in. We got here yesterday. Slept here last night, in the car. I slept well, undisturbed for almost eight hours, until a German rapped on the windshield and woke me up to ask if it cost anything to park here. Then it was about time to get up. Stand up and sit down again, that's how it is. No reason to go if there's no place you need to be. I sit on one of the two benches here; I've been claiming it for more than an hour, smoking cigarettes and drinking water. Sure, only one of these two activities is socially acceptable around here. Somewhere over there in the city is the theater. I can't remember off the top

of my head what it's called, but what does it matter? The address is stored in GPS, as is the Fairmont's, where currently I'm technically checked in. In name if not in spirit as they say. The ensemble has been looking forward to coming here, San Francisco is known for its theater audiences and I wish the cast easier days now, they deserve an audience who'll welcome them with open arms even if most of what's slung from the stage is enough to make a person fling himself off the bridge down there. If so, they wouldn't be the first. Or the last. A troubling number of people kill themselves from that reddish-brown bridge ever year, enough that the authorities are considering installing a net under it to catch all those unhappy and desperate people before they're lost to us for good. Maybe we should have had that for the theater as well. I'm ashamed to have put on *Better Worlds Through Weyland-Yutani*. What was I thinking? I suppose it was rage that made me do it, I think I wanted to air the rage on stage in the hopes that it would abate. It doesn't. The audience obediently accepts the text which tells them that they're all irrelevant and no one cares about them after all. Terrible to watch. How they applaud their own demise because they don't think they deserve anything different. I spot a guy jogging across the Golden Gate coming toward Marin County, and for a brief instant I'm worried he'll be one of the ones who suddenly gives up, climbs over the railing and vanishes, one of the ones who doesn't even hesitate. But he just keeps running, leaning into the headwind down there, a man in his early or late forties, not easy to say for sure from this distance. A half hour later, he comes huffing and puffing up the winding hills and passes me, winded and flushed, with an empty water bottle and sweat pouring from his cap with the word *AWESOME* in big, yellow letters on a light blue background. He looks like a man who regrets everything. Sooner or later he, too, will get there. This, I know: at one time, I was one of the ones running.

WE MEET IN THE GYM at the school outside Stavanger every Monday, Wednesday and Friday in our dark blue track suits with *Forus and Gausel Athletic Club* printed on the back, always on time, well, at least Stig and I always arrive at the same time, we slide our bikes into their spots on the bike rack and shiver in the

cool afternoon air. Then Andri comes, a few minutes later. *Sorry*, he says, *my mom kind of took her time with dinner*. She always does. Cooking isn't her forté.

We've been told we have a lot of potential, that we can go far, we have athletic potential, and our coaches, mostly local parents who have varying degrees of a clue about sports, complain incessantly about all the kids who suddenly stop coming when they hit fourteen, fifteen. But we're going to stick with it, we're sure of it. I've started to believe it, because neither of my parents has said a word about moving anywhere at all and it's 1989, more than a year has gone by, it's early October and I'm twelve years old. I think we're going to stay. So no way am I going to disappoint Sean, the physiotherapist from Ireland who always overestimates the shape we're in and sends us out on impossibly long runs with built-in hill interval training inspired by Spetsnaz forces, or Ola, the bald, good-natured meditation guru who can never figure out the floodlights and lets us run hurdles and throw the javelin in the dark on the soccer field and who, when we come inside where it's warm for the last half hour, puts together these bizarre, multidimensional obstacle courses in the gym which are just as hard to comprehend as to complete.

Yeah, we're going to stick with it, even after we turn fifteen. Of course we will.

We run and it feels like we're going to die. And it's cold out. That's how I remember all the training back then, as something that took place in the fall, or late in the winter, while it was dark in Norway, and the reflections on the asphalt from the cold rain that had fallen. We must have trained in the spring, too, and in the summer, but anyway that's how I remember it, and our breath always showed and we had to keep moving to stay warm and the street lights disappeared behind us as we ran farther and farther each time, always to places we'd never been before, with no idea when we'd get back to school again. It's Stig, Andri and me, together with Sean's eldest son and another seventeen-year-old from my sister Ulrikke's class who digs Springsteen, both of those to our horror. The two older kids always take the lead and know where we're supposed to go, probably hoping that us three youngsters panting along behind them will fall behind and eventually throw in the towel, turn around and go home again crestfallen. But we never give up. We really sink our teeth into it as we pass the twenty-kilometers-of-nonstop-running mark and are sure we'll never make it back alive. We stick it out for the first fifteen

minutes, the first half hour, always the hardest, the toughest, with a stitch in our sides and breathing that's impossible to control, we converse in dependent clauses to shift our focus or just to prove that we still have enough breath left to do this; we run throughout all of Forus, and all the places have their own names, too, I remember all the street names: We run up Ulsbergbakken and Heddeveien, through the woods, and along Godesetdalen, eventually our voices go completely quiet, they're replaced by the sounds of our running shoes against wet asphalt and regular breathing, in and out, in and out, in step, our breathing synchronized, we're like full-speed human metronomes, an organic machine that just goes and goes and goes, and soon it gets darker around us, the distance between the street lights and the houses increases, we're out in the countryside now, past the farms and the fields on Jåttåveien. Something strange happens in our heads as we stop thinking about how tiring what we're doing is, as our legs and brains part ways and leave each other to go do their own thing. This is what Ola has described so many times to his meditation students, *letting your head fly*. So, that's exactly what I do. I let it fly and we run down toward the highway and Hinna, and I leave myself and am raised up, higher and higher, I can no longer hear our sounds, and the landscape opens up, I see us from above as we run through the last evidence that the industrial neighborhood we live in was ever an agricultural area, far from the city, far from the world. I rise higher and stare down at the housing developments and streets and schools and stores and factories that surround the dark green fields where the last of the horses stand still and graze, oblivious to what's happening, and in the middle of all of this I can just barely make out five people running, faster than they were in the beginning, their legs jut out again and again from their lower bodies and pull them forwards, it's an amazing sight, and then I lose us in the cloud layer for a second. I don't find us again until we're past Jåttåvågen where the Condeep bases for oil and gas production platforms are built before being sent out into the North Sea. We're on our way back now, and I think we're glowing, at least I know I am, but I'm not tired, none of us are; we're indefatigable, we're on the cusp of something big, we're going to start middle school soon, our lives will begin as soon as next year and it's impossible to know what will happen after that, reality will open wide and we'll be in the middle of it. We fight our way up the final stretch,

the interminable Gauselbakken, still alive, still with energy left. I can see my own face as I reach the top, see the school and know we're there, I can see myself and I know what I'm thinking, because I'm thinking about my parents, I'm thinking that it's Friday and soon, after a final half hour indoors where we'll get to play our way through an intense round of floorball before we break for the evening, I'll go home, I'll say goodbye to my friends and hop on my bike, ride home, and my mom will take a loaf of garlic bread out of the oven and set it in front of me, along with a glass of soda, I'll eat a little and then I'll go shower, and while I'm drying off and putting on clean clothes, I'll hear the theme song at the beginning of *Norge Rundt*, the show everyone watched on Friday nights, and smell the scent of wood burning in the fireplace and hear my dad say something to my mom and her laugh shortly before she comes and knocks on my door and says the pizza's ready, and then we'll sit there together in the living room, on the brown sofa across from the fancy sofa that we never dare to sit on unless we have guests which we almost never do, and Ulrikke is out with her friends so I have them to myself, my parents, whom I believe love each other. My dad asks if practice was hard and I tell him what route we took and how the landscape changed and he asks if I saw those three enormous concrete legs down in the bay for the newest Condeep which will be done soon and I nod, move more of the homemade pizza over onto my plate and refill my soda and that's how these evenings usually proceed, until they drift into something more unclear that begins to dissolve. I think it's because I'm tired, it's been a long week, I ran so far and now I'm going to bed, so I go back into the bathroom again, brush my teeth as thoroughly as I can and hang my clothes over the side of the tub before returning to my room, get under my covers and wait for someone to come kiss me goodnight, because I still like that, I'm not too old for that, and my mom comes in only minutes later, she walks so quietly, that's the way her feet are tuned, differently from my father's who stomps along through the world in a way that gives the impression that he's wearing snowshoes trudging through heavy snow and needs to make sure his footing is secure. Although my mother's gait is related in many ways, it's like she's always afraid the ice will give way and that the icy-blue water will well up at her. Neither of my parents fully trusts the ground beneath them.

"Are you tired?" she asks, sitting down on the edge of my bed.

"Think so."

"You can sleep in tomorrow, you know. Since it's Saturday."

"Yeah," I respond. "Tomorrow's Saturday."

This is the same Saturday that my parents—while Ulrikke sits on the armrest of an armchair with her arms folded demonstratively because she has places to be and doesn't have time for impromptu family meetings like this, and I sit expectantly on a dining table chair beside her—tell us we're going to move to the United States that summer, as soon as school gets out.

IT IS FALL. It is fall 1989 and then the new decade. The winter and spring of 1990. It's the final weeks of life in elementary school and the graduation party at Anne's house after the last regular day of school in the middle of June, a party that starts at exactly 6:00 p.m. and ends at 10:00 p.m. At the latest. We dance to Percy Sledge and eat rolls and buns and someone hung a disco ball from the ceiling to nudge the atmosphere slightly in a nightclub direction. A lot of the people present have actually been out dancing several times and seen how things are done. Not Stig or Andri or me. But to some extent we're all in the same boat, each of us from this class that has been together for six years spends the evening in a celebration that conceals our sadness and nervousness about the group we've belonged to no longer existing, we've bid a respectful farewell to our homeroom teacher and promised to come visit (probably only two of the girls will actually do it, and only one time, slightly embarrassed as they realize that this is one of those things people say but don't do because now they're busy with new classes), when fall comes we'll all be enrolled in other classes, some of us will end up at other schools farther away. We will have longer commutes to school, new teachers, new classmates to compete with or be teased by. We've existed together for almost as long as we can remember, we've have our assigned seats and we know everything about each other. Who sat across from whom, behind whom, two rows behind and to the right; none of that will carry forward. But at the same time, we can hardly wait, summer will feel incredibly long before we reach the other side of it, where the future awaits and middle school begins. Luckily there's no coming back here. From here on out you

just get older and things get steadily harder. It's a matter of seizing the opportunities that arise. The world is going to smell different now. Like victory.

But I won't be here then. No one knows, because I haven't told a soul that we're moving in a couple of weeks. Leaving Norway for good. I should have, and I had every intention of doing it, at least Stig and Andri. But I just haven't, I've been pretending like nothing is up, even when we talk about what classes we hope we'll be in in the fall and the welcome letter from the middle school that I lie and say I received, too. I've put it off and put it off so long that I've started thinking it might be best to just disappear one day.

The first two weeks of that summer. They never end, they crawl along through the scorching June days. Hiding, behind the curtains in my room, I slowly pack my things and my life thus far. I have the two boxes they gave me that I can bring to the U.S. and many boxes I'm supposed to fill with everything else I "want" to give away, donate to the Salvation Army or wherever it ends up. Actually, it's strange that no one has asked us what's going on, because there's no doubt some of the neighbors must have noticed the all the activity at our place, the heavy velour curtains in the living room being taken down and the trucks being filled with our furniture one by one and driven away the closer we got to our departure date. Maybe people think we're remodeling or redecorating or something. Most of our furniture is from the sixties anyway and I suppose people do fix things up in the summertime.

AND THEN SUDDENLY the day arrives. I should have been home already, but I don't want to. I'm sitting up on top of Ulsberget with Stig and Andri, the gravel sports field is behind us and if we want we can just barely see the eleven-year-olds who just started training track and field, running back and forth across the short side of the field while the coach, probably one of their fathers, yells at them to run faster, better, cleaner, with more control—but we're facing away from them so we just hear them, as if from far away, the yelling and their feet running back and forth across the gravel and in front of us, below us, is Forus, with its factories and gas stations and the Scania plant, rows of trucks parked for the night and I should have been home already, but I'm here. I don't want to go, I want to keep sitting here,

because it's a hopelessly nice night and we're sitting together on top of Ulsberget with Forus below us and it's starting to cool off even though the sun hasn't set yet, it won't do that for another hour and maybe how nice it is doesn't have anything to do with the whole thing, maybe it's not the kind of night where it matters what the weather's like. Maybe it could have been raining and I'd have been just as happy, I don't know, I just know that it's an almost uncomfortably nice evening and I don't want to go home, but I have to, because everything that's not packed and ready, labeled with my name, and placed in the specified locations before my dad goes to bed for the last time in our house, will be left behind.

Tomorrow at six a.m. it will be too late.

We're leaving then. For good. Before the neighbors are awake. A taxi will come and pick us up at 5:50 a.m. and after that all traces of us will be removed, as if we'd never been there to begin with. A moving van will park where our Mazda has parked all those years, and men none of us know will unlock our house with the key my father gave them, carry box after box with our names on them out into the van and make sure that they're sent to our new address. Soon new people and new voices will fill our rooms, they'll bring their own furniture, their own curtains and habits, their lawn mowers and clothes to dry on the clothesline and a totally different car in the garage. And the neighborhood around the house, the streets and roads, the factories and the North Sea oil offices, the traffic and the woods, the railroad and the rocky outcroppings, the shore and the fjord, none of it will be mine anymore, other people will take it over, I will only have the memory of once belonging here, to this exact place, where the summers are humid and unreliable at best and the winters never completely cold, with sideways rain and forecasted storms with incessant sleet and sporadically icy streets from November to April.

And I'll lose my two best friends. That's why I haven't said anything about this to Stig or Andri.

It's after ten. It's starting to get colder, I zip up my jacket, pull my knees in closer even though the sun is still in our eyes. It's one of the first days in July, there's usually bad weather when everyone's on vacation, but a lot of things are wrong with this summer. Just hours before we walked down the hill to the fjord, down to the wharf behind the Sønnichsen metal tube and fittings plant where Andri usually

goes fishing (even if there's no way what he catches there can be all that healthy to eat); we strolled over to Gausel Beach and went swimming, in water that was probably slightly too cold, but Stig believes it's important to swim in the summer, it's good luck, and I know he just made that up on the spot, but I stagger along after them across the rocky intertidal zone with goosebumps all the way up to my face and I step on a starfish before it's deep enough to switch to swimming and make my way out into the fjord, swim hard enough to warm up, and think that if nothing else at least I can swim better than all of them. I swim the seven hundred meters around the little islet of Gauselholmen, where three boys and three girls in their mid-teens sit barbecuing and smoking, they've set up a silver-colored tent and will surely spend the night out there, it looks nice, I envy them, and one of them, a guy with shoulder length hair in a wool sweater and bell bottoms with a freshly rolled cigarette hanging from his lips, stands up as I swim past them, smiles and cheers me on, and for a second I almost think he looks like me, but then he turns and says something to the others, they laugh, I can't tell what at, and I swim back toward the shoreline below the big houses where Stig and Andri are sitting by the edge of the water, throwing rocks at the crabs to break their shells and waiting for me to come ashore. We sit there and dry off without saying much and afterward we retrace our steps back up the same hills, just walking, we roam around in Forus, down Storaberget Terrasse to Heddeveien, down Kviestølen and Bamsefaret, Ulsbergbakken, Petroleumsveien and Løwenstrasse and back again, I don't remember what we talk about, just that it feels like a procession, all of it, like the end of something that was meant to last much longer and along the way, by the grocery store in Kviebakken, we run into several of our former classmates who will be in class with Stig and Andri in the fall, I enter the store instead, walk back and forth between the shelves to kill time while they chat outside, and I don't go back out until I see that they're alone again. Afterward we each buy a bottle of Coke and big baguettes that we eat plain, sitting with our backs against the warm, red bricks on the store's facade. Then we keep going, as if we're busy, and we are, too, we cross our own tracks and enter the woods behind the big residential area, up on Ulsberget, the highest point we can find, that's where we sit down, that's where we've already been sitting for way too long before I finally say it:

"I'm moving away tomorrow."

There's a long silence before Stig says, quietly, "I knew something was up. Have you known for a long time?"

"A while."

They nod slowly.

"I guess we're not all going to end up at the same school in the fall after all," Andri says. "The trio and all that."

"Looks like you guys are going to be just fine," I respond.

"Well yeah, but… I mean, the three of us were supposed to…" He doesn't finish the sentence. Instead he says, "Where are you moving, anyway?"

"To America. Long Island."

All three of us are shocked as it sinks in, just how far away that is.

"Is that… in California?" Andri asks. Best to pretend I don't notice that.

"No, I think it's near New York City."

"California would definitely be cool, Hollywood. Maybe you could go there sometime?"

"Maybe."

And then we talk about California for a bit and what we think it's like there, since there's no point talking about Long Island which we don't know the first thing about, and Andri says that in California people sometimes get killed right in their cars if they're driving too slow in traffic on the freeways, *shot right through the windshield*, he says, Andri read about it and it's probably true. But at the same time, we tell each other that the U.S. also has movie stars and money and the best bands and enormous helping sizes no matter what you order, and we all totally agree that America is cool, nothing wrong with the U.S., we can all picture ourselves living there, moving there and living exactly how we want. *Someday*. But not right now, not tomorrow. It's just too darned soon.

"*This is for us*," Andri says and looks out at Forus.

"Huh?"

"I said that this one time to some lady who came to our house and rang the doorbell, I think it was sometime last year, she only spoke English and was looking for Ullandhaug, I guess she was trying to get to the university or something like

that, and then she asked: *Is this Ullandhaug?* so I told her it was Forus. But I guess it came out wrong, I think she misunderstood me, because she seemed offended and turned around and left."

"*This is for us*," I repeat.

"And in a lot of ways that's true," Andri said.

"This place sucks," Stig says. "Look around, would you? I don't get it. How the hell can people even stand to live here."

"But it's *our* sucky place," I answer.

"The Nazis were the ones who made Forus livable, did you guys know that?"

We did not know that.

"It's totally true," Stig says. "Nobody talks about that out loud, but it's the truth. The Nazis saved Forus from sinking."

"I don't buy it," Andri says.

"Oh yeah, it's true. Even Satan has one good turn in him," Stig says. "They came up the coast in 1940, crawling inland over the sandy beaches along Jæren and they moved north from there into the countryside. Until they got here, to Forus. I think they picked the place sight unseen. They must have. If they'd only taken the trouble to check the eta… etamolo… molotology…"

"E-ty-molo-gy?"

"…behind the name of the place first, they would have realized that Forus means *swampy terrain*. And that spells trouble, right? But they came, the Third Reich waded into the swamps and decided to locate the headquarters for their fighter planes in the middle of the region's most hopeless wind and weather conditions. They built concrete runways and a five-kilometer-long taxiway, shatter-proof hangars, they floundered around in the mud wreaking havoc, then they finally built solid, efficient channels and drained the swamp water out into Gandsfjord and Hafrsfjord and shored up the soil in Forus forever. And then they flew away, which must have been the only time the runways were ever used."

It was easy to picture. That first and final sortie. If you blinked you would surely miss the Messerschmitts departing Forus in a bright steely swastika formation in the sky.

"Later," Stig continued, "thirty years later, after the oil started gushing and the high housing prices crept outward from downtown Stavanger and became insurmountable for most people, a few people took their Sunday walks out to what had once been pure farmland to see if maybe Forus might be a place where they could put down their roots."

Easy to picture that, too: My parents, Stig and Andri's and everyone else's, how they all drove out here, independently, and studied the real estate prospectuses and the lots with skepticism or enthusiasm, discussed among themselves and spit into their fists, stuck the shovel into the dirt and called the bank to set up a meeting about a mortgage loan. We put down our roots here, tentatively and hesitantly at first, eventually with increasing conviction. And those of us who stayed, among the factories and the industrial buildings that rose around us on all sides, we bore our belonging to Forus like a badge, proof that people can survive in any kind of conditions. We were citizens. We were in the house. In the burbs. With dry feet in the swamp.

"Well, just tell them you don't want to move," Stig says. "Say you refuse to go."

"Don't you think I've tried?" I respond.

We're quiet again, it's not so easy to think of anything else to say about it.

"But we can come visit you, right?" Andri says, trying to find something positive. "Maybe we could come for summer vacation next year. We could stay until school starts again."

"Of course," I say.

But that'll never happen.

All three of us know that, we just don't say it out loud.

Instead I tell them about the reorg at SAS and how my father got a tip that American Airlines in New York was looking for pilots, and I tell them that American Airlines has those really big planes that my dad has always dreamt of flying, the jumbo jets, Boeing 747s, and that that's why we're moving, so he can fly longer, bigger planes, earn more money, have more predictable work hours, and maybe we'll move back again after a few years, that could happen, I say, but mostly because I want it to be true, and I talk and talk about the differences between the Boeing 737 and the DC-9 and the 747 and the other types of planes I know about,

all to keep silence away, and we agree to at least write letters to each other, of course we can do that, I promise to send them my address as soon as I can, and we make plans to see each other the following summer, as if that were realistic, and by then it must be getting close to eleven p.m., we finally get up and come down from the rocky knoll, through the woods, and we say goodbye to each other on the gravel path between the soccer field and the houses, they each shake my hand as if I'm leaving for some official mission. I turn my back to them and walk home, hear them parting ways a little behind me, each walking off in their own direction after having agreed to meet up the next day, maybe go down to the beach if the weather is nice, you never really know how long the nice weather will last after all, it's usually always raining in this cruddy town, and it's not cold anymore, the heat is coming back, it's humid now, my sneakers stick to the asphalt on my way home and I swear the thunder and lightning started that night, a terrible storm over the entire Stavanger region, which probably lasted until well into August and gave way to an unseasonably early winter.

(End of sample)

SYNOPSIS

(Continues from end of sample)

PART II

GARDEN CITY

(BRACE BRACE HEADS DOWN STAY DOWN)

1990 – 1993

Chapter 1

Long Island, New York. Max is homesick, lonely and demonstratively not doing anything about it, wanting to punish his parents (and his mother in particular) for uprooting him. His mother, who stays at home and is probably as lonely as Max is, urges him to talk to some people his own age, but Max feels somehow trapped between languages, not yet knowing the subtleties of English. His days consist of waiting for them to pass – reading, running, watching American television and trying to prepare useful phrases in English, keeping to himself at school, turning his back on his mother, though he eventually promises her to "*make an effort*."

Chapter 2

At school Max sticks to his Norwegian identity, wearing his thickest knit sweaters and answering the teachers in Norwegian, though he acts on his promise to his mother and has meaningless chats with his classmates. His lies in his letters to Stig and Andri grow elaborate as he describes an America that matches their childhood idea of it, until the letters grow shorter and shorter and they eventually stop sending them.

Though the Long Island streets – similar to the suburban streets of Forus, but neater – never seem to agree with Max, he finds himself getting the hang of the language. After happily leaving middle school behind, he goes on vacation to Florida with his parents, and there he decides to let go – to become American, as a means of survival. He starts smoking and makes amends with his mum.

Chapter 3

One week into the first semester of his years at Garden City High School, Max finds himself at the deep end of the high school swimming pool, as one out of two people to have chosen

advanced swimming instead of *swimming for beginners*. Neither of them turn out to be more than fairly average swimmers, but they both – to Max's great surprise – prove to be great at quoting *Apocalypse Now*. The other one is Mordecai, who'll shortly become Max's best friend – a fairly secular Jewish guy with impeccable hair, great taste in films and music, and memberships in a number of school clubs.

They're on a new friendship high; watching films, listening to music, having endless conversations, discussing the workprint version of *Apocolypse Now* that is almost impossible to get hold of. They never talk about swimming outside the swimming pool, and in the swimming pool they're doing ok at best. Though they don't ever win the races, the swimming hall is where Mordecai one day is asked out by Alison, one of the prettiest girls in school. And as they start going out, Mordecai and Max eventually drift apart.

Over the summer they only call each other once, and have nothing to say to each other. Max, on holiday in Florida, takes it out on his family, he shouts at them at dinner, feeling miserable about being lonely again, promising himself that he'll move back to Stavanger the instant he finishes high school.

Chapter 4

After the holidays, Max and Mordecai meet up, and briefly experience plunging into conversations like they used to: "We almost seemed like ourselves." But they don't talk about Alison, they don't talk about how they really are, and as the second year of high school kicks off, they see less of each other. They quit swimming. Mordecai skips classes, and at one point his mother turns up at Max's place, fearing he's gone missing (but feeling better after getting some wine and encouragement from Max's mum). Max hangs out with Stanley and Nate from the swim team, discussing which girls are the most similar to Alison, and thus the most interesting, and he pictures how they'll go on living neat and tidy lives, never expecting him to stay in touch. They're friends, all right, but they're not Mordecai.

Chapter 5

As a kid, Max went to the theatre a lot with his mum, always playing a game of "*The Art of Not Throwing an Orange"*: Max would get to hold an orange, knowing that the illusion of the play would be broken had he thrown it – and thus, if not always old enough to fully appreciate the

content of the play, he became aware of how fragile this illusion is. When Max's mum takes him to see *The Zoo Story* in the autumn of 1992, it's their first play together since they moved from Stavanger.

One night in December Max wakes up to several snowballs hitting his window. Outside he finds Mordecai, wanting to talk. He's still not in love with Alison, he confesses, even after all this time, and he talks about how hard it must be to be The Prettiest Girl, as everyone must eventually end up treating her like shit. Max still suggests that he should break up with her, and when he does so in January, he does it by writing and publishing a short story about her. Not a mean one, but an utterly revealing one. It earns him respect from some people, but turns way more against him, and leads to him being excluded from most of his clubs. Mordecai thus having way more spare time than before, joins Max roaming around Garden City, having a ball. Mordecai even hangs out with Max's mum a bit, having a coffee with her before heading up to Max's room when he comes over, and sometimes joining them for an Off- or Off-Off-Broadway production. It is Max's mum who suggests that they audition for the school theatre program, and despite their skepticism towards school theatre members in general, they do audition, and they're both accepted.

Chapter 6

February. Max arrives for theatre practice two minutes early, which is, according to the teacher, Wohlman, as good as being too late. Four times a week Max and Mordecai attend Wohlman's lengthy theory lectures, and learn to admire the other school theatre members for their sheer perseverance. Wohlman, with his heavy clothes and thick glasses, is of the old school: he tears up when talking about Hamlet's inner crisis, he knows the Lee Strasberg method better than Strasberg ever did, and there's hardly a play he hasn't worked on, in some way or another.

Chapter 7

March. Eventually Wohlman allows the school theatre members onto the stage, and he tells them that they are no longer human, assigning them an animal each. Hesitatingly, they start acting like their animals, but Max simply can't bring himself to pretend he's a polar bear. The furthest he's willing to go is to lay down flat, like a rug. As the task is repeated again and again, Max stays himself, fearing that he might get kicked out for it. One day they're all asked to be rhinoceroses, and it turns out that they are to do the absurdist play *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco. In this play,

an entire village, one by one, willingly goes through a metamorphosis, becoming rhinoceroses – this, Wohlman tells them, is to question the human condition and the wish for conformity, and by that to question how nazism and fascism could gain the amount of support that it did. In the play, the character Bérenger is the only one who refuses the metamorphosis. Wohlman offers Max the part.

Chapter 8

April. Max listens to his mum listening to music by herself, his father is exceedingly often on long west coast flights, not making it home when he's said he would. Max is wondering who his mum is thinking about when she plays Percey Sledge, whether it's a younger version of his dad, this guy Owen he's heard mentioned as his parents quarrel, or someone else from her past.

They've started working with *Rhinoceros* on stage, Mordecai playing Jean, another big part. It feels like they spend more time at the school theatre than they do at school, staying there from five until ten p.m. six nights a week. The mere physical aspect of the acting is getting demanding, and they start showering after practice. To the surprise of some, Wohlman also showers after practice, though he hardly moves during it. They quickly realize that it's not to see them naked, but simply to belong, to feel like a part of the group. Nevertheless, several find it odd, and when Wohlman one day slips and falls, and stays down until Max – after quite some time – helps him back up, some come to see him as a rather ridiculous figure. In Max's and Mordecai's eyes, though, this only makes them respect him more – and even, become fond of him. The "fall" makes Wholman feel human to the boys.

Days before the premiere, the 17th of May (and the national day of Norway), Wohlman instructs the actors and stage crews to take a night off, telling Max that they need to talk. For six hours they work on stage and share war stories, Wohlman's about the second world war and Holocaust, Max's about Vietnam, trying to grasp Bérenger's last monologue. When the play premiers, it does very well.

FAIRFAX
(THRENODY FOR SEQUOIAS & UXO)
FRAGMENTS 1972 – 1977

(Note: Throughout various chapters and from the point of view of a third person narrator representing Owen's diary, texts or "Fragments" are inserted, ie: an article on how the South Vietnamese soldiers struggle as the Americans are backing out of the war. Some of these "fragments" are just a few lines, some a couple of pages, some capturing a brief moment or several years and everything in between. In these texts we learn about the life of a man who used to be a Norweigan named Ove, but who's now an American named Owen.)

Chapter 1

Fairfax, CA, 1972. Owen's 28 years old, and he has returned from the Vietnam War. He's asphalting streets, though he knows better how to play jazz music, he wears his best suit to The Silver Peso, drinking with his coworkers as often as they can be persuaded, on his own when they can't. He waits for a girl he can fall in love with, and finds her one day angrily trying to get the asphalt workers to get out of her way. Her name is Martha, they start going out, and within weeks they move in together. They synchronize their lives perfectly, have the same weekly menu so that they don't have to argue over what to have for dinner, they visit her parents every Sunday, he times their breakfast so that her cereal has been soaked in milk for exactly three minutes every morning when she enters the kitchen. Most of his things are still in storage in New Jersey, he buys his favorite jazz records again, she grows slightly tired of them. They go for walks, she always finds her way back.

Chapter 2

April 30th, 1975. The Fall of Saigon. Owen pays close attention to the news, he goes in to San Francisco to get international papers they don't have in Fairfax. Martha grows tired of hearing about the war, so Owen stops telling her about it, but he doesn't stop reading. Millions of refugees are on the move, big numbers are being evacuated, far bigger numbers are being left behind. Hundreds of thousands dead. Millions wounded. 130,000 refugees from South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are granted permanent residency in the U.S. There are more to come.

Chapter 3

September 1975–1977. Owen and Martha have even started looking alike, as he's let his hair grow, but one day Martha comes home with a new, short haircut, and new clothes. She's met another man, but for quite a while they keep living together; Martha visiting her lover in San Francisco, Owen trying to make her stay, wanting to make her understand, to show her that she's the one making a mistake, that she'll be sorry – but knowing that it is a lie. He moves back to his old apartment on Mono Avenue, she calls him every now and then, he lies and says he's fine. Eventually she stops calling. Owen spends his days sleeping, can't be bothered to eat, dreads every new day. After several months he buys an album he hates, just to listen to some music she probably hasn't even heard about. Then he starts shopping for groceries, eating at least a bit, he starts listening to her favorite music and tries to make it remind him of something else – of how he should paint the house, of the dishes in the sink. When he one day starts walking, and doesn't stop until he reaches a ranch a good four hours outside of Fairfax, he knows he's ready to go back to New York.

FIRE ISLAND
(LET'S HEAR IT FOR OLIVE OYL)
SUMMER 1993

Chapter 1

Fire Island, NY. Max is, for the first time, on holiday with his family somewhere else but Florida, and he loves it – the hot days spent in the same clothes (Max has a holiday uniform that he rinses and dries every night), at the same beach, going for long walks, helping out an elderly couple painting their bungalow, enjoying a beer with them when they wrap up for the day (people keep believing that he is in his early twenties). He'd love to come back every summer, he writes, but it won't come to that. Fire Island marks their last holiday as a family. In the autumn everything will be different.

Max's dad spends every other day working, and he compensates by wearing a holiday uniform, just like Max, to properly be on holiday when he's there. Embarrassingly, he has cut his homemade shorts too short, and whenever he bends over he exposes too much. He doesn't fully master the holiday uniform, nor is he able to properly relax and spend time with his family – he and Max's mum bicker, and Max almost prefers it when he's off to work. Just like in Garden City, Max spends the days with his mum, both of them enjoying the odd gazes they draw at the beach from people who can't figure out if they are related, or if they are lovers.

Several weeks in, Mordecai finally arrives, having spent the first part of the holidays at a summer camp. He mentions this girl he met there (only a friend, he insists), named Mischa – she's seven years older than them, and slightly weird, but cool. She's a painter, and it so happens that she's staying at Fire Island too, in Davis Park, fifteen kilometers away from Fair Harbour. She had told Mordecai that he was welcome to pop by. They are going to, of course.

Chapter 2

As Max's mum is off to Manhattan to watch *The Swan Lake*, it is Max's dad who reluctantly makes them promise to be back by 2 AM when they decide to visit Mischa the following Friday. First he suggests that he could come with them, that they could make an outing of it – Max and Mordecai politely decline, and Max feels that they're drifting apart, his dad and himself, and that it has probably been going on for a while.

Max and Mordecai score some alcohol for their trip to Mischa's by breaking into the house of an alcoholic Max has befriended. When they arrive at Mischa's house Max finds himself transfixed. He finds her amazingly beautiful, like Shelley Duvall in *Brewster McCloud*, with her Calvin&Hobbes t-shirt, slender, tanned arms and bright blue sneakers. He falls in love with her, if not instantly, then at least within the next few hours.

But it's not the warm welcome Mordecai expected. Mischa's surprised to see him, unsure of whether she should let them in, making Mordecai ashamed that they turned up in the first place. Eventually she gives in and invites them to join her and her friends, most of them ten years older than Max and Mordecai, and only when they pull out the whiskey are they fully accepted, and stop feeling out of place. Some pot is passed around, the evening passes, and some time between very late and quite early Max finds himself lying on the floor, feeling the room slowly rotating, Mischa lying with her head on his chest. They talk. They kiss. Eventually Max realizes what time it is, and he finds Mordecai, gives Mischa one last hug, and they bike off. His memories of the way back home are vague at best, but eventually they tiptoe past Max's dad's bedroom, and as Mordecai slips out of his clothes he slips into Max's bed instead of his own, "I remember that he lay close to me and he was warm, and he'd taken off his underwear; he put an arm around me and said something I didn't grasp, it was actually quite nice and that might be the last thing I remember."

Chapter 3

The next morning both Max and Mordecai feel bleak as they face Max's dad's disappointment, and spend the day at the beach, not talking much (without it being an awkward silence). Max worries that Mordecai might be in love with Mischa as well.

Not until Max's mum take them out for burgers do they seem to regain their balance, and Max finally asks her about this Owen, whose name he's heard mentioned several times in his parents' rows. Owen is his uncle, his mum tells him – his dad's brother, who went to America as a young man, served in the Vietnam war, and only wrote home twice. Max's mum has met him – he lives in Manhattan. But she forbids them to discuss Owen in front of Max's dad.

After going fishing with Max's dad (not mentioning Owen, but dropping heavy hints), a trip none of them enjoy as much as they would've wanted to, Max and Mordecai get caught in a tremendous downpour. Though already soaked, they seek shelter, and Max finally builds up his courage and tells Mordecai how he feels about Mischa. Mordecai says he's happy for him, and goes on to tell him what Max has yet not understood – that he likes boys, that he memorized the lines of *Apocolypse Now* in order to get to talk to Max in the first place, after overhearing him talking about the film; that when he pulled away from Max last year it was at the advice of his therapist, *to create room for reflection*. He says that he's not in love with him now, but that his parents could've saved a lot of money on that therapist – it simply made him realize that he did like boys, nothing to be done about it.
Later that night Max and Mordecai bring a bottle of wine down to the beach and they talk about Mischa and the girls and the boys and the future; they make plans and solve problems, they talk about how they'll visit Owen in the fall, of how Max's parents will leave each other.

That day in the rain, the summer of 1993, is one of Max's best memories of him and Mordecai. This is how he wants to remember the two of them.

Chapter 4
The second week of August. Mordecai leaves, Max starts going on his long walks again. Coming back from one of them he stops dead: outside the house of the alcoholic there's an ambulance and a police car, and as Max is watching, the alcoholic is carried out on a stretcher, covered in a grey blanket. Max never tells anyone – not even Mordecai.

Max spots Mischa on the beach by Fair Harbour, reading a book. Drawing his breath thrice, he jogs over to her, asking her about the book. She asks where Mordecai is, he says he's gone home to Garden City. Mischa invites Max to come over to her place later that day.

Chapter 5
With permission from his mum Max turns up at Mischa's, he's offered tea, which he hasn't really liked before, but that he of course accepts. She shows him a picture that she's working on, an extremely detailed realistic painting of a washing machine. She sold one in the same series that spring for 10,000 dollars, she tells him.

They have wine, they talk, Max talks about his dad and the problems his parents might have; they have more wine and Mischa talks about the artists she admires and Max can't stop staring at her, listening to her voice, thinking of what an idiot he was when he biked off after the party; how he'd risked never seeing her again. And then they kiss, and there is nothing more to say.

Chapter 6

Max wakes up the next morning in a heap of clothes and happiness and sunshine, only to find Mischa crying, saying that she's sorry, that she shouldn't have invited him, that sleeping with him is punishable by law, that a 23 year old woman falling in love with a 16 year old boy is frowned upon, it'll make people suspicious. The words *in love* triggers an avalanche in Max, he's so happy he fears he might faint.

Mischa tells him about how it was growing up in Canada, how she missed out on the puppy love crushes most people have when they're fourteen, and how she later missed out on home parties and getting drunk and doing silly things. She never had the time – she was always training. What started off as gymnastics later turned into pole jumping. She was really good, good enough to be a star, she was told by her coach, and for years she did nothing else but push herself to be the best she could possibly be. But one day when she was 18, at a summit in Lille, France, she had had enough. Buying her own ticket back to Canada, she up and left ("it's the nicest plane ride I've ever had, Max"), and on her return she applied to film school in Toronto, finally getting friends she could really talk to (but not a boyfriend, she replies when Max asks). A looped video montage of a fighting scene in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* gets her accepted to art school in Manhattan.

When Max at long last is leaving, Mischa gives him her address in Brooklyn, asking him to visit. He says he will the moment she gets back there, and suggests they might visit his uncle together one day, as well.

APTHORP
(CLOUD CUCKOO LAND)
FRAGMENTS 1978 - 1980

(As in the section above called "Fairfax" pieces of text representing Owen's diary are dispersed throughout these chapters.)

Chapter 1

New York, spring 1978. The city is near bankrupt. Owen is back, at home, and it feels good. He works at Weber Piano & Pianola Co., building pianos, listening to them being played by the piano tuners. His days are very much alike: he starts them by driving through the Holland tunnel (designed by the Norwegians Ole Singstad and Erlig Owre – or that is, the *Americans* Singstad and Owre: Owen remarks how it is so much easier to be a successful immigrant when you also gain some other sort of success) on his way to work, and once or twice a week he has a beer or two with his workmates. Sometimes he has eight or ten, and spends the night in his car, having promised not to drive in his condition.

In the uncomfortably hot days of August 1978, with low activity at the factory, Owen starts doing what he hasn't done since the early seventies: at the end of his shifts he plays the piano. Beginning with a goofy version of "Rondo Amaroso" to amuse his coworkers, he goes on to play: "Autumn leaves," Fartein Valen, and Grieg. In the middle of a rendition of Grieg's "Trolltog" the manager walks in on him, making it perfectly clear that the pianos are not to be played, but offering him the card of a Mr. Seymour E. Hall, who works at the showroom on 107 5th Avenue. He might be allowed to play there.

Seymour Hall turns out to be a huge, fairly terrifying man in his late forties, and he turns down Owen immediately. But Owen persists and Seymour gives in. So it starts: he plays for two hours every Saturday. Thrilled to be playing again, Owen thinks of his old band mates (though one of them, Eric, is dead), and he can feel his old ambitions returning to him.

Chapter 2

December 1978, Owen and Seymour are both trying to catch a cab, going in opposite directions. They exchange a few polite phrases, Seymour asking what plans he has for Christmas, Owen admitting that he has none. Seymour ends up inviting him to celebrate with him and his wife.
Christmas Eve turns into a lovely evening. Seymour and his wife, Debbie live in one of those great apartments that everyone not living in New York picture New York to be like, in the Apthorp building: 306 square meters, marble floors, five bathrooms, two fireplaces. After playing the piano all night, he stays over, Seymour and Debbie insisting that he must. He doesn't leave the following day, either. He's never felt more welcome – and possibly, never more at home.

Chapter 3

March 1979. Owen spends his weekends at the Apthorp, spending all week looking forward to going there. One day in July, dining in their favorite restaurant, Debbie and Seymour finally ask him – would he like to be their *flat mate*, as it's called nowadays? They've got plenty of room, after all, it's getting common, he could pay a third of their rent and have the two large bedrooms facing the backyard. Owen doesn't even consider protesting or refusing.

August and September, 1979. Four years after the end of the war hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese flee the country by boat, many of them drowning, 458,367 emigrating to the US, 3,998 to Norway. Owen no longer has beer with his workmates, now that he lives with Seymour, he's no longer one of them.

With Seymour and Debbie both having meetings to attend and friends to meet, Owen spends quite a few nights on his own. He starts chatting with the Indian doorman at the Apthorp, whose name he doesn't really grasp the first time he presents himself – it somehow sounds like Antichrist, and this nickname sticks to him, though Owen calls him Andy for short. Andy came to the US from Rajasthan in the late sixties to study literature, hoping to teach, but ended up in the Apthorp building as his wife asked him to get a proper job, and has been there four days a week since 1971.

When Owen suggests that Andy could join him for the new Coppola film, *Apocolypse Now*, Andy refuses with all possible subtlety and politeness. Owen ends up going alone, and though he had no problems with *The Deer Hunter*, this film makes him extremely uncomfortable. Returning to the Apthorp pale and unwell he finds Seymour and Debbie fairly lightheaded, drinking wine, giving him plenty. Owen's head is spinning, and when Debbie leans over to kiss him, Seymour mouths that it is ok, and after even more wine Owen ends up in their bed.

New Year's Eve is celebrated in the Apthorp by three people who are on speaking terms, but no longer share the same understanding as they used to. And a new decade begins.

LEAF BLOWER BLUES

(THE SPRAWL)
FALL 1993 - SUMMER 1995

Chapter 1

1993. Early September, Dumbo, Brooklyn. Max has biked almost 40 kilometers, and hesitates outside Mischa's apartment. He's afraid that he got it wrong, that she never meant for him to turn up, that it was only the kind of thing one says. But he does ring the doorbell, and he's not only welcome – he's expected.

Chapter 2

Autumn. Max's dad start flying the long, international flights; Hong Kong, Rome, Rio. Max pictures him going out with workmates, having an exciting time, because it's too sad to picture him spending so many nights alone in his hotel room. Max remembers how his dad once told him that he should always tell the truth, but that not everything needs to be said, and he wonders why he hasn't told his mum about Mischa. He tells Mordecai, though.

Mischa's working a lot, finishing her washing machine series, picking up Max twice a week and driving him to Dumbo. Sometimes he fears that she might get tired of him, but whenever she arrives his worries disappear; *it's us, after all, it's me and her*. When not spending time with Mischa, Max is doing theatre.

One day at lunch Max's mum blurts out: "How old is she, anyway? Your girlfriend." When Max replies "twenty-three," his mum laughs so hard that the milk she's drinking is coming out of her nose. It turns out Mordecai's mum has called her and hinted that Max is seeing 'an older woman.' She'd feared to hear of a woman in her seventies. She's excited to meet Mischa, and Max wonders why he ever felt he had to keep it secret from her. "You can tell me everything, Max," his mum says. "You can always tell me everything."

Max's dad, though, speaks of Max dating Mischa as a mistake and one night enters Max's room and sits down for a chat. Max might or might not have replied that his father's having an affair in L.A., he can't remember. If he did, his father doesn't reply – instead, he talks of the Vietnam

war, of the late sixties, of how he met Max's mum, by recruiting her to the Communist party. Max has heard the story plenty of times, he knows how it goes on: how they eventually were excluded from the Party as his dad started his job as a pilot (his mum still selling the Party newspaper for a few years); how their neighbors never the less kept seeing them as communists.

Max's mum drives him out to Brooklyn the following Friday. As Max is getting out of the car, she's telling him that she believes his father has met someone else. "So do I," Max replies, wishing there was something else he could've said, that he could've asked her how she was, that she could've replied, "Fine – I'm perfectly fine."

Chapter 3

One Thursday at the end of October, Max's parents tell him and his sister that they are getting a divorce. Somehow Max finds it hard to concentrate on their words. He finds his gaze drawn to the South American men with leaf blowers outside, slowly working their way up and down the street.

None of them are surprised, neither is Mordecai, when Max tells him later. Max buys an old medal from a Vietnam veteran sitting outside the mall, Mordecai pins it on his chest and declares him a child of divorced parents. When Max later offers one of the leaf blowers a smoke, they don't find the story behind the medal funny, but asks Max to take care.

Chapter 4

When the day arrives that Max's dad is leaving, Max chooses not to show up and see him off. His mum is furious, and it isn't before way later that Max understands how disappointed his dad must've been, how the fact that Max wasn't there when he left probably was the reason why they didn't talk for a very long time. Max pictures him arriving in California, leaving his worries and bad conscience behind him, ready to start a new life with *her* – he considers calling his brother, but chooses not to.

A few days before Max's dad leaves, Mischa comes over for dinner. Due to her efforts they get through it, even though the air is heavy with the realization that whenever they are saying things like 'could you pass me the salad, please,' it is for the last time as a family.

Chapter 5

After the premiere of *Oklahoma*, to everyone's surprise, the applause never seems to stop. They learn through the play that sometimes theatre is simply hard, uninspired work; they learn that sometimes the audience matters more than they do, that they always have to deliver, no matter how they feel about the production. "You were marvelous! But the play was rubbish," Max's mum tells him after the play, adding that as Max was good, Mordecai was extraordinary. Max is more curious about Mischa's reaction, though – and as he finds her and they prepare to leave, he can't bear to leave Mordecai alone for the premiere party after all, and insists on him joining them.

Mischa doesn't drive them back to Brooklyn, but continues to Manhattan. It turns out she's looked into Owen's address. There's only one Owen Larsen on Upper West Side: in the Apthorp building on the corner of West End Avenue and 78th Street.

Though he sees right through their made up stories of having an appointment with Mr. Larsen, the elderly Indian doorman lets them in, and Max suddenly finds himself face to face with the uncle he's only known of for a couple of months. He looks nothing like Max expected him to – short, plump, rather resembling an accountant in a small firm from the Midwest rather than a war veteran. He clumsily greets them speaking partly in rusty Norwegian, partly in English, and invites them in. The big rooms are largely empty; they end up in the kitchen, which is the only room with enough furniture for all of them. Owen serves wine, they talk of sports (Owen likes to listen to old recordings of sports events, prefers to know the outfall of the game so that he can concentrate about the game itself), Max tells Owen about how his dad is still a pilot, but that he doesn't speak to him much. Max is itching to ask about Vietnam, but it somehow feels impertinent. On his way out, he mentions it anyway.

Christmas. Max, Ulrikke and their mum don't really know how to behave, they talk a little louder than they normally do at dinner as if to hide the fact that one guest is missing. Max is watching his dad's favorite Christmas video (that he purposedly made sure his dad didn't pack when he left) as Ulrikke knocks, and they share a weirdly nice Christmas moment, Ulrikke tells Max that their father is ok, though missing them all; Max tells Ulrikke about Owen. That's not

why she knocked, though – she came to tell him that she's moving to Germany to study. Outside the winter service vehicles have replaced the leaf blowers.

Chapter 6

The 1994 Olympic games in Lillehammer, Norway. Owen pays close attention, Max and Mischa have helped him install a small TV with a video recorder. Max visits him a couple of times a month, seeing him more as a friend than an uncle, even though Owen reminds him of his dad.
Max arrives late and overdressed for the opening of Mischa's exhibition *Heaven is a Laundry Place*, but it doesn't matter. It's the kind of exhibition which simply *is*, Max thinks it's great, but struggles to find words to properly express it. When they go out after the exhibition Mischa gives a small speech, thanking Max for being great, whispering *I love you* into his ear afterwards.

It is the year where both Max's dad and Ulrikke are gone. Wohlman puts up two one-act plays in the spring, Pinters' *The Dumb Waiter* (in which Mordecai does yet another great role) and Sartre's *No Exit*, causing a minor scandal with the latter. Max is not playing in either, but acts as Wohlman's stage manager. The summer passes, Mischa is worn out after *Heaven is a Laundry place*, they spend a lot of time inside. Autumn: Wohlman is putting up Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which feels very safe after Sartre. Mischa, Max, and Mordecai celebrate New Year's Eve with Owen, after Max has celebrated Christmas with his mum, the two of them almost shouting across the table to make the noise of four.

For their last semester of high school, in a last attempt to make professional actors of them, Wohlman has them doing Beckett. They are divided into three groups doing one play each, and none of the groups are allowed to visit each other as they practice; Max is set to do *Krapp's Last Tape* on his own. They spend hours and hours practicing, mostly on their own, Wohlman looking in on them from time to time. These weeks of working in solitude was a wonderful time of his life. One week before the premiere, Wohlman informs them that no one outside the theatre group will be allowed to attend the shows. Then, the day before the *Godot* premiere, he reveals that they won't be allowed to watch each other's productions, either. He explains: "I made you do *Oklahoma* after *Rhinoceros* to see how well you could adapt. That's what you'll be working with, the most of you. *Oklahoma* and worse. If you one day get to do something that actually matters, like Beckett – then no one will care." He urges them to develop a respect for the field

itself, for the *theatre*. To be actors even when no one will see them act. When Max finds himself on stage at the end of his last high school year, Wohlman is the only person in his audience – and shortly after he starts, Wohlman quietly gets up and leaves. Max hesitates for a second – and then he plays *Krapp's Last Tape*, all according to plan, for a room filled with absent people.

Chapter 7

Graduation day has arrived. Pictures are taken, promises are made, tears shed. Everyone is leaving for college – but not Max and Mordecai. They stay. They have both applied to three theatre schools in Manhattan, Mordecai being accepted at the one they both wanted the most, Max getting into one of the others. Owen offers Max and Mischa to come live with him in the Apthorp.

At the end of July, Max and his mum find themselves seated in the old, brown leather sofa that they once brought with them from Norway, out on the lawn in Garden City, watching lamps and cardboard boxes being carried past them. Max is moving to Manhattan, his mum to Queens. As they get up to leave for the last time, Max thinks that by the time the leaf blowers start their work of Sisyphus again, he'll be gone, he'll have handed the streets back.

KPM

(FROM THE MIXED-UP FILES OF MR. OWEN HANSEN)
FRAGMENTS 1981 - 1992

(As above in the last two "Owen" sections, third person texts or "fragments" are dispersed in these chapters.)

Chapter 1

September 1981. Owen considers writing home, but ends up not doing it, his drawers and pockets filled to the brim with unwritten letters. Spring 1982, Owen, Seymour, and Debbie hardly ever spend long nights drinking wine and listening to music anymore, the two latter have rows almost daily. Owen sees a few women, but doesn't fall in love; he attends baseball games, but doesn't really get the sport. 1983: Bad times for Weber Piano & Pianola Co.
One day in 1984, Seymour tells Owen that he and Debbie are moving to Chicago. With Debbie's parents gone, there's no reason for them to stay in New York. "But," Seymour says, as Owen thinks about how there's nothing he wants less than to move again, "you could stay here, of course."

They leave the piano, and Owen finds himself, in the huge, empty rooms, *at home*, at home in his own home. He moves his bed into Seymour and Debbie's room, moves the piano to the closest living room, makes frozen pizza, has a beer. He's thrilled.

Chapter 2

1985. Weber Piano & Pianola Co. close their doors in mid-January. Seymour has paid his part of the rent for four months to give Owen a soft start, he locks up most of the rooms, and only buys what's absolutely necessary.

February. A small ad in the paper catches Owen's eye: "PIANO TEACHER, fair price. For beginners and adv. players. Manh. Mr. D. Solomon." This, Owen decides, is just what he needs to get better.

In a worn down building in Harlem Owen starts taking piano lessons three times a week. His teacher Solomon is a stout black man in his early seventies. He hasn't had a piano student for a

while, blaming the rush for quick entertainment and distractions. Owen suspects that the worn cane standing in the corner might also have something to do with it.

Owen works hard, he practices for hours every day, they listen to Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations*, but play everything else. One day Solomon takes him for lunch and brings him to a record shop, giving him a gift (for the first and last time, he makes that clear): a dark green album with a white frame, the letters KPM and the words *Music Recorded Library* in a corner. When Owen asks him what it is, Solomon replies: "This? This is the future."

Chapter 3

The KPM catalogue consists of thousands of tracks to be used as background music, recordings by unknown musicians, recordings by well known musicians in need of some extra money. A few phone calls by Solomon and a recording of Owen playing is all it takes. All of a sudden he finds himself in Atlantic Studios. He can't believe it.

In the course of two days he records four classical compositions, and one day in October a square package arrives by mail. Owen invites Andy to come up and listen to it with him, it is the first and only time he crosses the threshold. "The music is beautiful. And my wife says hi," he says, like he normally does.

More recordings follow: *Classical Piano #3*, *Polar Mountain Music.* And there's money. Solomon worries that Owen's not pushing himself. He urges him to start composing.

Chapter 4

In September 88' he receives his first KPM album solely with material that he has composed: sound landscapes with a slightly 'artic' feel, and titles like "Trekking on Svalbard" and "Across Jotunheimen." It fees like a musical advertisement for a place he'll never visit. Pleased, he listens through it a few times and mails a copy to his parents with a note: "Owen Larsen = Ove Hansen. All is well. Greetings, Owen." He does not include a return address on the envelope, leaving his whereabouts unknown to his parents.

In 1992 there's a war veteran gathering marking that 20 years have passed since they served at Firebase Bastogne in 1972. Owen immediately decides to go, but sitting on the bus he gets cold feet, gets off and takes a cab home.

October 12th, 1992. In a restaurant he recognizes a soft, Norwegian accent, it's Beate, the girlfriend his brother brought with him to Oslo so many years ago. He talks to her, they're both astonished to meet here, now. Walking through Central Park she tells him that his parents have both passed, that she's married to his brother, that they have two children and live on Long Island. He wants to visit them. She's not sure if that is such a good idea.

PART III

UNTITLED NO. 1
(INCIDENTS & ACCIDENTS, HINTS & ALLEGATIONS)
2001 - 2004

Chapter 1

September 2001 shakes them all while living together at the Apthorp. It feels like becoming homeless, rootless, again; Max feels less American than ever before. Not properly a New Yorker, the tragedy that hits isn't really his. Max calls up Mischa, who is in Zürich, he talks to his mum, and as he learns that two of the airplanes belonged to American Airlines, he calls up his dad. He can't reach Mordecai, but it doesn't worry him, at least not to begin with. With the apartment empty, Max spends his days talking to Andy about everything but the terror attack, and works on the play, *Ocean*.

Around this time he was about to change from someone wishing to go home to someone wishing to wish to go home. Max reflects on the text from the exhibition catalogue from the exhibition *Grey – a Retrospective* at Whitney Museum of American Art. It seeks to explain Mischa's *Vietnamization* series, considered to be amongst her lesser works, primarily made for one person: Max Hansen, her seven years younger Norwegian-American then-boyfriend, celebrating his 20th birthday. The catalogue excerpt discusses inspirations, explains references and offers analysis ("Looking at technical drawings of Bell UH-1B Iroquois-helicopters and maps of Norway, Grey realized that the country's outline resembled that of the body of the helicopter, further strengthening the link of Hansen's Norway/Vietnam-interest and/or -longing").

Mordecai finally calls. He's been "method acting" on set for a new film and hasn't been allowed to call. Max is frustrated by him but agrees to do Mordecai a favor and check on his Tribeca apartment. Being a kilometer away from the towers the streets are dusty with fragments of concrete scattered around. Mordecai's windows are covered in dirt though it's hard to say if it is due to terror or laziness. Apart from some moldy food in the fridge, everything seems fine, but Max finds three things that surprise him: four pictures of Mischa from the summer camp in 93'

(kept in Mordecai's copy of *Heart of Darkness)*, a prospect for a house in Burbank, California, with a note from a real estate agent saying, "*What about this one? Call me*," and finally, approximately twenty neatly stacked cardboard boxes, each marked with a date and an address. Max recognizes ten of them as addresses in Garden City. He realizes that they are tied to a series of break-ins that Mordecai was rumored to be connected to, where nothing of value had been stolen. True enough the boxes contain lip sticks, TV catalogues, car keys, newspapers, scissors, and Max's old swim cap.

Sample 3, from part 3

UNTITLED NO. 1
(INCIDENTS & ACCIDENTS, HINTS & ALLEGATIONS)
2001 – 2004

2

Ocean became a split success at best. Unfortunately most people misunderstood it as repugnant and uncompromising, which in turn resulted in good reviews and hopeless ticket sales. People were busy enough without also spending hours in a room full of actors suffering from a refusal to make decisions and outright defiance. But we did the best we could for the few who came, and there are some nights I'll never forget: barely one quarter full theaters where the intimacy between the actors and the audience reached a place I can't describe in any way other than beautiful. Stripped of the safety a full theater gives, the audience sat in their seats as if naked, and every motion they made, every single time they moved the tiniest bit or rubbed their eyes, yawned or looked at their watch and surreptitiously got out a throat lozenge, every time they smiled, laughed, if the lines got through to one or two of them and they suddenly grasped what we wanted to impart, what it was *about*, and then in the next instant realized what had happened in this city and what was still enveloping us all, and as a result of that began to cry, then they couldn't hide in the anonymity of the crowd. The stifled sobbing was audible, the muffled, embarrassed "sorry" whispered to the guy next to them, four seats away or in the next row. And

this uncertainty spread to the actors, left them uncomfortable and confused, or the opposite happened, if they sensed that the twelve to fifteen spectators in the audience were totally on their side and were communicating that back to the stage, in the form of a silence which is not stillness, but a theater audience's own sound of solidarity, a kind of inaudible hum of acceptance, at a frequency it takes experience to tune into, where sympathy for the characters seems to be exuded along with understanding for the predicament they found themselves in, as if what they were saying, from the floor of the house, was this: *we understand. It's hard for us, too. We understand that you guys don't know what to do to get back to the surface. But that's OK.*

This way of relating to the audience took an enormous toll on my actors. It wasn't unusual for me to find them bawling backstage when I came back from sneaking out to take a peek at the audience as they gathered in the lobby to get their coats and exchange a few words before they pushed open the doors and disappeared to their taxis and the subway and buses and cars or the sidewalks, alone or together, just as wiped out as the two actors, each smoking a cigarette in the green room. Other times the green room was filled with a kind of desperate rage when I came in to talk to them after the final curtain. On a few nights resignation and emptiness reigned; there were nights when they were exalted and hugged me, insisting that we had to go out and have a beer, celebrate.

Because maybe I forgot to mention this: the poor ticket sales and the conjoined twinning that took place between the audience and the performers, also affected the play itself. Sometimes, albeit not often, it happened to be a success; despite long tangents and idiotic conversations the characters occasionally managed to solve the technical problem that the play's outward action revolved around. Almost to their own surprise, as it were, it was always the result of spontaneity, born of the interplay between the text and the improvisational surfaces over the course of that evening. In the midst of a maelstrom of hopelessness they could sow the seed of a solution and slowly, unnoticeably, it would grow in the background, until the solution was manifest, in a landslide of technical lines and musings that neither I nor the audience (to say nothing of the actors) had foreseen. In this way the play unfolded before our eyes, landed: those

two scuba-diving engineers figured out how to repair the damage and prevent the impending catastrophe. The first time that happened, I was completely stunned, a tad pissed off to be honest, I saw it as a sign of wear and tear and that the actors were getting tired of the drawn out nights on stage, caught in a universe that mostly resembled an enormous quagmire. Underwater. But when I walked into the green room after the show was over, ready to dish out a dammed up speech about responsibility and professionalism and respect for the drama, I realized they were just as stunned as I was. *We survived*, one of them whispered, shaking his head.

I had to call Frances York and say it like it was: I couldn't guarantee that her play would end the way she'd written it. *Things are happening here*, I said and explained how few people there were in the house each night and what that did to the entire show. I told her what had happened.

"You have to do what you have to do," she just said. "It's your play now."

Mostly they didn't survive, though. The characters usually died in the end, as did their interaction with the audience, since the actors had essentially given up. Then we all went our separate ways, downcast and exhausted.

I wasn't there the night Mischa, Owen, and Mom saw it. I couldn't, it was too intimate. Didn't want to risk looking out at the audience in case that was one of those nights when the show became a single, downward spiral without a single bright spot or gleam of hope, and then discover their faces in the middle of the third row, going down with the ship. So I met them afterward, for a quick dinner, and I discerned right away that it had been an unusually brutal show. They seemed scared, annoyed, almost as if they thought I had punished them intentionally, and the mood was tense, no one said anything about it and the meal felt weirdly forced; we ordered our food and drank wine, but the conversation never really got going, it turned into a string of half-eaten sentences and long silences. I think everyone just really wanted to go home, and after we sent Mom home to Queens and were crammed into a taxi heading north to the Apthorp, Owen broke the silence and said: *So, when are you going to do something upbeat?*

THE APTHORP BUILDING. Let's visualize a sort of dissection of Owen's apartment, which was actually now *our* apartment: The place, with its 3,300 square

feet, was (if you studied a blue print of it) divided more or less in half by a horizontal opening, then further divided into thirds by vertical lines that separated (from left to right) the entrance foyer from the colonnade and hall. The apartment's demilitarized zone. This is usually where we met after our workdays were over, before we headed to the kitchen and dinner or at least planning it, gathered into a herd, like a gang of workers, where determining who would perform the delicate task of going grocery shopping, and what that person would be asked to purchase—if we didn't decide to eat out instead, as we usually did—would be hotly debated, agreed on, and ultimately formalized through an oral vote. Now, if we continue to picture this north/south division of the apartment and begin in the north, more specifically in the northwest (which technically means north, i.e. true north, since Manhattan isn't oriented on a north-south axis no matter how much we'd like to think it is, but rather askew, tilted to the northeast, so *northerly*, we'll call it northerly) or, for the sake of simplicity, to the left on the north side of the apartment, was my office, squeezed into the corner. The window—I had only one of them—looked out over the building's inner courtyard and the room was unquestionably the darkest one in the whole apartment. On the other hand, it had its own adjoining bathroom, so I could work undisturbed without having to make the trip out to the foyer and wander down the hall to relieve myself, thereby risking hearing the sounds of Owen or Mischa working and, if it was one of those days when my own work was going slowly, risking being so put out at hearing them making such tenacious progress in there that I was doomed not to get anything at all done for the rest of the morning. Further west was the living room, where Owen used to do his work before we came, this room was now, along with the kitchen, the only room we all shared and where we spent the majority of the evenings together when we were home. To the right, or east of the living room, Mischa had her atelier, where she spent her time when she wasn't down at her studio in SoHo; when we moved in and Owen let her take it over, we laid linoleum down over the original wood floor to protect it so that she didn't need to worry about spilling paint or think about the landlord going ballistic if he found out what she did in there. We didn't do much to the walls on the other hand, and when we moved out again later and poked out heads in one last time to

make sure we hadn't forgotten anything, it was easy to see that that room was going to need a complete renovation by professionals who were going to shake their heads picturing the spoiled, discipline-starved child who had inhabited this square footage. We knew then that there wasn't even a glimmer of a chance that we would get even a single cent of our security deposit back. Mischa also had her own bathroom that you could only reach from her room. And she had a bathtub in there. Sometimes she spent more time in it than in front of her canvases. Then finally, on our de facto west-east axis: Mischa's and my bedroom. The command center. On the south side, opposite the living room, Owen had his office in what had previously been the dining room. He had what was clearly the largest room and although maybe not his own bathroom facilities, he did have one of the two fireplaces and a door by the windows looking out at 78th Street which gave him direct access to the kitchen to the right of him and undreamed of snacking opportunities that he could take advantage of on the sly. One of the reasons we furnished the place the way we did, beyond it seeming right and reasonable that Owen get the biggest room, was the specific location of those bathrooms I mentioned. He could not hear us while he was working. He was completely dependent on that. One peep from one of us and the disruption was an irredeemable fact; a footstep outside his door and he got it into his head that we were standing out there listening, which made it impossible for him to concentrate, let alone create anything. So unless we'd agreed otherwise or had let him know that we needed to leave at a specific time, we each kept going in our own area until Owen's piano quieted and we could hear his footsteps out in the colonnade, and his quick, dry ahem that told us the coast was clear and the afternoon was over.
The last room on the south side: his own bedroom. We didn't go in there.

When Owen suggested that Mischa and I move into the Apthorp with him in the summer of 1994 it made sense in many ways, not just because of the practical considerations and the obvious financial benefits, but also because we found ourselves at the beginning of a friendship that extended beyond our familial ties, and I couldn't imagine anything nicer than the opportunity to spend more time with him. There's also no getting around the fact that I think he needed us even more than we needed him. But Mischa was skeptical, reluctant to leave her almost

perfect apartment in Brooklyn, plus she considered the Upper West Side culturally overweight but artistically completely dead. *It's a place inhabited by people who read books about things they imagine they could have created themselves,* she said. *Aging actors and TV producers. And ballet dancers with anorexia and personal demons. It's where Rosemary had her baby and Lennon was shot.*

But we couldn't get around the fact that her apartment in Dumbo was on the small side for two people for the long term, especially because she wanted to be able to keep working from home sometimes. And slowly, as summer and then fall came and we regularly visited Owen, she got used to the idea of giving up her place in exchange for an apartment where we would have all the space we could want, at a fraction of the price and she eventually found a kind of essence in the new neighborhood that she could tap into, I don't know how, but something happened and she started to take a brighter view of the area. It was *unused*, as she put it, *because everyone else here is too famous to bother to care about it or too blind to see it.* Plus she liked being so close to the park.

So we moved. In October of that year I helped her pack the boxes and pictures and furniture she insisted on taking with her, along with her bed and some lamps; we loaded it all into the truck Owen had rented and made two trips, until there were only three plastic bags left along with empty walls and the last, melancholy moment, when she asked us to wait down by the street while she went up to the roof one last time; I don't know what she did up there, but she was gone a long time, maybe she was looking over at Manhattan and thinking that she would never get to see this view again, maybe she ran through all the time she had lived here and the work she had done in the rooms below. Or maybe she thought about us, the first day she I had visited her, or the summer I spent almost entirely with her. For all I know she just smoked a few cigarettes and let the time pass.

AND THEN THERE'S THIS, of course, Mordecai's return from shooting a film in Nebraska, on one of the last days in October, with cold rain washing in off of the Manhattan Sound and hitting Battery Park, and you could feel it, when it finally reached the folks in Midtown or even higher up, maybe all the way to Harlem, how the buildings and skyscrapers it had pushed through and rubbed against on its way

north seemed to have made it even colder, in a way that was far more difficult to understand than to notice, and then, within just a few hours, the wait time for a cab outside of rush hour ballooned from what was normally less than a minute to significantly longer, long enough that soon you wouldn't even bother counting the minutes, which was an indication that summer was ending and something else was beginning, something awful you had almost forgotten all about and really didn't feel ready for; from now on getting anywhere would require a certain degree of planning, not to mention perseverance; standing in line for movie tickets would no longer be a setting for a pleasant chat, but sooner an exercise in survival and a litmus test of every single person's ability to conjure up his or her inner zen master. I was shivering outside the theater smoking a cigarette and was just heading for the subway entrance when he called.

"Hi," he said. "So, what's up?"

"Not much, the show just ended. I'm standing outside the theater. Are you back in town?"

"Got in today. Want to grab a beer?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm right here."

A guy across the street waved his hand. I walked in that direction and hugged him.

"I figured I'd find you here," he said as we strolled toward a bar a couple of blocks away.

"Only three days left now. Of the show."

"What do you think about it?"

"I think we all need a break."

"But it was good."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"*Ocean*. The play. Some of the best stuff I've seen."

"When did you…?"

"I saw it tonight. I wish I had one of those parts."

"I think by this point at least one of the actors would have been just as happy to let you have theirs," I sighed. "But, wait… you saw it tonight? As in just now?"

"Yeah," he said.

The whole thing was rather confusing.

"I didn't see you in the audience."

"You didn't look hard enough, I guess," he said.

"But, why didn't you call—I would have given you a comp ticket, at the very least."

"No worries, I can afford a theater ticket. Didn't want you to know I was there, you know, in case it disturbed you or something."

"Obviously it didn't."

"But you *are* disturbed. What happened in there, Max… I feel defiled. And kind of dead."

"That's the point."

He opened the door of the bar for me and we found ourselves a table at the back of the place.

"It's about September eleventh, isn't it?" he said quietly after he'd ordered two beers and an ashtray.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"I knew it. How's my apartment?"

"It's alive."

He rubbed his face.

"It's fucked up," he said.

"Yeah," I replied. "That's exactly what it is. Fucked up."

"How did Mischa handle it?"

We talked about her for a little while, and what the vibe had been like in the city lately. We talked about his new movie and then the conversation sort of crumbled. We searched the floor for it. I noticed how thin he'd become, his weeks selling knife sharpeners in the Midwest hadn't done him any good. He looked worn out.

"I'm going to move," he finally said. "At Christmas. I'm going to California."

I wondered how long he'd put off saying that, waiting for the right moment.

How long had he known that?

"I knew already, saw the papers lying around in your apartment."

Mordecai smiled wryly.

"I guess I should have thought of that."

"Looks nice. The house, I mean."

He looked at me, embarrassed. "It's just that… I mean, it's the most practical thing for me to be out there. Closer to the industry, if you understand. For a while anyway. It doesn't need to be permanent. A couple of years, maybe, I don't know… what about you, any desire to get into film?"

I was quiet for a long time. I drank beer. He drank beer. We ordered more beer and we drank it alone, each on our side of the table.

I said, "You can't fucking leave. Not now."

"I know, I know," he replied somberly. "But I'm going to do it anyway."

Weird how I don't remember his face from that night, it's all but erased, a body with a head out of focus; I can only picture his fingers, which he drummed on the table top next to his glass, impatiently. The index finger. The pinky finger. The middle finger. Intently sending me an explanation in Morse code that it would be easier to nod at, in understanding. Morse code, as if he'd already left and the sparks were blowing across the continent.

IT SHOULDN'T BOTHER you. The problem is: You're twenty-four years old and you ought to be old enough to handle things like this now and know that this kind of thing won't cause the world to end in a howling inferno; this is not the first friend you'll lose. You ought to be old enough to know that you'll see each other again and that there will be others, lots of others you can latch onto (if you try hard enough) whom in time you will come to call friends, good friends, your closest confidants, it's bound to happen if you just let it. You have colleagues now, people in the same boat as you whom you could ask out for beer once in a while, if you have time, something you less and less often think you have. You don't even need any excuse, and the social hierarchy is different, although still fully there. Just the fact that you all work under the same roof or in the same field is a socially acceptable basis for asking people out that way. And the chances are good that they'll say yes. After all: No one wants to be left out. It doesn't matter that you don't know them that well, you don't even need to like them that much, their

primary purpose is the same as yours is to them, you make each other feel like you have friends and a healthy work environment and an exciting life with more liberties than obligations and most things are pretty much like before, the way it used to be, and you don't feel your throat constricting at the thought of having to get up the next morning as well, and the one after that and the one after that and the one after that and the one after that, go back to the same workplace, the same office, the same desk or theater or whatever the heck it is, and the same people and the same tasks and the next invitation, this time from someone who's not you, to grab a couple of beers, after work, one night, or maybe go to a soccer game together, *do* something. You've got to do something. To keep the silence at bay.

You ought to be old enough to know there's a reason no one advertises the realities of life.

You ought to be old enough to be content on your own.

You ought to be old enough to know that the romantic notion that you and your best friend will be together forever, long into the unforeseeable future, insulated from the rest of the world as if sewn together, conjoined twins was exactly right, a swooning, romantic notion that you should be able to smile at, patronizing, almost. You slip away from each other. It's unavoidable. Find other people who can offer some of what you didn't know you needed, who affirm you in a different way, you start to rely on yourself and your own taste, or imagine that you do. There's more distance. It's been eight years since you last slept alone, you have a job and it's the job you wanted, you have a place to live and therefore, in light of all this, it ought to be if not unproblematic then at least something not to get all worked up about in exactly the same way you did the first time it happened, when you were five or six or seven or eight or thirteen and left your country behind as well; it shouldn't bother you the same way, but it does.

3

None of us saw the third plane. It sounds weird, even as I write this, because we did almost nothing in the weeks and months after That Morning in September but look for it. We craned our necks back until they hurt. Every time we spotted a plane in the sky, the same thought went through our heads: *Is that one supposed to be there?* And we cringed at any faint suspicion of an anomaly in the otherwise routine rumble of airplane engines and learned to distinguish between air traffic coming toward us and air traffic moving away from us, didn't matter where to, as long as it was Somewhere Else, so that we didn't need to worry about it anymore. But this plane, it never reached us; it fell down in Queens. If you were one of those people who kept a tally of things like this, as we all did, then you also knew that the concept of *The Third Plane* was more a figure of speech than anything else, a convenient delineation to distinguish the years and events from each other, and that it was actually the fourth plane in just six years that crashed within a relatively small geographical area of the state of New York (see TWA Flight 800, 1996, hit Long Island), and with its two hundred and sixty people on board brought the total number of airborne fatalities in these disasters up to the unsettling number of 666—that is if you were one of the people who included the terrorists from two of

the planes in the statistics, which a lot of people refused to do—but we also knew that it was just a number and that, in light of everything else, it didn't mean anything at all, except as a meager distraction, a chance to work it all out mathematically so you could yet again avoid processing the fact that they were people, human beings and not numbers, who'd been sitting on those planes, and that each and every one of them had families, lovers, spouses, and friends, colleagues and acquaintances, and that all of *them* in turn also had families, friends, colleagues and acquaintances and so on and so on, ad nauseam, ad inifinitum et mortem, until the equation was no longer something you could toss around in conversations with people on the sidewalk or play with in your head as you stood, crammed into a subway car on your way to work, able to move only a fraction of an inch in any direction, or in a car in gridlock, but rather became a deeply complicated equation on the kind of astronomical scale that required you to learn new names for large numbers, and one of them would be googolplex, and that would be far more frightening than any bland account of three sixes lined up in a row.

When the first news bulletin reached Manhattan that an American Airlines passenger plane had crashed in the Rockaway Beach neighborhood in Queens exactly two months and one day after the attack on the World Trade Center, fresh panic set. It spread to the other boroughs in minutes and unified New Yorkers in one collective thought that morning: *It's happening again*. The Empire State Building was evacuated, the UN building, too; bridges, tunnels, JFK and LaGuardia were shut down and air traffic was redirected as F-15 fighter jets took off from nearby airbases. We'd seen this before, it wasn't that long ago, the procedures were at the tips of people's fingers now, as was the thought of how different the city and the country might look by the time this day was over.

But it wasn't terrorism. No one knew that and no one would have dared to believe it, that that big Airbus machine wasn't hijacked or blown up; it would take days and weeks and months before people realized that it had found itself in the wake turbulence (appendix 1) of a Japanese jumbo jet that had taken off moments ahead of it, and that the first officer's attempt to avoid the unstable airstream from JAL Flight 47 included excessive and unnecessary rudder usage (appendix 2), and

that the aerodynamic stresses inflicted on the plane were so great that the vertical stabilizer separated (appendix 3) and sent Flight 587 into a flat spin that it was not possible to come out of (appendix 4), thundering toward a residential section of the Belle Harbor neighborhood with such force that the engines separated from the fuselage, to later be found several blocks from where the body of the plane obliterated four houses, setting fire to five others and killing five people on the ground (appendices 5, 6, 7, and 8).

The National Transportation Safety Board's final report would be read with skepticism and by so many people in the state of New York that it had to be reprinted multiple times. It would be scrutinized, sentence by sentence, fact by fact, because it was hard to believe that such a thing as a sheer accident still existed.

The sound the seams in the pavement made when I borrowed Mischa's car and drove to Queens the day after the accident, ka-thunk, ka-thunk, ka-thunk, ka-thunk; a regular, comfortable rhythm, or a pulse, as if to emphasize that there was still life where I was headed. It was too complicated to get down to Howard Beach by car before that, with the tunnels and bridges closed and our collective fear that more planes would fall from the sky, but in the fresh light of morning things became easier and clearer. I passed several fire trucks heading back to their stations as I drove south along Woodhaven Boulevard, an unusually large number of police cars, too, and the FEMA trucks holding their steady course toward Rockaway Beach and the affected neighborhood out by the shore.

Howard Beach was inland of Rockaway, on the other side of Jamaica Bay and far enough from Belle Harbor that Mom had actually seen more of the smoke rising from the crash site on TV than she would have from her own windows on the second floor. She lived on 165th Avenue, a street lined with power poles crooked from the wind and practical station wagons, where the pavement was cracked as if with stretch marks and had never been resurfaced, instead patched frugally here and there by miserly road crews who walked around with tape measures and hardhats deciding exactly how much asphalt they would have to part with to avoid their superiors receiving phone calls complaining about the undercarriages of peoples cars that had been damaged by the uneven road surface. The numerous seams, filled potholes, and strange geometric shapes outlined on the

road after they had fixed the most damaged bits of the lanes, looked like scars. You could study the broad selection of shades of gray and determine which years the city had had sufficient funds and which years they'd been forced to use asphalt of a plainer and less durable quality. And you could try to eke some meaning out of the now faded yellow spray paint markings the road workers had left behind in the middle of the street, with their symbols and numbers and gobbledygook abbreviations, and imagine that it wasn't just done to create the illusion that someday sleeves would be rolled up and authentic repair work would actually begin.

Mom rented a siding-clad house here, not a big one, not a particularly attractive one either, but within her price range, and for a long time now I had sensed that she was happy. For all I knew, she was, too, for a while, it was cozy inside, snug, furnished just the way she'd always wanted her living room, with a wide, low bookshelf in front of the window that she could set a wool throw blanket on and sit on with a satisfied expression, like people who have finally or at least for a while found their place in the universe, and no giant TV that took up the whole room, but a small portable TV position way in the corner where it didn't bother her unless she wanted it to; and a view of the bay and a glimpse of the ocean on clear days; and massive, south-facing windows that let the sun pour in for large parts of the day so that she could sit in front of them on her days off and squint and not think about anything in particular, and if she needed help with something, there were pleasant, Italian-American families on all sides; she even learned a few words, a few halting phrases in Italian so she could feel even more at home with them, she said that as a language she both liked the sound of it better and had more aptitude for it than English (which she had always thought sounded a little imperialistic). She even took an Italian class in the evening. But that was before she realized that even her neighbors didn't speak more than the same few expressions she had already learned from them ages ago. She quit the class halfway through and got half of her money back.

Her desire to someday settle on the shore of Lake Como outside of Milan was hers to keep for free.

But once those first years were behind her and the sun no longer brought with it the same joy and sparkle, when instead it just made her notice it was high time she washed the windows again, or in the fall and winter, when the never-maintained parkland across the street from her house lost all its leaves and assumed a gray, lifeless color, occasionally broken by a few splotches of snow, white to start with but eventually contaminated by their surroundings so that they, too, took on a drab, grayish veneer, then Howard Beach was no longer a place she could say she was content to have wound up. Then it was just a place to live and little else, a neighborhood that was neither here nor there. If she told outsiders that she lived in Queens, most of them pictured the other side of the borough: Long Island City, Sunny Sides, Astoria (where she had lived the two first years after we left Poplar Street), places like that, and not a starting-to-be-run-down residential area cut off by the Belt Parkway, far from pretty much everything. The only thing you could really say she was close to down there was JFK. But she wasn't going anywhere. She had to make do with watching the planes that came and went and the comfortable thrill of being able to tell what time of day it was based on the frequency of the air traffic passing over her head; even if she'd wanted to, she couldn't have afforded to move back to Norway again anyway.

She came out to the driveway when I pulled in in front of her garage. She was wearing green pants and a gray wool cardigan under a jacket she had surely bought in the store where she worked; she looked good. We hugged each other.

"I saw it," she said, distressed. "The plane. I saw it."

"Are you sure?"

"A huge ball of fire, Max, right in front of me, I've never seen anything so terrible. What if it'd stayed in the air a few seconds longer? My God, it could have fallen right in our laps. What's going to become of this country, Max?"

"We don't know what happened yet," I responded. "They say they don't think it was terrorism this time."

"Well, it must have been an explosion, I can't see how it could be anything else. It can't be random. Someone did that. You should have seen it, how it was burning as it fell." She pointed to the south and made circling motions with her hand to show how it had spun in the air. "No matter what, I think it's horrible. And

tragic… all those people. The houses that were hit, did you see on the news? There were several fatalities on the ground. Can you imagine? Have you talked to your father?"

It was September all over again.

"He doesn't fly to the Dominican Republic," I replied reassuringly.

"Well how would I know that? But have you?"

"I talked to him last night."

"Well, what does he say?"

"What can he say? Not much. He was on his way to Narita and didn't have much time."

"I don't know where that is."

"Tokyo," I answered.

"Oh, right." She hugged me again, harder. "It's good to see you," she said. "But I wish you'd come a little more often. I haven't seen you since, well, when was it? Hmm, since your play."

"That was only four weeks ago."

"I'm just saying. So, what are you working on now?"

"Not much."

She raised her eyebrows the way she always did when I told her I was between projects and thus in her eyes idle, loafing.

"But can you afford that then?"

"Not doing much doesn't cost much," I smiled.

That Tuesday I spent with Mom was more of the therapeutic kind of family visit than the friendly kind, although I'm not sure which of us benefited the most from it. She needed to talk through what had happened the day before, but I also needed to hear her do that because I had been scared when it happened, scared that what had happened in September had returned, just even more unmanageable and incomprehensible than before and that it wouldn't blow over this time. Even though I had chosen to believe the NTSB's conclusion that this probably wasn't another terrorist attack, the worrying felt pretty much the same, and it felt like there was something systematic afoot, something that was slowly gearing up, as if it weren't random that the first plane had crashed off the coast of Long Island the

summer of 1996, the next two in Manhattan, and then Queens. As if it was coming closer, ever closer and sooner or later it would find us.

So we discussed it. I went shopping with her and we visited the store on Cross Bay Boulevard where she worked and which sold clothes for women who found themselves in that dusky layer between the bold self-promotion of youth and the cloth giftwrapping of old age. The whole time we were contemplating the various details from the accident, comparing notes. She'd read about the policeman who'd run around searching for his own family while at the same time organizing first responders while awaiting more colleagues, I explained where the two jet turbines had fallen, relatively far from the rest of the fuselage, and what that meant to the likely chain of events, we'd both heard conflicting rumors that the tail section had been located, found, and retrieved a mile or so from the beach in Rockaway. We ran through the possibility that someone might have wanted to blow the plane up and if so, why or why not; we considered the structural stresses airplane wings could tolerate without pointing out that the only reason we knew these things was that Dad had taught us, and we compared our experiences from our respective vantage points, and the weather and wind conditions from the preceding twenty-four hours, almost as if we were our own accident investigation board. It would have seemed bizarre if anyone had overheard us, as we calmly and analytically tossed around aerodynamics terms and pilot lingo, people might quickly conclude that we'd been watching too much TV. But the truth was simply that we'd both lived with the same man and that this expertise was one of the few things she and I still shared. It brought us back a sort of hint of our old days, talking the way we did, it had a calming effect, it reminded us of a time when we had been the ground crew and had looked forward to hearing the sound of the outer marker as Dad was picked up on the ILS and landed inside the door at home, taxied into the bathroom to wash his hands, and parked at the table we pushed the chair up to so that he could sit down and open his mouth. But that was a long time before he decided to permanently change the grid he flew. I don't know if she missed him or not.

Mom and I ate dinner together at a restaurant not too far from her house, with a view of the pleasure boats in the canal behind it. She went there fairly often and knew the owners, a pleasant family with roots from the Calabria region of Italy

who greeted her attentively and did their utmost to show her how wonderful they thought it was that she'd brought her son. The whole place had a bit of a *Lady and the Tramp* feeling to it, which was nice, apart from that I couldn't quite picture who would push the last meatball across the plate and offer it to my mother as she sat there alone and expectantly at the table with the red and white plaid tablecloth. That was really quite a sad image. She'd had girlfriends when she'd lived in Astoria, not many, but a few, good ones, I'd had the impression. I'd met a few of them, too, both at her place and at a couple of lunches in Manhattan, not that I could remember when or where, just that they had been pleasant and talkative, with loud, piercing voices and vigorous arm gesticulations when they got going, like windmills; Mom had looked small next to these women. It didn't seem like she had much contact with them anymore. I guess that's pretty much what my visit was about: her loneliness and how we couldn't do anything for each other. My life in Manhattan felt distant to her; she sometimes visited us at the Apthorp, me, Mischa, and Owen, but even so it felt like she was standing outside the whole time, like she didn't quite make it in the door, didn't completely want to or couldn't quite manage to join us. And I couldn't push her out into the world either, force her to develop relationships with her Italian neighbors or call her girlfriends and command them to report to 165th Avenue immediately to spend time with her; I couldn't become her father or push her to get active in politics again and dare to be excited about her interests and ideals, let alone go on dates with one of the many, relatively nice men in the Brooklyn-Queens-Hempstead triangle who would surely have loved to get to know her. Nor could she ask Mordecai to return to New York, but it did seem like she knew what was bothering me, because suddenly while we were walking back to her house after dinner she said:

"So, it's nice about Mordecai and the new movie, isn't it? And that he decided to take the plunge. I really think he can go far if he wants to. Don't you agree? You know, you ought to go visit him in Los Angeles once he's settled. And you and I can go see the movie when it comes out, make a night of it, wouldn't that be fun?"

"How do you know about that?" I asked confused, I hadn't mentioned a word about any of this to her.

"What do you mean? He called and told me," she responded, the confusion mutual.

"He called you?"

"Yes, he does that sometimes. When he has news to share. He's done that for years."

"I guess I just think it's weird that he calls you, that's all."

"Well, he does. He stopped by to see me one night, too, before he left. He was on his way home from seeing his parents in Garden City, I think."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"What, are you jealous?" she teased me when I didn't say anything, just started walking again.

"I just think it's weird," I mumbled again.

She started talking about Mischa and Owen instead (whom she consistently referred to as Ove), asked how they were doing and what they were working on these days.

"It's good you have them," she said afterward, genuinely. "Uncle Ove is a nice man. A good man."

"He does his best."

"And your best…"

"…is always good enough," I completed.

We were standing outside her garage and it was already dark. It was cold, no more than 42 degrees, but in the yellow glow of the streetlights it seemed warmer, and you couldn't see the gray clouds that had been hanging over the city for days. I shivered in my jacket and looked for my car keys.

"Are you cold?" Mom asked, rubbing my back a few times. "I'd be happy to knit you a sweater if you want. Do you need one?"

"That would be great."

"Mischa, too, maybe?"

"She'd be thrilled."

"What kind of sweaters would you like, with a Norwegian pattern maybe? Or should I knit some of those Icelandic sweaters. Those are so nice, aren't they? And stylish."

"Just a regular, solid color would be awesome."

"I have a ton of brown yarn."

"That sounds great."

I wanted to leave before she went into any more detail about the knitting so that I wouldn't have to spend my whole trip back to Manhattan picturing her sitting by herself, in her second floor room with the view of the bay and all the way to the ocean if the weather was good, which it wasn't, counting stitches and humming to herself, and thinking that what she was doing served a purpose and that we would be happy and that we would visit more often and that they would repave her whole street instead of just the places where it was absolutely necessary and that this, this place and this job and the restaurant where she was served by whatever the guy's name who runs the place is, so that she would come back again and again and again and this anxiety she felt after yet another plane had crashed into her life, was just something temporary, and not something she would have to get used to.

She stood there in the driveway as I backed out and drove away, grew smaller and smaller in my rearview mirror, until I couldn't see her anymore.

Mischa was with Owen when I came home, engrossed in a TV documentary about the joys and challenges of deep-sea fishing off Cape Cod. From the way they both sat casually on Mischa's old sofa, with the smalls of their backs resting on the seat cushion and just their shoulders and heads propped against the back rest, it was easy to see that their evening in front of the tube had been of the lengthy variety and that gravity had been given free reign. It looked more like they were doing it for show than for comfort and I stood there in the colonnade watching them for a while without their noticing me; there was something truly soothing about the sight of two people allowing each other to see such a degree of peaceful boredom, evidence that there was trust here in this room. People were who they were and that was true in so many ways. Two bottles of beer and a bowl of potato chips sat on the coffee table in front of them, all empty, and from the way they kept licking their lips and working with their tongues in the hopes of drawing a bit of saliva into their mouths I deduced that the beer had run out before the chips and that they'd kept eating anyway, each in the hope that the other would get up and go get a

couple more beers, but nothing had come of that hope; the distance to the kitchen had become too long and now they both put their faith in the hope that focusing their attention on one big fish after another, being hauled up from the black depths on the screen in front of them, would help them forget how thirsty they were, not to mention how uncomfortable their backs were. I turned, walked into the kitchen, returned to the living room with three beers, and set them on the coffee table in front of them. They grabbed them with unconcealed desire, drank half in one gulp and regained a bit of their energy. Owen straightened up and crossed his legs while Mischa curled up at the other end of the sofa making room for me and insisted on holding the bottle while I sat down, as if she were afraid it might be too good to be true and that at any moment it might occur to someone to take it away from her again.

"What did I miss?" I asked, staring at the satisfied sport fisherman grinning next to an unshaven old salt in a shiny rain slicker, hair like steel wool and a knit cap that could barely hold onto the top of his head.

"Some people fishing," Mischa responded lethargically without taking her eyes off the screen.

"What kind of fish?"

"Don't know. Just fish."

"I think cod," Owen said.

"That's not a codfish," Mischa protested. "It's something else."

Owen nodded at the fish, which took up the whole screen.

"Well, look at that one he's holding up there. That's a codfish, isn't it? It even has that little beard thing."

"Codfish don't have beards. Salmon are the ones that have that," Mischa said.

"I think you're wrong. It's the other way around. Salmon don't have beards. Salmon have… something else."

"We probably ought to turn up the volume," Mischa said, waiting in vain for someone else to go to the trouble of leaning forward and grabbing the remote control.

"Have you guys eaten?" I asked, I felt like my mother.

They shook their heads.

She wouldn't have been able to stand living here anyway.

"We could order something," I suggested. "I already ate, but… it seems like you guys could use a little something."

"As long as it's not fish," Mischa said.

"Kung Pao chicken, that's what I want," Owen announced to no one in particular, absentmindedly and without enthusiasm. "They ought to be wearing lifejackets if they're so far out at sea."

It struck me later, as I walked to the Chinese restaurant around the corner on Broadway, that I hadn't seen them so relaxed in months, none of us had acted like that, not since the towers fell, and that maybe that was normal. At some point or other the tension and crisis mode had to die down and ebb away. I think they were exhausted, like the rest of the country, and it was contagious, but in a good way; standing at the counter waiting for the food that I'd called in and ordered in advance, listening to the mild, smooth music that leaked out of the speakers in the ceiling (the same CD as always, eight or ten tracks of Asian, synthesizer muzak—I'd started to recognize them by now and could tell them apart after having eaten here several times, but I still wondered how the employees kept from going crazy with the relentless repetition). I realized I was standing there, smiling. Even that felt unfamiliar. Everyday life had returned. Life was leaking out again, not just the black pus we'd gotten used to. I gave enough of a tip to ensure a parade of mutual bowing, I was forced to exit the establishment backwards, my torso bobbing up and down like one of those drinking bird toys; I thanked them and wished them a pleasant rest of the evening. They followed me out onto the sidewalk and gave me a bag with even more fortune cookies than they'd stuffed in with my order. *You need fortune*, one of them said in broken English, the wife of the owner I think. *And now we have it*, I responded and bowed my way across the street, backwards into the cold night with the myriad brilliant lights from windows and streetlights around me, and into the doors of the Apthorp.

We spent the rest of the evening, and parts of the night, in the living room, surrounded by empty cartons that had once bulged with reasonably priced, tasty Chinese food, and beer; we drank beer and talked, with the same openness we'd had toward each other before the fall began. I remember an ease in the room that

night, Owen positioned on the deep, rickety, comfortable chair by the fireplace, the one he'd bought himself at some flea market somewhere, his first piece of furniture, which no one other than him sat on and which creaked every time he moved even the tiniest bit, or spoke, and Mischa and I lay on the sofa together, crowded together, outstretched, with our heads turned away from him, as if he were our therapist, the one who would elicit our best and forgive us for all the rest. Every now and then he would straighten up (accompanied by sounds from his chair that made it sound like it was going to give out once and for all) and slip over to the sound system to put on records he thought we should hear, that went with whatever we were discussing or just made us sound wiser than maybe we were, the farther into the beer we got. Mostly the night was dedicated to Coltrane. And Mingus. That was also the night Mischa divulged the details of the one-woman exhibit she was working on which would open in February, the reason we almost wouldn't see her until Christmas and even less so after that. She lay on the sofa and described the three paintings she was working most intently on down in her studio in SoHo and how uncertain she was about whether what she was doing was right or completely distasteful. And whether that actually mattered at all. In the end Owen dozed off in his chair and then made his way through the apartment to his own room. Mischa and I stayed up awhile longer, listening to his records before we, circuitously and through a rather complicated chain of cause and effect, ended up in my office, as far from the sleeping musician as we could get, on my sofa in there, covered with old notes, outlines and books related to *Ocean* which already seemed outdated and devoid of all energy and would have to be gotten rid of at the earliest and best convenience, if not now, right now, as we moved to the floor and she smelled like that time on Fire Island and I was so happy, so terribly happy that we were exactly here, now, on the floor, after eight years and with the way the world was headed, protected by the rumbling from Owen, and I loved her even more than I had in the beginning, if that was possible, it was exhausting and almost painful, and as we found the rhythm in our lovemaking which without a doubt marked the pinnacle of our relationship, a demonstration of the art of copulation which I later thought ought to have been framed and had its own plaque screwed onto it, I wanted to ask her if she wanted to get married, not to mention having children,

and I was working up to doing both, but there was just too much to concentrate on, and afterward, almost a bit embarrassed by the whole thing, as we trundled back to our bedroom at the other end of the apartment with a quick stop by the kitchen for a couple of slices of bread and a glass of water, for some reason or other it felt a little inappropriate and thus remained just a thought.

THE QUESTION about tastelessness that Mischa had asked us about her work on the exhibit *From the Office of Things Unhinged*, also became a heated debate among art critics when her show opened at Gallery Leiko on Spring Street at the end of February. The question didn't come up so much about the actual title works—the four hyperrealistic panorama paintings of empty office landscapes and meeting rooms, based on photographs she'd taken during her stay with Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich, but which in her versions had been transformed to rooms without windows or doors, rooms without any chance of escape and which therefore reinforced their loneliness and gave them an unpleasant surgically cold air—but the three last, oversized works which were painted 120 x 80 inches and titled "Phones Kept Ringing," "I Just Called to Say I Love You," and "Meet Me in the Hallway." These were the paintings that Mischa had told us she wasn't sure about, and which we had ended up urging her to complete. The paintings were based on FBI evidence material (portions of the debate also had to do with how she'd gotten ahold of them) and showed a cell phone, a PalmPilot, and a pager. The problem was that they had all been recovered from the ruins of the twin towers. Grayish brown, bent, partly crushed, punctured, dirty, dust-covered objects, reproduced in heartbreaking detail as a reminder of all the people we were never going to hear from again. The size of the paintings, and the way they were hung, unusually high above the floor, gave them an almost sacred quality. Relics. On the wall next to the first of them, Mischa had handwritten: *Cell phones, pagers, and planners found in the ruins of the World Trade Center. Recovery workers reported phones that kept ringing for days after the towers fell, the time between calls gradually increased as family members lost hope and the devices ran out of power.*

The critics broke into three camps. There were those who considered it objectionable to profit off of national suffering under the guise of artistic activity

and that the objects the paintings depicted, even if destroyed beyond recognition, should be regarded as private, personal effects which naturally led to the question of whether Mischa—with the help of the FBI—was complicit in grave robbing. Others thought it was understandable for an artist like her to be preoccupied with this perspective, but that it was simply too soon and that she should have waited ten years, after the healing process had progressed further and it became possible to look at what would then probably be outdated technological artifacts and recognize the works as *evidence of an era we had made it through*. The last group of critics, which was the smallest, but also the most vocal, were those who stood wholeheartedly behind the paintings. The New York Times reviewer was one of them. He viewed the three paintings as "an elegy to the dead, standing stones to the memory of the city in general and the buildings in particular." "Viewing the components of the exhibit," he continued, "is like roaming backstage in a world where the actors have left for the day, or forever. The fluorescent lighting, mounted on the ceiling for the installation, gave the paintings a harsh, unfavorable sheen that initially brought to mind a curator with an exaggerated sense of mood and the big picture. But then, the longer you contemplated the images and digested the way the white light conveyed the flatness as opposed to the scale of the images, you realized that it had to have been a conscious choice on the part of the artist. It later also turned out that the works were created under similar lighting conditions and hence calibrated for this intensity from above. There's a symbiosis here, a pregnancy in the relationship between what is unspoken and suggested in the exhibit. The landscape paintings (if one calls them that—because of course they are, contemporary ones) sent echoes back and forth to the ruined electronic gadgets in the other part of the exhibit, the *Appendix*. The anonymized objects became the final portraits of their owners, the plastic, electronic gadgets thus became imbued with a remarkable softness and warmth, as if they possessed a type of sovereign identity that could be read from them, as opposed to the final calls and text messages they had transmitted, which were no longer within reach. In this way Mischa Grey became a curator of catastrophe, a force for preservation, and through the factual, the concrete, her show was nevertheless equally concerned with work life, corporatism, and its ultimate consequence, death, paradoxically expressed

rather abstractly. But, and this can't be emphasized enough, the exhibit *From the Office of Things Unhinged* is about far more than the terrorist attack on New York City and the World Trade Center. This is the only reason I can nod a bit in understanding at the other critics who thought that Grey's exhibit was premature: Because of what the city and the country had been through in recent months it was easy to become hypnotized by the ruined cell phones and the Palm Pilot and criticize her for this being what she was exclusively trying to convey. But if you dared to allow yourself to look beyond the disaster, a completely different exhibit opened up, and this one required a longer look, a clearer and more gentle look at ones surroundings (the office landscapes, for example, are not based on American buildings, but offices in Zurich, Switzerland, where the artist lived last year, under Bruno Bischofberger's wings). Then it becomes a tale about the transitory nature of the contemporary economy and capitalism and about how everything that goes up must also come down, the poetry of economic cycles and their wavelengths. The works, and the approach—the almost pathologically detail-obsessed, naked rooms and the stillness—have a kind of reflexive transparency, a gravitational force pulling toward the hereafter (the afterlife) and what must be interpreted as a completely transcendent sensibility (of our material world). There is no campy aestheticization in Grey's works, nor any provocation, although it is completely possible and maybe also to a certain extent unavoidable, to experience the paintings as criticizing institutions, although problematized by it not being clear exactly which institutions she has it in for. All together one could view them as making a critical point, opposing power structures and modern western institutions, with an unspoken feminist shout-out in the background. But that would also be far too simple. Because the offices are anonymous, they're everywhere and they control the operations of almost everything in our lives. Thus, when the offices empty out, the world ceases. And yet, as a continuation of that, the works also embrace the office as a place of safety and identity production in line with the material values that are produced in the premises, but here they robbed of their exits and their views, their *exit strategy*. Like a womb, with the employee, the office worker, as the helpless embryo.

Mischa Grey's production positions itself securely in the tradition of photorealists and brings to mind Ralph Goings, Chuck Close, and especially Robert Bechtle, the latter being the one she felt the greatest kinship to, particularly with regard to her everyday focus. But even if Grey's paintings far exceed Bechtle and his colleagues when it comes to the degree of reproduced detail—possibly a result of the fact that these days photo realism is increasingly discussed as hyperrealism—she consistently choses to sully her images a bit with impurities and mild recklessness, leaving traces of a brush she used to wipe color away with or dust or dirt that has gotten stuck in the paint before it dried, as if to emphasize that we actually are looking at paintings, or also to point out that the competition for lifelikeness and precision isn't her true concern.

Otherwise, the only object installed as part of the exhibit, placed in the center of the room, is a well-worn wooden chair, a copy of Danish designer Arne Jacobsen's *3107*. It's an almost perfect piece of designed, imported office equipment. A chair, constructed with long-term desk work in mind, but deprived of all its power and function, rendered meaningless for the simple reason that no one is sitting in it.

The exhibit was well attended for the month and a half it ran, far longer than Mischa's previous one had. She also gave far more radio, TV, and newspaper interviews than before, mostly due to the journalists' desire to fire up the ethical debate associated to the three touchy paintings. But she didn't succumb to their attempts to corner her by asking pointed, rapid-fire questions and attempts to goad critical voices into debating her pretty much always ended up the same way: a fairly upset person would accuse her of having made an ethical gaffe and being *un-American* (her Canadian citizenship always came in handy for them here as they were able to accuse her of being unable to understand the American perspective on the issue), which she didn't dispute, but rather sort of agreed with, and she protested that she wouldn't do the same again (without adding that the only reason that wouldn't happen was because she had *already* done it and no one had any interest in rote repetition). When the person debating her or the journalist would then point an index finger at her and ask why she didn't take down the pictures, she simply said: *Maybe I would have if I could, but they've been sold and I don't own*

them anymore, so there's not much I can do about it now. After that the debate/interview would usually move on to what she'd earned from the pictures and her assurances that with this money she would make something that was pleasant to look at the next time, and from there the withered provocation would wash into the sea, until the clock ran out.

There were other interviews, of course; the art journals and culture magazines focused more on the show viewed as a part of the contemporary scene and in the context of her earlier works or on thorough analyses of her oeuvres, and the last bit of irascibility among those who viewed the three paintings as unpatriotic faded when a relatively high-up representative of the FBI took a fall for saying he liked the pictures. "That's what the real world looks like," he said. "You don't need to like it, but we're all forced to live in it."

She gave lectures, too, in the city and at universities in California and the Midwest, to up-and-coming art students during the day and middle-aged, middle-class women in flowy, loose-fitting clothes with their husbands in tow in the evenings. They sat with their legs crossed and their feet swinging up and down listening patiently to her, full of curiosity, mumbling *ah, I see* and *exactly right* to each other, but always so quietly that it would seem like they were just saying it to themselves and had forgotten themselves for a moment.

And Bruno Bischofberger was satisfied. In a rush. He came hurrying back to the city on the Concorde and met Mischa and me for dinner at a place close to the Sherry-Netherland three weeks after the opening. I didn't get to meet him, the place was packed, but that didn't matter. I didn't like him now, either. I concentrated on the fois gras and thought how would he like to be force fed four times a day for weeks on end. I didn't actually ask him, and he didn't ask me a single question either. The only thing I remember him saying to me that night, other than *hi* and *nice to see you again*, was something along the lines of *she's a gem, that one,* something like that, which was neither a question nor anything I could disagree with and I suppose that was the idea, too, for me to say as little as possible and thus not interrupt him as he counted up the money in the back of his head. The paintings from the exhibit were moving on to galleries in Zurich and St. Moritz before their buyers in the U.S. and Europe took possession of them, and

even if that meant a good deal of money for Mischa, I couldn't help but see how hard she found it to accept that these paintings would now be scattered to the four winds, to collectors and investors who had probably bought them as much because Bruno had convinced them that Mischa was going to be super valuable in just a few years that they began to like the works uncommonly well, and that they would be able to sell them again with a thousand percent profit when the right time came. I don't think that's what she wanted, but I also don't think she'd counted on selling them at all. I think she'd hoped that they would remain hers, that they would continue to take up space in her atelier in SoHo between exhibits and that she would alternate between pleased with them and irritated at them, until the day came when one of the museums bought them and put them safely in their storage archives, so that they could bring them out and display them to the public at regular intervals.

Since the *Heaven is a Laundry Place* show in 1994, she had had a number of group and solo shows in the city and in Barcelona, Chicago, Milwaukee, Paris, Toronto, Monterrey, Madrid, Amsterdam, Newport, Boston, Pennsylvania, Rome, Philadelphia, Cologne; there may have been more or possibly less, I didn't fully keep track and I'm not really sure if she did either. With the exception of the exhibits in Rome (*Mischa Grey Paintings*) and Paris (*Wash Up After Yourself: An American from Canada in France*) which I'd missed because of theater rehearsals, she had declined, or in the beginning not even been invited, to be present at the foreign shows. But we had pretty much both attended the ones that took place in the U.S. I liked being in the gallery with her and watching the way people studied her work and pointed, gesticulated, and displayed authentic engagement and interest in her work, all while Mischa herself was invisible to them. Almost more than anything else, I liked watching other people realize how talented she was. It wasn't until after the first several minutes were over that would she be recognized and the vampires would come out of the woodwork, at which point the whole thing would fall apart.

The first several years we were together, in many ways it had only been us or the illusion that it was only us. We traveled to the galleries and cities where the exhibits were taking place and looked for her paintings among all the other

exhibitors', or waited for the gallery owner to take some time for her and ask if we were hungry and how our trip had been and that sort of thing. But now it was different: Mischa attended dinners and receptions and there were faux accolades and evenings with drinks and casual conversations with other artists, and none of the informal conversations or gatherings were ever that, informal. To the contrary, they were loaded to the point of bursting with formalities and nascent obligations, testing each others' boundaries, probing how far they were willing to go and endless discussions of what people were working on now and how one should go about breaking through, breaking things wide open, there was always talk of that, of breaking through, not in the sense of a breakthrough to the public or potential buyers (at any rate no one ever said that openly or straightforwardly), but with regard to with the art *per se*; they were collectively looking for what several of them called a *Pollock moment*, referring to the epiphany that caused Jackson Pollock to leave traditional methods behind and switch to action painting, with the canvas spread on the floor and the paint alternately dripped onto it and hurled at it in vigorous, controlled motions. The talk was always about something that was going to happen, now, soon, every moment. And everyone was counting on being at the center of it when it happened.

(End of sample)

SYNOPSIS

(Continues from end of sample)

Chapter 4

When Antichrist retires, they throw him a farewell party, and this party marks the first night of Owen's small disappearances. Through the autumn and winter of 2003 he goes missing at around six PM, sometimes on the 20th of the month, sometimes the 18th or 21st, but he never tells them where he goes.

Summer, 2003. Max talks to Mordecai on the phone, but not often, and never for long; he always fears that he's too busy. It's been a year and a half since *Ocean*, Max is living off of Mischa, and she's started to hint that he might find a new project soon. One day when they're out with friends of Mischa's (Max presents Wade Guyton and his printer technique, as well as Gabe; painting all black pictures – the latter becoming a friend of Max's), she asks him if he knows of Roberto Gorza. Max doesn't. It turns out he's a playwright, several of Mischa's friends have read his first manuscript, Kim Gordon[1] is doing music for it though no one has decided to put it up yet. Someone knows someone who knows someone, and after two weeks two massive brown envelopes, containing what'll become the play *LAX*, arrive in Max's mailbox. It takes Max eight pages to call up the playwright.

Chapter 5

Max meets Roberto Gorza outside his hotel, joining him in the cab going to the airport. The 400 page manuscript, like *Ocean*, is mostly about two characters passively waiting. But apart from that it's strikingly different: two rough gang members wait around at LAX, speaking in a language heavy with slang, forcing the audience to concentrate. When Max asks Roberto, himself a former gang member, whether he's ever killed someone, Roberto is offended – but Max makes him understand that he doesn't give a shit about what Roberto's done personally, he simply needs to understand this way of life, he needs it to be believable. This is the beginning of a series of conversations, but Max quickly realizes that the hardest part is to understand the bodily rhythm and choreography of *waiting*.

[1] Of Sonic Youth

After a lengthy process of asking permission and proving he's not mad, Max stands outside JFK and simply waits while being recorded by airport security cameras, to which he is later given the footage. One hour into the first day he regrets it, but he sticks it out, and the second day he gets the hang of it. It reminds him of running as a teenager with Andri and Stig in Forus – of eliminating one's expectations; of simply running.

On the train back form JFK after the third day, Max, to his surprise, spots Owen – crying. He realizes that it is the 21st of September, it's the day of Owen's monthly disappearance. When he later asks Owen what he's done that day, Owen lies about it. Back at home, Mischa, having had a few beers with Gabe, insists that they should follow Owen on his next disappearance.

LAX turns out to be a tremendous success, selling out 90 percent of the tickets within a week, following rave reviews in all newspapers. Extra dates are added, Roberto's interviewed everywhere, and the show is finally moved to a way bigger theatre. Meanwhile, Max and Mischa decide to follow Owen, ending up at the Brooklyn VA hospital. He's at a Vietnam veteran meeting. When he sees them there, he's angry and hurt. Embarrassed, but annoyed, Max says, "I thought you said it was nothing to talk about. I thought you were done with those things?", and Owen replies, "I'm done with *those things*. But they're not done with us."

One year later, shortly after *LAX* finally stops playing at the Eugene O'Neill theatre on Broadway, Roberto Gorza is shot and killed in LA. He talks to Owen, who says he feels he has to go back to Vietnam, that there's a group of them planning to go in a few years. "I think it's time you tell your story," Max says, "about who you were." "It's not a revolutionary story," Owen replies. "Maybe you should tell it anyway," Max answers.

LEAVES FROM THE DIARY OF IMPERIALISM

(FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. THE YEAR OF THE MONKEY)

1966 - 1970

Chapter 1

"It's not like you think," Owen writes, "I came to America for the jazz." Growing up he listened to jazz on the radio whenever his parents were out, later he listened to his few records again and again in his small SRO in Oslo. He wanted to be the new Monk, the new Mingus, to spend his time in the dark basement clubs of Greenwich Village, to try heroin and wake up exhausted on roofs or in streets. He wanted people to say it was a shame that he passed so young. And he failed.

Born in 1944, Owen grows up with a father who balances being deeply religious with being a worker and a communist, never seeing these as contradictory (though both groups regard him with a certain skepticism). At home they sing, psalm after psalm, until Owen eventually feels that he can't relate to their content anymore. He keeps going to church for a while when he moves to Oslo to study to become a teacher, but by the autumn of 1966 he stops. Instead he plays the piano.

One day in December he approaches a guy he's seen around, a poet called Jan Erik,[2] who introduces him to a guy named Per.[3] They discuss jazz, they discuss the Vietnam war. When Owen's home for Christmas his dad says that he's changed so much, it's almost as if he's become someone else. Owen takes it as a great compliment.

The next summer they arrive at Owen's apartment in Oslo uninvited, his parents and his brother, staying for a whole week. Owen doesn't like it, though he's happy to see his brother again. Growing up, they were extremely close – whatever Owen did, Svein did as well, and even though Svein was four years younger, none of Owen's friends questioned it when he joined them for hikes and weekend trips. The brothers shared a bedroom, in the evenings Svein would sing them a psalm before they talked until they fell asleep.

[2] The Norwegian poet Jan Erik Vold

[3] Per Kleiva, Norwegian visual artist. *Leaves From The Diary of Imperialism* (*Blad frå imperialismens dagbok*, 1971) is the name of a series of three silk screen prints by Kleiva.

After Owen moved to Oslo, they became distant and stopped writing to each other, and when Svein arrives with his parents (and his girlfriend Beate, Max's mum) in the summer, he's a young, radical man no longer looking up to his brother, but rather hating him for not being opposed enough to the war.

Owen dreams of jazz, and together with Jan Erik and Per he makes a plan; he'll move to America, he'll pay attention and write home about the newest music, literature, art, representing them all over there. He builds up his courage and tells his parents that he's leaving. His brother, enrolled in the military, is not at home. Owen can't bring himself to tell Svein that he's moving to the country Svein hates the most. He neither calls nor writes.

He saves up money, sells his furniture and buys a boat ticket, visiting and re-visiting Per's latest exhibition, but unable to afford his favorite picture. The last night in Oslo he spends with Jan Erik and Per, the latter giving him a scroll not to be opened until he reaches the U.S. And he's off.

Sample 4, from part III

LEAVES FROM THE DIARY OF IMPERIALISM
(FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. THE YEAR OF THE MONKEY)
1966 - 1970

2

Norwegians were impossible to escape.

I'd only been in the city a few days, in Brooklyn, before I ran into the first one. I had arrived in New York on the MS Bergensfjord and we'd sailed past the Statue of Liberty on our way in, the sight was every bit as dramatic and touching as I'd imagined it would be, the way we'd talked about it being. I stood on deck, we all stood on deck, whether we were here on vacation or to stay, I don't know if we did it because some things never change and we were mostly standing on deck because that's what those who had come before us, earlier in the century or in the previous one, a hundred years ago, had done; we stood on deck and were moved and relieved and maybe we were also anxious. We'd been able to prepare ourselves for the view from deck and the sight of the enormous city that met us, there were pictures and movies and TV reports, we'd seen most of them; we knew what New York City looked like and that Ellis Island had been shut down, there wouldn't be hours of waiting there as we slowly wound our way through the system having to watch the

anarchists and people with syphilis being deported, the sick placed in quarantine, and old women in shawls and kerchiefs with insufficient English skills sitting worriedly on their trunks along the wall waiting for their husbands to finish their inspections.

We knew what the city would look like, but we weren't prepared for the anxiety. For many of us, this was our first time outside of Norway. And now we were on the other side of the world, after eight long days and nights at sea.

We were there. We were nervous.

I sat in a room in Manhattan. The Anderson Hotel was at the corner of West 23rd Street and 7th Avenue. I stayed there for six days, on the second floor, in a cheap room, one of the most affordable hotels in the city, probably. I stayed there while I tried to get my head together and shake off my sea legs. A cockroach occupied the area behind the toilet and had the same daily rhythm as me; we met in the mornings and evenings, mutually put out. In addition, the window to the street didn't seem to open, someone had been in a hurry and painted it shut. The first few days I was on the verge of telling the lady at the front desk, but each time I dropped it and instead asked nicely for the key to my room. I didn't want to complain. Besides, there was also something comfortable about being encapsulated this way, the noise of the traffic overwhelmed me when I was outside, but back in my room it was like I was out of the city, a room that, thanks to the insulation of the window, gave me a distinct sense of being neither here nor there, but sooner in some a kind of indeterminate transit zone. In the mornings I opened the curtains and peered out with curiosity at the people and cars, from a safe distance, for long enough that the rhythm of the movements out there became predictable to me. Only then did I leave the room. Gradually my anxiety was replaced by a desire to explore, I stayed out later in the evenings, I discovered that Village Vanguard was only three blocks from my hotel, this was the legendary club I'd dreamt of one day getting to play at—where Coltrane had played, where Monk had been given permission to grow and mature even though no one could be bothered to come and listen to him in the beginning. Sitting at a table, at the very back of the place, with beer and wide-open ears I devoured whatever was played for me and enjoyed every

single second with a radiant joy that shot from my feet up my spine so that I had to hold onto the table to keep from howling my pleasure to the whole establishment. But I couldn't stay at the Anderson Hotel, there wasn't money for that. And on the sixth day I packed up my things and went to Brooklyn, to Bay Ridge, to 8th Avenue.

To Lapskaus Boulevard.

The street's not there anymore. Well, it's there, but all the Norwegian immigrants aren't there anymore, the signs that used to advertise lutefisk and lamb and cabbage stew and Olsen's Bakery, the Ekeland & Berntsen Music Store, Sørlandet Restaurant and the Sporting Club Gjøa building, the Norwegian churches and Sunday schools: They've all been gone for ages. The first of the businesses closed down sometime in the late seventies and then, one by one, the others followed suit. The Norwegians went back home, or on to Florida and retirement life where they could die more or less respectably in the sun after a long life that had taken them across the big ocean. The last Viking on the street packed whatever meatballs remained into practical Tupperware containers and left one hundred and twenty years of history and the street, where Chinese immigrants were now in their hay day, hanging up their own signs over their own shops, clearing away lutefisk and setting out rice for their own compatriots who would be arriving in the country any moment and starting their own chapter of the local history.

Lapskaus Boulevard, what a terrible place it was. From the first instant, I knew it wouldn't do to stay there long term. Sixty or seventy thousand babbling Norwegians, with a distinctive dialect that was neither fish nor fowl anymore, were keeping house in Brooklyn when I arrived there, and no matter where you went, where you stood and where you looked, you were surrounded by them; it was insufferable. Sailors, most of them, from Aust and Vest Agder and Rogaland, and thus all infected with the same pietism, reeking of sulfur, that I (and they) had been trying to get away from. But then they came ashore here—escaped en masse from the wages on their ships that were far too low and one day just disappeared into the city which they eventually got to know better than their own hometowns, or they were lured across the sea by relatives. Regardless of the reason, this robust maritime

migration from southwestern Norway brought folks who were bewildered at how fantastic America was, at the enormous opportunities this place had to offer, and at how well the Norwegians had been received, good workers and honest and polite and God-fearing not to mention how skilled they were in their trades and good with their hands. They decided that the whole thing must have been what God intended, and thus, crestfallen, they dug out their psalm books again and fold their hands under the captivating, American skies.

If it hadn't been for my having no idea where to go, I would never have set foot in these parts. If it hadn't been for my not being able to afford to stay in a hotel any longer, my anxiety about that had returned and I needed somewhere to live where I wasn't going to need to pay first and last month's rent up front, I would have drawn a big X right through all of goddamn Brooklyn. But I followed word of mouth and headed to Lapskaus Boulevard. And less than a month later there I stood, on May 17th, Norwegian Constitution Day, celebrating the national holiday with thousands of other people in Leif Ericson Park. By then at least I had found a place to live. A piano had been brought up to my tiny apartment for free and I had a job as a Norwegian and Geography teacher at the Norwegian school. Not bad. I walked in a door that first day, into a Norwegian restaurant, and 45 minutes later, after consuming a plate of traditional potato dumplings and two glasses of water, I walked out with my hands full of addresses and phone numbers of people who were ready to open their arms to help me. It seemed as if benevolence itself lived here. It's a shame I disliked them so much, each and every one of them was so good. Can I say that? That I detested them? I don't know if it's true. It basically wasn't their fault, just my prolonged allergy to everything Norwegian that tipped the scales. The residents of Norway's Brooklyn colony spouted pietism over 8th Avenue like Agent Orange on murky souls and planted the need for repentance and piety and penance in what little was left of the people afterward; I think that's what bothered me. How they pretended to cling to everything I was doing my utmost to get away from, and my own disappointment at having traveled so far and still not made any headway. The hardest thing wasn't the thick blanket of Lutheranism that lay over Lapskaus Boulevard—I could have dealt with that purely based on experience and come to accept it, even if I kept

myself at proper distance. What was worse was that people seemed to be constantly pulling off the Lutheran blanket and putting on their new-found, *financially aware*, American selves instead. They offered their wares from the counter, a lithograph of a gentle Jesus smiling on the wall behind them, but as soon as a customer asked a question about the price, a lightning fast hand darted up from the shopkeeper's apron, flipped Jesus over a hundred and eighty degrees and was followed by loud complaints on the permanent recession. And who could blame them? They came from seafaring families, most of them, they knew how hard life could be in the Norwegian merchant fleet and how necessary Jesus had been, as the only insurance policy they could afford to buy. They had no plans to be taken advantage of again. Maybe it was different in the previous century for those who had left tenant farming situations in Norway and gone to the Midwest, people were now cultivating fourth-generation dirt at farms in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Iowa; far away from New York's brutality they could work in the sweat of their face and thank the Lord for their evening porridge with sincerity in their voices. There wasn't room for that kind of thing in Brooklyn. Either you earned money and clung on, or you found somewhere else to go, and somewhere else pretty much meant back to Norway, or even worse: back to the boats that took them away from their families for months at a time.

But. Not everyone ran businesses; there were carpenters and bridge builders, shipfitters; three quarters of all the dockbuilders and longshoreman in New York were Norwegian. They were a visible presence in the Big Apple. Salomonsen, whom I rented from at the corner of 8th Avenue and 53rd Street, had never set foot on a boat. He wasn't particularly religious either. He had long ago replaced his picture of Christ with a picture of King Haakon VII. "*And* money," he said, "*don't you* worry *about that. I'm sure we can come to* an agreement *about that as we go along*."

Salomonsen got me the teaching job at the nearby school so that at least I could pay him *something* every month from May onward. He also got me a nice Weber piano, just two days after I had asked him for advice about where I might be able to rent a reasonably priced one; it was hauled up to my room on the third floor one day while I was at work and he wouldn't hear of taking any payment for this

favor either. I don't know how he got ahold of that piano. I chose not to ask. Salomonsen worked down at the harbor in Red Hook and was usually gone from about ten at night until eight in the morning; I usually saw him from the window when I got up, he parked his Mercedes in front of his house across the street, went inside and didn't come out again until the afternoon. Then you could usually find him somewhere on 8th Avenue, in one of the shops or ambling up and down the street where he would greet friends, acquaintances, business partners, and the other tenants he served as a kind of patron to. Eventually it also became clear to me that he had started the rumor about the jazz musician on 53rd Street which I was confronted with more and more often over the summer of 1968. He wanted people to know that I lived under his roof almost for free, that he had gotten me the expensive piano that would bring me success and make me thank him later in my successful career. That was Salomonsen's payment from me, marketing himself as a philanthropist, a person with enough money to do things like that, which in turn, for his part, proved to anyone who might be in doubt that he was a loaded man who ought to be treated accordingly or there'd be a price to pay for rubbing him the wrong way.

On the other hand, when it came to me, I did end up rubbing a number of other people the wrong way. My dislike of the psalms and the waffling piousness was one thing, the snootiness of many self-declared Norwegian Americans was something else: If I talked about my concern that the oil industry would change Norway and render Stavanger unrecognizable, they scoffed at me and lectured me on *the American way*, which they not only declared themselves experts on, but also good representatives of. Like all good Americans they, too, had started with two empty hands, or better yet: two folded hands. *Norway*, they began, *lacks entrepreneurial spirit.* Showmanship. *I* guarantee you *that they won't find any more oil than will fit in the tank of an* American car. *And if that were to happen, which it won't—it takes* hard work, you see, *it's no use to sit on your* ass and wait—*I hope for* God's sake *you people have the sense to do something useful with the money.* They started almost every single sentence with *here in America* and *we*, as if to emphasize that there was a difference between us, between Norwegians and *Norwegian Americans*: between those who had been here for a long time and those who had

arrived recently, which left me a bit out in the cold: I hadn't become one of them yet—and I had renounced my home country by turning my back on it.

I was also an outsider on those occasions when I took a break from Lapskaus Boulevard, it seemed. To my vast disappointment I had to force myself to appreciate that the New York I had dreamt of was disappearing for good, I was ten years too late; Coltrane was dead, Dolphy was dead, Lester Young and Bird were long gone and the jazz scene in Greenwich Village, where the beatniks and smackheads and musicians in suits and crazy poets had once ruled the nights in the dimly lit jazz cellars, were well on their way to being replaced by the colorful, new youngsters: Hippies had taken over the streets. Flower power, Timothy Leary and Haight-Ashbury were what mattered, the memories of the Summer of Love and endless mantras hollered out of open windows so that Maharishi Mahesh Yogi would hear it; there were bed-ins, love-ins, sit-ins, psych-out, turn on/tune in/drop out, the Grateful Dead and magic mushrooms and Hendrix and Joplin and jugglers and street theater and the west coast and the sexual revolution and weed, hash, pot, speed, LSD, bongs and Buddha and Strawberry Fields that stretched from Washington Square all the way up to Central Park, and it seemed so foreign, it made me sad, not because I didn't believe in them, they certainly had good intentions, but it just wasn't my era anymore, the hepcats I had so longed to be a part of had evaporated, weren't there anymore, not the same way. A seriousness had come in, a different seriousness, and people had ushered in free love like a weapon against the doom and political complexity, the beatniks had been passed over and left behind, tapping their feet to a different beat than those who now dashed up and down the streets in their Afghan coats and psychedelic-colored shirts and bell-bottoms, obtained from any of the countless shops that just in the last year had been sure to hop on the bandwagon of the new youth rebellion and quickly pump out one weird outfit after another, in bone-chilling color combinations that kept people awake for days and free flowers in the hair for the first one hundred customers. Just being a hippie wasn't good enough anymore, you also had to look like one, unless you were Allen Ginsberg and could stride out of the jazz and poetry and smell into San Francisco with your credibility intact.

But me? I couldn't pull it off. The distance was too great, and it wasn't that I didn't think these young folks were serious, or that the freedom they sought was different than mine or that their protests against Vietnam or the subjugation of women were hard to sympathize with, but because their movement, with all its rituals, unspoken dress code and attitudes, and embracing the collective, in all its shades, was constantly at risk of developing into a new and invisible form of religion, just as confining as the one I came from, but doomed to implode sooner or later as soon as it ran out of steam or if the war (whichever war really) lasted too long. I saw them in the parks, in the streets, and in the lotus position on the sidewalks, the most eager of them, chillums in their hands and freedom in their hair, but the freedom they peddled to people passing by seemed flimsy and bore witness to a rickety division where you were either with them or not, and if you weren't with them on everything, then you weren't with them at all. Then you weren't groovy. Then you were defending the system. A hypocrite. The enemy. Bourgeois. Reactionary, a friend of Hoover. I just didn't get it.

But in hindsight: It's certainly possible that I was deeply jealous of them and that I really would have liked to be one of them, naked and in love with everything alive, had it not be for this darned Norwegian stiffness that flat-out kept me from so much as dancing out of step.

Was it like this at home, too? I wrote to Per and Jan Erik, explained how things were going and heard back that the Henie Onstad Art Center had opened with a spectacular piece of music by Arne Nordheim—had I read about it in the New York Times (Per asked)? Had I heard that Crown Prince Harald had married Sonja (Jan Erik asked)? By the way hippies took over Palace Park in Oslo, they wrote, and song festivals were the new thing there. The letters said little about whether that (or the royal wedding, for that matter) was to be considered a good thing. On the other hand there was something in Jan Erik's letter about Øydis. A whole page, almost. But I didn't read that part.

I went right out and bought myself a new suit; it was a silent protest. Shirt and tie. New sunglasses. The whole kit. The last hepcat in New York. I went to Village Vanguard and saw Bill Evans in August; for several nights afterward I sat in my

room on Lapskaus Boulevard and tried to play like him. It couldn't be done. I worked harder, longer; it didn't get any better.

WHY NOT play saxophone instead, like Coltrane? Or bass, like Mingus? I was no great pianist, my fear stood in my way. But piano became the instrument in my life, out of practical considerations more than anything else; we had one at home, an old one that my mother had grown up with. I wasn't allowed to play anything besides hymns and folk tunes on it and Mrs. Bore, who came to our place every other week to teach me and who, herself, lacked any sort of certified training, let more than a year pass before hesitantly teaching me chords, faking off a lead sheet, and other simple tricks that in her view belonged to the realm of vulgar music and really had no value for classical music or the sacred hymns where the composer's harmonic movements were integrated into the work and the different parts' linear interplay—wasn't just slapped down like a boastful chord, and it wasn't until after I had persistently complained that she finally flung her arms up in resignation and caved. Up until that point she had limited me to infinite scale drills in all keys and études and taught me to play the hymns from the Hymnal, in quadruple counterpoint according to fixed, undying, majestic rules passed down to us from the great father of church music, O high-born J. S. Bach.

She didn't like noise, Mrs. Bore; I think she had tinnitus, although none of us was familiar with that concept back then so we never talked about it, instead allowing her suffering to be passed over in silence because we thought she had weak nerves. She may have, too; I often had to sit with my hands on the dining table in the kitchen for a whole hour and formally practice correct hand position or move one finger at a time while the others remained completely still, and then thunk them down on the table top one by one. *You need to hold your fingers over the keys exactly as if you were clasping a potato*, she said over and over again in that rural west coast Jær dialect of hers as she held her hands up in front of me to illustrate her point.

There were days when she barely let me touch the piano at all.

But once in a blue moon she would sit down at the piano herself and demonstrate the possibilities the keyboard offered. Then she wouldn't play hymns

anymore, but music from what she consistently referred to as the *top shelf*. And she always made it clear in advance that that was a shelf that you could never count on being able to reach. I remember that on one such occasion, to my parents' mild objections, she played Grieg's "March of the Trolls," followed by "In the Hall of the Mountain King"; that must have been on one of her good days. Her fingers hammered away at the keys and your father and I sat flabbergasted each on our own stool beside her and watched her struggle her way into a hurricane of music as her face contorted into the strangest expressions, making her look creepy, far scarier than the enormous trolls and giants the music was about and which we were still convinced existed out there, in the woods, up in the Dovrefjell mountains and across Jotunheimen, sniffing for the blood of a Christian man. But even though I delighted in the fierce temper she drew out of our otherwise timid piano, but I liked the middle part of the "March of the Trolls" best, when the trolls hid from the sun. Then the music abruptly subsided and grew comfortably quiet, beautiful and precise, as if the notes she were playing simply flowed out of her fingers and over the edge, down onto the carpet, an effortless rain, a respite before they erupted again and I just caught my mother, her hands folded in preventive prayer in the doorway to the kitchen when she thought no one was looking.

Mrs. Bore was called a *friend of the family*, but to tell the truth I'm not sure she had any friends at all anymore. The way she played the "Moonlight Sonata," with the funereal mood of its chords, more than hinted as much. Plus, she always sat by herself in the chapel during church services, in one of the backmost rows, and I can't remember her ever staying for coffee afterward or her and my mother chatting for longer than a brief moment after my piano lesson was over and then Mrs. Bore would put on her year-round coat and go on her way. I suppose there was a Mr. Bore, too: I never met him. I don't know what he did for a living or where he was all the time. Or if he played the piano in other people's homes too.

But that afternoon in November 1969 as I sat with my new band in my practice space on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, suddenly I missed Mrs. Bore and Mr. Rolfsson (who a few years later had tried to teach me to forget every she had taught me). I acutely missed the security of being the student, where the worst that could happen was that you'd get chewed out and asked to start over again from

the beginning, concentrate harder, make your fingers keep up. None of that safety net was left now. All those hours with both of them, all the practicing in the basement in Uranienborg and in my apartment on Lapskaus Boulevard; all those nights I'd lain awake and dreamt of precisely this, of having my own band, or at least being part of a jazz band, in New York City, had all led to this moment. And it was not a good one. "Maybe we should take it one more time, from the top?" suggested Billy, hesitantly. He played bass, and like the drummer, Eric, and me, he had responded to the classified ad Anton, the trumpeter, had placed in The Village Voice at the end of July, in the hopes of putting together a group. We'd been playing together for over three months, twice a week. We'd even given performances a couple of times at a nearby café where pretty much no one ever stuck around unless they were already drunk enough that if you asked them what time it was they missed the mark by at least twelve hours. The place was a good fit for us, we had the chance to play together in front of an audience which they say is the alpha and omega for developing an ensemble. The problem was that I just couldn't hack it. Which is to say, as long as I stayed in the background and comped the group with the chords we'd settled on in advance, it went basically alright, but Anton couldn't do all the solos, and the base and the drums and eventually the piano were going to have to step up if we were going to be complete. And my solos were hopeless, especially if I had to improvise them on the fly. It was like starting a sentence I didn't have the foggiest idea how I was going to finish. I could sit by relatively happily and manage to stay afloat while Anton barked into his horn and Billy followed up with breakneck fretboard gymnastics, then Eric flung himself out onto thin ice and pounded out some complex rhythms, which led to me. But as soon as he sat back again, the whole thing fell apart. I didn't hear it, the possibilities, the potential intervals that could have worked, or a more melodic approximation, I couldn't see it; not for shit. All that came to me was excruciating performance anxiety, I stiffened, I started playing like an automaton, faltering and erratic, and after a few beats of hapless attempts at trying to cover that up and regain control, they would all have to come to my rescue and take over. It was even worse with fast songs, my hands wouldn't obey my brain, or vise versa. At home by myself on the other hand I could sit pleasantly for an entire evening and play along

with the music from my record player; I could keep up with relatively complex solos from my favorite records if I already knew them, if I had them memorized. Then I played like a metronome, without missing a single beat, rocking from side to side on my bench. But the moment I lifted the needle off the vinyl and sat down to do my part of the homework—coming up with a melody for our next rehearsal—it was full stop. I simply couldn't come up with anything at all, not a single little line of melody that extended beyond the completely banal, a hook we could elaborate on, take for a spin, or build onto. And yet I did it, after a lot of hassle I managed to find my way to at least something I could bring the group, then I got lost and it was gone; even the simplest jazz formula rotted in my hands.

I'd started hating that piano. I dreamt of crushing it with my hands at night. Every night.

I started disliking more of my records, too, the piano in "Haitian Fight Song," among other things, which seemed so fluidly simple, and Hank Jones's amazingly beautiful and gentle solo in the second half of "Autumn Leaves" on the *Somethin' Else* album. I couldn't listen to them anymore, not without feeling like a failure. I knew what needed to happen, that's what was so disheartening. But at the same time I was also realizing that I might never be able *to do it*. So with increasing regularity I convinced the others to do covers of music that other people had already recorded before us. That way I could show up prepared, then I could sit at home and select chords and solutions in advance so it was just a matter of recreating them at rehearsal, discretely sneaking the various pieces into place without making a big deal out of it; then it sounded good, then things got going and the vibe and our faith in ourselves reached new heights. But. Still. No matter how you looked at it: It was pretty much pissing in your pants to keep warm. Sooner or later we were going to have to play our own material, too, if we were going to be anything other than recirculation musicians; sooner or later we were going to have to give up playing safe and just venture out into it, sooner or later, before the other members' patience collapsed. "Maybe we should take it one more time, from the top?" repeated Billy, louder this time, as he restlessly drummed his fingers on his bass. Then he got tired of waiting, and just counted off and started, so we didn't have any choice but to join in, and yet again I was struggling to keep

up with the others, searching in vain for the basic theme, for some way or other to use it that didn't seem forced, but organic, fluid. Authentic. And finally: the relief when we staggered across the finish line, exhausted, when the cellar space got quiet and Anton, without looking at me, packed his trumpet in its case and said, "Let's get out of here and grab a beer instead."

COLD AND BITTER WIND in the streets, almost Scandinavian in its sting; it followed us all the way to the Bowery. If there hadn't been calendars to prove it, it would have been inconceivable that only months before I had sat in Salomonsen's place with other Norwegians, the windows open in the hot afternoon air and watched those two astronauts carefully step onto the surface of the moon for the very first time while we cheered and toasted with the champagne Salomonsen had arranged for in ample quantities from an "unidentified source"; or that hundreds of thousands had gathered on Max Yasgur's farm for three days in August and despite the rain and mud stayed to the bitter end in the name of music and peace. Out of sheer curiosity and in hopes of catching a glimpse of Grace Slick, Billy had hitchhiked north on Saturday, just to get stuck in the traffic jam and chaos outside Bethel for six long hours, until word had been repeated so often on the radio that the festival was turning into a disaster area without sufficient food or water or other necessary facilities that he gave up, slowly made his way through the crowd and found a bus that took him back to Manhattan. According to him, he had made it close enough that he could hear snatches of Canned Heat's performance in the distance.

It had been a strange summer, but nice, in just the right colors and with the right smells, I'd mostly poked around Brooklyn and enjoyed the long vacation while my students were safely contained in their family cars on their way here and there and to summer camps spread across the entire country. But as soon as school opened again in September, other smells had come to the fore; something started to smell off in the hallways and classrooms and before the month was out it reached me, too: Due to declining enrollment the school was going to shut down after final exams in the spring. It's a pity, they said. Either more Norwegians needed to come across the pond, or we were going to have to have more kids, and preferably make it

snappy. Neither of those was realistic on the scale that was necessary. The problem with the school shutting down wasn't just that I lost the only source of income I had; what was worse was that it created significant problems with regard to the processing of my EB-3 visa and placed boulders on my circuitous route toward permanent residency. If I'd been a better pianist—if I'd been what I'd dreamt of being—maybe I could have applied for an EB-1 instead, where the wait time wasn't so monumental, or in a worst case scenario an L-1 which could be converted later into something better and permanent. But just the thought of winding up at the end of the line again and having to having to start pushing through the staggering towers of paperwork again, after I had managed to convert my student visa to a shiny EB-3 with the school's help and much gnashing of teeth, was enough to give me insomnia for the unforeseeable future.

We each got a beer and sat down in one of the booths at Harry's. We drank. We drank and I brought up the immigration status issue, mostly because I wanted to head off any discussion of the lack of musical progress, which we were all painfully clear on. Billy didn't seem particularly concerned about my predicament. "Well, can't you just find another job?" he asked. "At another school. How hard can it be, there must be tons of teaching jobs to choose between." "Brooklyn's not exactly overflowing with Norwegian schools anymore," I responded. "Well, does it absolutely have to be a Norwegian school? What's wrong with the public schools? Nothin' wrong with them. I went to public school, you know, it worked for me." "But what kind of job would it be?" I protested mildly. "Where there wouldn't be Americans who are as qualified as I am? They can't hire me unless I bring something to the table that American applicants can't." "You could tap dance," Eric suggested. "Hardly anybody knows how to do that anymore." "Come on," I sighed. "This is serious." Billy lit a cigarette and passed the pack around. Some of us helped ourselves. "Alright. But there must be one job," he said. "Not that I know of," I said. "So what gives? I had the impression that half of Norway was in Brooklyn. Did they all leave without even saying goodbye or something?"

That was exactly what they'd done. Packed up their things and left, just as inconspicuously as they'd arrived. But why were they leaving Lapskaus Boulevard? I've always wondered that. Why did they all just leave, once they'd finally gotten

used to speaking English, at least a version of English peppered with southern Norwegian peculiarities; now that they had a toehold, their own shops and schools, their own neighborhoods and new lives; now that they were successful and had made it in America, in New York, even; what was it that pulled them back or away so suddenly? Homesickness? Did they go home? Was it the fear of new hard times, or the letters from home explaining what had been found in the North Sea and the riches that were heading to the fjords; had they spotted an opportunity to bring their industrial expertise home again? Did they really think they could come back and host a barbecue in the yard and speak in an accent about archaic memories without having to pay dearly for it; bring their Cadillacs and Chevrolets and receive applause? Did they hope the distance wasn't as far it would turn out to be? It's possible. I don't know.

Billy bought more beer. It was needed. We had a lot we didn't want to talk about. He said, "If you're not going to be a teacher, is there something else you can do? I mean, for a sec let's just ignore what your degree is in and instead ask: What do you want to do? Anton works for his dad's company, Erik at the mattress factory, we probably ought to look into the options for getting you in at one of those places. Assuming you're willing to take whatever. Or I can see if there's anything available where I work. Anyway, it can't hurt to check." "But he would still have to have expertise the other American applicants don't have," Anton objected. Eric stared into his beer glass and said, "Well, there is another solution." "What's that?" I asked. "You could enlist for Vietnam," he responded quietly. For a brief moment the rest of us exchanged glances, as if to kind of confirm that his ridiculousness even deserved a response before we burst out laughing and thumping our fists hard on the table. Several of the other patrons turned to look at us and the bartender gave us a warning look, but Eric just kept staring into his glass. "I mean it," he said earnestly. Our booth was dead quiet. There was a clammy, uncomfortable silence, and behind that crackled aggression. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" said Anton. "Do you not get that three hundred thousand people just marched in Washington last week, *against the war*? They came from *the whole country*, man, from the whole country, do you get that? In the cold. They burned their banners and signs in bonfires to keep warm, but they were there, they

didn't leave. That's the biggest protest ever. Support your local planet, for Pete's sake." "Yeah, but…" "Maybe you didn't see the paper yesterday either," Billy interrupted. "Maybe you didn't see the pictures from My Lai on the front page of the New York Times. Women and children, Eric, civilians. Shot in the head, in the back, in the ass. Their faces hacked off. Left in heaps in a ditch, hundreds of them. For what? So that Johnson and Nixon could sleep at night? Give those guys a fistful of sleeping pills and bring our people home, that's what I say." Anton shook his head and said, "I just don't get what's wrong with you. You're pro-Vietnam? Is that what you're saying? Do you believe the domino theory, too? Do we have a little Spiro Agnew in our midst? Well, I can guarantee you one thing, in addition to your shocking the hair off me: You're the only warmongering jazz musician I've ever heard of." Eric set his glass down firmly and sat up straighter. "Listen, no one supports the North Vietnamese fight for freedom more than I do. Hurray for the NVA and victory for the Viet Cong and all that, that's not what I'm saying, so chill. I actually do read the papers, whether you guys believe it or not. I know what Cronkite said after the Tet Offensive, I've also read about how many civilians are being killed and villages burned. And yes, I have actually heard about the march in Washington, I know people who went, and I saw the pictures from My Lai—that's not the point." "So then what is the point?" Billy asked dryly. "The point," Eric responded, "is that this war is at the end of its road. Any time now. Don't you guys see that? Nixon's whole *Vietnamization* and troop withdrawal has already started, battalion after battalion has flown back; My Lai and Tet and Khe Sanh, the bigger and bigger demonstrations in D.C., don't you guys get what's going on? It's going to be over soon." "Well," Anton said caustically, "there's still more than half a million American soldiers in Vietnam, if I'm not mistaken?" "But that doesn't matter. Ho Chi Minh is dead and we've already lost, or they've won, depending on how you look at it. The only ones who haven't grasped that are the recruiters. Saigon is going fall. Believe me, before summer Uncle Sam fires the last shot in Southeast Asia. It's going to be awfully quiet after that. And," Eric raised his glass in a kind of toast, "so this is the perfect time to go. Now. Go to Vietnam now, put on your uniform, load your weapon, get yourself photographed in full kit, and be interviewed by Morley Safer at the airport in Da Nang while you wait for your

plane back home. Piece of cake. But here's the thing: I've looked into it, immigrants with temporary visas who enlist to serve in Vietnam, in areas where it is otherwise hard to fill positions with men, can be granted citizenship after just six months."

Eric continued with his reasoning, interrupted only by sporadic objections from Billy and Anton; he claimed there were hardly any line companies going out into the field for weeks on end down there, the way they had been since '65. More and more the responsibility was being returned to the ARVN and that pretty much it was only small American reconnaissance patrols who were still being sent into the jungle, which probably wasn't anything for me to worry about—you didn't end up in a detail like that unless you really wanted to and were crazy enough. And I'm sorry to say that what he was saying soon started to make sense to me. The idea of solving my problem once and for all and not just temporarily, but actually becoming *an American*, with the right to vote and everything, at any rate it was hard not to take it seriously. In retrospect I can say: I knew enough not to do it, but I did it anyway. I got greedy, and by the time I realized that, it was too late. Unlike my father and brother, I wasn't all that interested in politics, never had been, not even during the time I spent in Oslo with Jan Erik and Per, or at the Uranienborg School; even after that night when the paper lanterns rose over St. Hanshaugen in honor of comrade Ho Chi Minh I hadn't felt politically aware, let alone active. Vietnam had felt so far away as we stood there in the snow in Norway, shivering. Agreeing with both Jan Erik and Per that the bombings in Vietnam had to stop was one thing. Who wanted to see children burn to death from napalm? But beyond that, how much had I thought about it, I mean really thought about it? My opposition to the war had first and foremost been about finding community, having something to agree on, a way to rebel that didn't leave the streets on fire or the shops vandalized.

I told myself that I didn't have any objections to going. That's what I did, I worked hard to convince myself that I wasn't abandoning all our ideals, the reasons I'd come to America and the life I had intended to create here; I forced myself to think that this was the best solution, a slight sacrifice for a long-term gain, I slowly got used to the idea and was able to accept it, run through it over and over again in

my own head, that was something I was good at: introducing the necessary material until it stuck, repeating and repeating until it began to feel normal.

After that evening at Harry's we were no longer a quartet. Anton, who until then had been the one in charge of arranging our rehearsal dates, stopped calling. I didn't hear from Billy either; I don't know if it was the political disagreement that got in the way. There could have been other reasons, too. Like maybe they talked it over and decided together it would be best if they proceeded without us.

Eric and I started getting together on our own, without instruments. We did other things instead, went to concerts together, ate dinner, went for walks; sometimes I spent the night at his place, on the sofa, if I didn't have the energy to go back to Lapskaus Boulevard and the constant chatter of Norwegian voices there. We celebrated Christmas together, just the two of us. And we talked the whole time, about the choice I'd sort of made but had yet to formalize. We went for walks in Green-Wood Cemetery in the days after Christmas and on one of them I realized that Eric had had his own reasons for pushing the opportunity to go to war before it was over: His number had come up in draft lottery at the beginning of December. He started boot camp in fourteen days, he'd already packed, finished up at the mattress factory, was ready to go. I think he was hoping he wouldn't have to go alone. "For all you know, Anton and Billy will show up there, too," I said. But Eric shook his head. "Anton's father comes from money. Those guys' sons never end up serving, although the government would never admit that. And Billy is 4F." "What's wrong with him?" "A pain in his willingness to comply, I think." The morning of January twelfth, in freezing cold sleet, I went with Eric to Penn Station to see him off on the train he was going to take to South Carolina. A group of hippies were wandering around in the station handing out flyers featuring just one word, *LOVE*, while two longhaired types sat in the lotus position on the dirty floor playing the guitar. A poster in front of them said *WAR IS NOT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN AND OTHER LIVING THINGS* in big, black, lower case letters on a yellow background, encompassing an enormous, hand-drawn sunflower. "You know, I just don't get it," Eric said dejectedly when he spotted them. "It seems kind of self-contradictory. I mean, on the one hand all this love for every living thing, and on the other hand this intense grudge against the soldiers. If they were going to

be consistent, you'd think they would be ready to embrace the soldiers when they came back, don't you agree?" He looked at them with disapproval. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe you're right." But maybe he was wrong, too. For all I know, they had every right not to, the right to flat out refuse, to protest that it wasn't OK that you couldn't lie down to sleep in this country without waking up to new atrocities. It was easy to make fun of them, they looked so weird, and they smelled even weirder, there was something phony about the self-declared freedom they exuded, but their despair was heartbreakingly authentic. It was a confusing time for everyone. I just know this: that I went home that day and felt a great sense of peace come over me; I had made my decision. I sat there the whole evening and listened my way through my favorite Monk records, I could listen to them again now. I sat down in front of the piano myself for a little while, too, played through the sheet music Mr. Rolfsson had given me. Maybe I even played a few hymns, too, just for old times' sake, to hear how they sounded on this side of the planet. And the day after that I went down to the nearest army recruiting office in Brooklyn, explained the situation and had it confirmed: I would become a citizen.

Brochures were distributed. Information was imparted. Contact information was written down. Agreements were reached. Promises were made. Papers were signed. Handshakes were exchanged.

After that the practical details had to be worked out. I wrote my second letter home since arriving in New York. It was just as short as the first. I just wrote that things were good, that the school where I worked was going to shut down and that I'd signed up to serve in Vietnam to get citizenship. I wrote that apparently I was going to be placed in desk job in the rear lines, far away from the fighting. An REMF. I wrote that the war was going to be over soon anyway. I wrote that I didn't have anything against the Vietnamese, but that circumstances required me to go, and I was planning to come back to New York afterward. I included the address for Fort Sill, where I would go through boot camp, without any request to be contacted there.

The other letters were worse. To Jan Erik and Per. It took some time to write those, months went by without my accomplishing more than a couple of meaningless sentences at a time, and in the meantime the world moved on; in May

four students at Kent State in Ohio were shot by the national guard when they opened fire on demonstrators who were furious at Nixon's decision to take the war to Cambodia; the day after that a large number of colleges and universities in the country closed in protest, it just piled up: In California twenty-eight schools serving a total of 280,000 students closed; Penn State was closed for an indefinite period and before you knew it more than four hundred institutions had closed their doors; the demonstrations spread, on campuses around the country, a six-digit number of students marched peacefully past the barricaded White House and there was no longer any doubt, even though a hundred thousand others—construction workers, longshoremen, and office workers—paraded through the streets of New York in support of Nixon's policies: Something had changed, it was in the air no matter where you went, you could almost taste it every time you inhaled and I was starting to feel scared about what I'd done. At night I would lie awake and wonder if I should back out, if that was even remotely possible. Or maybe make a run for it.

But I stayed.

I stayed, and tried to write more of my letter to Jan Erik; I wasn't getting anywhere on it now either, it was harder than ever. The right words escaped me, just damp stains from my fingers on the paper showed that I'd been working on it. And it was hard work. The words had to be meticulously carved out, one by one, hewn from hard blocks of language, until they formed the few sentences I needed to explain what I'd decided to do. *Life in America is hard,* I wrote. *Things haven't gone as planned. Sometimes you have to be brave. I don't know if this is bravery or the opposite of bravery. I'm asking for your understanding. Or forgiveness. Or both.* I wrote that I didn't plan to kill anyone. *I don't hate anyone,* I wrote. *I figure I'll be back after a couple of months,* I wrote. Then I chickened out, addressed the letter to Jan Erik, and concluded by asking him to pass the news on to Per for me.

The response arrived three weeks later, about the same time as my induction letter, which instructed me to report to Fort Sill in November. In its entirety it said:

You can tell Per yourself. Here's a poem I wrote:

Hi Johnson

I have a suggestion

If we quit writing
about Vietnam

will you quit
bombing Vietnam OK?

Jan Erik
Over and out.

I noticed that the letter had been sent from a new address in Oslo, that must mean that they'd torn down his old wooden house in Briskeby.

We never wrote to each other again.

August 1970 arrived and Eric had already been in the war for more than three months when I packed my things and cleaned the apartment on 8th Avenue, delivered the keys back to Salomonsen and thanked him for all the help he'd given me. He was going to be leaving himself, he said. Soon. *Back to Norway.* And as the sun hung high in the sky bathing Manhattan in the most beautiful light you can imagine, Salomonsen drove me to New Jersey where I put my possessions into long-term storage, said goodbye to him, and took the train back into the city. I spent my last night at the youth hostel up on Amsterdam Avenue and boarded a Greyhound bus in the morning. It took me safely to Lawton, Oklahoma, and Fort Sill, where I completed the eight long weeks of basic training and after that field artillery school, and on November 26, I was flown to San Francisco and given three days leave before I, along with hundreds of other guys, got on board the chartered plane that would first take us to Anchorage, Alaska, where we would freeze on the runway while we stretched our legs and waited to continue to yet another layover at Yokota Air Base outside Tokyo, and then to Bien Hoa in South Vietnam for further processing, registration and moving out to our final deployments in the various units.

But that was still more than twenty hours off. That was before I walked off the plane and into the brutal wall of tropical heat, before I saw row upon row of helicopters and vast quantities of military equipment which arrived and left the base assembly-line style and made it completely clear to us all that the war was not quite over. Yet.

I slept almost the whole way from Japan.

(End of sample)

SYNOPSIS

(Continues from end of sample)

BURNING MEN

(ONE DAY WE'LL BE DANCING TO THROBBING GRISTLE)

2005 – 2008

Chapter 1

Most summers Max and Mischa go to Canada, always picking the same routes, to the same places. They fly to Quebec City, they rent a car and drive down to stay in Montreal, always in the same little, red house, where they play the same records, sit on the roof and chat with the neighbours, thinking that this might be the place they should have lived. And after having postponed it for as long as they can, they go to Toronto, to visit Mischa's parents. The parents, though nice people, present a challenge with their over-eagerness to ensure that Max and Mischa are having an absolute great time. The father presents them with a neatly printed out itinerary of activities, such as dinners at restaurants, museum visits, concerts, trips to Niagara and day cruises on Lake Ontario. To get the most out of the day, the parents sometimes split up Max and Mischa and take them on two different "adventures." The father takes the opportunity to bring Max down to the memorial site of Little Norway, the airbase where Norwegian fighter pilots received training during WWII. Here he subtly probes Max for info on any potential future grandchildren.

One night Mordecai calls, quite drunk, in New York, asking him to please come and meet him. He agrees.

Chapter 2

Max is greeted by Mordecai's parents when he rings their bell in Garden City, they offer wine and awkward small talk as he waits for Mordecai, who eventually turns up in loose trousers and a tight blazer, looking a bit like Chaplin. They go out and start driving around in Mischa's old wreck of a car. Max is relieved to find that things haven't really changed between them.

When they can't be bothered to walk about anymore, they sit down, drink cheap wine and catch up. Max gets to learn that Mordecai is what no film star can admit to being: he is, quite frankly, poor. He's done some good films and some less good films (himself always being brilliant), none of which have paid very well. "We'll need to find you a project," Max says. "I've been thinking the same thing," Mordecai replies. His suggestion: "Us. This place."

The next day he calls up Mordecai, telling him he can stay in the Apthorp for a while; he calls up Mischa to let her know that he won't be meeting her in Toronto after all. With Mischa in Canada, Owen in Saigon, he and Mordecai find themselves home alone and acting as though they were fifteen, playing music too loudly, and eating at Arturo's, one of Mordecai's old favourite pizza places. They start working on what 16 months later will turn into the play, *Bob Ross Paints a Pretty Clear Picture*, based on their years in Garden City. Max hopes that Mordecai will forget where he really lives.

Chapter 3

After more than his fair share of doubt and hesitation, deciding for it and then against, only to change his mind a minute later, over and over again, Owen finally ends up joining fellow veterans on a trip to Vietnam to visit the place where Firebase Bastogne once was. When he arrives, together with veterans and their families, some of them crying, some of them having a hard time being back while others feel a moment of long sought catharsis, Owen realizes that there's no need for him to be here, he has no unsettled business here after all. On a hill close to the A Shau Valley, feeling nauseous and slightly guilty about not feeling anything as the others cry at what they went through, he decides to leave. He is relieved. He starts walking towards Hue, leaving A Shau behind in foot, eventually accepting an offer of a lift. Upon reaching Hue, he gets tickets back to Saigon (or Ho Chi Minh City – it'll always be Saigon to him), and at a whim, not bearing to stay, not feeling like going to New York, he books tickets to Perth, Australia.

When he arrives, it's dark. He's been in the country before, but not in the city; it doesn't look like he pictured it. He can't afford to stay at the Duxton Hotel, but he wants to stay at the Duxton Hotel. So he does. He starts to think that he could live here. Right here, Max could send his things. Maybe he could live here with someone like Eric's girlfriend, Agatha. Eric is dead but he

doesn't know if Agatha is still alive. He remembers how she looked when he first saw her, in her red dress, he fell in love.
He still remembers her address after all these years, but when he rings her bell, she no longer lives in the house. He goes out to all the different suburbs, eventually he starts asking people on the street whether they know her, she must be close to sixty by now. Finally, he wakes up one day and he's ready to go back to the U.S., but he decides not to join the veterans out in Brooklyn again.

Chapter 4

The Apthorp is sold, they're promised that it won't change anything, they'll get to keep their apartments as they are. "Wait and see," says Cyndi in 10F, and surely, 50 % of the building is sold, and the owners start a silent war on the tenants. The building crumbles, the prizes are forced up, no promises are kept.

Within their own walls a smaller battle is fought, less dramatic, but inevitably real. Mordecai's been living in Max's study for two years, and one night, lying in bed in complete darkness, Mischa says it out loud: "I mean, if the rent increases as much as it has done in the other apartments, it might be a sign. We've been here for *thirteen years*. And Mordecai's here indefinitely … I don't know, it's not what I pictured." Max says Mordecai'll go back to California after the play is done, she asks what play he's referring to, exactly. She tells him she's been invited to Shanghai for an exhibition, she doesn't ask him to come with her.

Their rent doubles, Mordecai stays, it doesn't help. The Apthorp being sold, Mischa not being herself, Mordecai leaving any time, Owen having been weirdly calm since he's returned from Australia – there are too many trenches, too many fronts on which to fight. And Gabe – Max sometimes has drinks with Gabe and Mordecai, trying to keep them both by rooting them down, tangling their roots together.

Bob Ross premiers, Mordecai is brilliant in the role of a Max-and-Mordecai-mashup, the amateur actor Alfred is horrible in the role of Gary from the record shop/the greek choir. But it's a good play, and to his surprise, Max spots Wohlman in the foyer after the show – he compliments them, and drily notes that he had no idea that his fall in the shower meant as much to them as it did.

Max is embarrassed, but pleased to see him, and he joins them for drinks after, charming Max's mum (but, as Max points out to her, he lives in Connecticut). When Max gets back home, he wakes up Mischa though he tries not to, her Shanghai tickets on the bedside table. He misses her. She's still there.

Chapter 5

Gabe finally breaks through with his exhibition, "–" (pronounced *Dash*, or *Four Paintings Plus Dress*), with four deeply, utterly black paintings, covered with the prototype Vantablack, consuming 99.7% of all light directed at them, and a dress in the same material. Max is there for the opening, disappointed that he hardly gets to talk to Gabe at all.

Bob Ross got fairly good reviews and ditto audiences, but it only played the three weeks it was originally scheduled to. Afterwards Max and Mordecai keep hanging around in the area of the theatre, eating at Arturo's, knowing that Mordecai eventually will have to go back to LA. Their last night arrives, Owen, quite drunk, makes everyone in Arturo's turn their back on the piano in the corner, and he plays "Autumn leaves." Mordecai promises he'll be back, Max promises to visit him.

Max receives The MacArthur Fellowship grant in August 2008 which is both a surprise and not a surprise. It certainly helps the Apthorp situation. Max immediately calls Mischa to tell her about it, she's at the *Burning Man* festival in the Black Rock desert in Nevada (you have to be there to understand it, Mischa explains as she talks about her first time there) for the second time. Coming back from the festival, they're supposed to celebrate the grant, but instead Mischa tells Max that she needs some time away from New York. Away from him. She's met a couple of nice women at the festival, they've got a house in California, they've invited her to stay. She'll leave after Christmas and stay for half a year.

LESSON IN THE ART OF FALLING

(DROP THE BOMB, EXTERMINATE THEM ALL)
1970 - 1971

Chapter 1

It seems more like work than a war. Heavy, manual work. Firebase Bastogne is located in the Thua Thien province, 20 km east of A Shau (called *The Meat Grinder* by the soldiers), 30 km west of Hue. Owen's tasks: being one of four men to operate the long distance cannons, shooting granades two to five miles away. He never sees them hit their target.

For thirteen months he wakes up to the same view, surrounded by the same mountains. But Owen never enters nature, he stays behind the walls of FB. Most of the time, nothing happens, and Owen suspects that from time to time someone fabricates a message of a sniper in the area, so that they can attack nature itself for a while to make time pass. They wait, wondering whether it is safer inside than outside (though stories of tigers make them appreciate the fence) – firegates have been attacked, Firegate Bastogne is an obvious goal. They just hope that they'll be gone before they're cornered.

And then there's the rats. At times there are hundreds, crawling over their faces when they sleep, at times there are none. They begin to believe that it can't be a coincidence, and charting the movements of the rats, they eventually find a pipe – they've actually been sent in.

Chapter 2

Owen hands in his R&R application in the end of April, and by the end of May he finds himself on a plane to Sydney, Australia, longing for some cold, hoping he'll get to sleep. He chooses his hotel at random, and spends the first days of his week sitting on a bench in Hyde Park, or walking about. Then, entering the hotel lobby, he – to his great surprise – spots Eric.

It turns out he's applied for extended service, and he's been allowed a month in Australia before starting his additional six months. Eric has met a girl. Agatha from Perth. And Owen spends his last days with the two of them.

Agatha. There's something twig-like about her, Owen thinks. She's 22, soft-voiced, and slightly lopsided in a lovely way. Owen falls in love with her immediately, he can't help it. As he's leaving Australia, he's already planning to come back here at the end of his service and to rejoin Eric and Agatha. He'll stay for half a year or so before going back to New York.

Back in Vietnam he receives a letter from his father. He doesn't reply. They keep shooting their grenades in a steady downpour, the rats are back; there aren't as many, but they can't seem to get rid of them this time. One day Owen's fellow soldier Lentz comes running, bellowing "JIM IS DEAD!", causing them all to jump to their feet trying remember who Jim is. As Lentz shows them the newspaper, it turns out he's talking of Jim Morrison. The list of losses catches Owen's eye. There he is: *06/07/1971, F/75th (Ranger), SP4 Eric J. Wallace, Wichita, KS (A Shau/Thua Thien). KIA.*

He considers writing to Agatha, to ask her if she's heard. He considers going to Perth, but he doesn't. It's a decision he'll regret time and time again.

Chapter 3

California. People are staring. Owen wants to scream at them that he's not what they think he is, that he hasn't killed anyone. He can't bear the thought of going back to New York and finding that the people he knows don't want to be around him anymore. He should've gone to Perth. Instead, he enters a bus at random, and ends up in Fairfax, California. Doing the paperwork and getting his permanent residency in San Fransisco, he changes his name from Ove Hansen to Owen Larsen.[4] The now Owen, not Ove, takes a bus back to Fairfax, rents an apartment, gets a job as an asphalt worker, starts spending his weekends at The Silver Peso. He doesn't even try to find a job as a teacher. He doesn't miss the music.

[4] At this point, when Ove receives his new passport and becomes Owen, the narrative voice of the text changes from 1st person to 3rd person, as Owen considers his old self gone and his new persona someone he isn't familiar with, thus explaining why sections entitled *Fairfax*, *Apthorp*, *KPM* and *Vesterheim* are written in the 3rd person, as they chronologically takes place after this moment.

LAUREL CANYON
(BLACK ON MAROON)
2009 - 2010

Chapter 1

At times, tracing backwards to what the Kübler-Ross model (the five phases of grief) recognizes as phase two, *anger*, Max finds himself wondering whether Mischa's success is at least in part is due to the fact that some people, in her early years as an artist, mistook her for a man. He wonders whether she would've been less successful with another name. At least before the *Toronto Precision*-series, the one she paints in California, which exploded in the autumn of 2009.

It's a difficult year, a difficult summer. Max and Mischa talk on the phone every two weeks, mostly discussing practicalities. Their discussions of the weather mirror the current condition of their relationship. Max dreads the days where California's simply *sunny*, in one word. They pine their way through phone calls where they have nothing to talk about, where being the one to signal the end of the conversation is a defeat and a relief in equal measure.

In New York, time stands still. Max is running, Owen is acting more fatherly than ever; taking him for dinners and walks, keeping him distracted (but never offering to talk about what's troubling him). He cuts out articles he finds interesting and leaves them for Max to read, one catching Max's eye: it's on an art exhibition with one deeply controversial work: *The smoking gun* by Agota Miškini. The work is being displayed in a room by itself, and to enter, one has to sign a number of papers acknowledging that one is about to enter a *sharp situation*, in the presence of weapons, and that one does so at one's own risk. One then enters a room which is completely dark, except from a barely lit table with a handgun. And that's it. Apparently, people lose track of time in that room, many break down and cry. One person directed the gun at his/her head. It was filled with blank cartridges, and supposedly this person then experienced someone walking out of the darkness, giving him/her a hug. Then the lights were turned on, revealing writing on the walls: *Everything will be all right* or was it, *Everything will be different?* He couldn't remember.

In the *Toronto Star* Max reads an intriguing interview with Milorad P. Andersson, a Bosnian-American filmmaker doing a series of films somewhere in the grey zone between fiction and documentary, on the understanding and dissemination of the war in Bosnia in the 90s. Through conversations with Owen about the difficulty of conveying what war is really like, of placing any blame, of what it does to a nation and to the sense of community; Max decides to call up Milorad. Huge, but with a small head, always unsmiling, snoring tremendously, Milorad comes over to stay in the Apthorp for a week at a time, helping Max with the writing of the play, *The Mill Stone*. Both being men who have left their old countries and names behind, Owen and Milorad get along great. When Milorad's not there, Max struggles, and in hindsight he wonders whether he struggled with this play for Mischa's sake, picturing that she'd be impressed and that things would work out between them after the premiere; or whether he did it for Owen, as an excuse to invite Milorad over from time to time and thus, for a while, to camouflage his uncle's loneliness.

Chapter 2

May 17th. For the first time in years, Owen and Max join the parade on Norway's national day, where Lapskaus Boulevard had once been. They shout *hurrah!* when the others do, but can't seem to find the rhythm. When Max's mum calls and asks them to join her and Samuel for dinner, he can't turn her down, not on May 17th.

When Max and Mordecai went to school they never even considered the fact that Wohlman might have a first name. But now, after he's been together with Max's mum for a year and a half, *Samuel* is what he has become. He struggles with this role, trapped between a former role of authority and a new role of a buddy, failing at both. Max understands that the way he scoffs, explains and arrogantly gives advice is simply a result of him trying so hard to keep Max's mum, and possibly of the fact that both him and Max know that career-wise, the tables have turned.

This day, after the parade, Samuel/Wohlman winds them up in a lengthy game of petanque, even though it is cold, Owen's unwell, and none of them enjoy it. The more obvious this becomes, the more stubbornly Wolhman insists on completing the game.

Owen spends five days in bed, coughing; Max works a few hours a day on *Mill Stone*, reflecting on his mum and Wohlman: "With his new, deteriorating self he showed me the last thing he could teach me, which I hated him for: that there are no such thing heroes; there are simply people who struggle and do their best."

Chapter 3

August. Mischa hasn't returned, so Max goes, arriving after a seven hour flight at the address he's been forwarding mail to for eight months to a large wooden house in Laurel Canyon, a long cab ride north of L.A. Ringing the doorbell he regrets his decision; as the door is opened by a woman in her sixties, wearing loose-fitting garments and throwing a look at his suitcase, calling him optimistic but inviting him in for tea; he regrets it even more.

Mischa's not in, but Marcie, the owner of the house, serves Max a cup of tea and her family story, a story of people who built a house and stayed. She shows Max to Mischa's room where he falls asleep surrounded by her things, uncomfortable at first, but looking forward to seeing her. In this moment he loves her more than ever before.

Max wakes up to find Mischa sitting on the side of the bed, looking at him with an expression he can't decipher, asking him why he's there. "I need to know where we stand," Max says. "No less. Is that too much too ask? You've been here for a long time." He's laying on the bed, she sits down in a chair, she's miles away. But he loves her, her slim fingers and her Canadian accent, her useless sense of place, her sense for mismatched socks and high-quality footwear, her ability to cry from laughter when getting measurements wrong or burning things in the kitchen, for never knowing what time it is and for still, at times, looking like Olive Oyl and/or Shelley Duvall, circa 1970.

She shows him her new pictures, solid blocks of color in horizontal lines across the canvases. Titles: "We Grew Up in the Sprawl 1981." "We Waited Under a Tree Until The Rain Stopped. But When the Sun Came Back We Had Already Kissed 1984." They're not about him, whether he likes them or not really doesn't matter. "Are you staying until tomorrow? I'm sure you can have dinner here," Mischa says, and leaves.

Chapter 4

(Note: This chapter opens with an excerpt from the catalogue to Mischa Grey's exhibition, *Grey – A Retrospective: The Toronto Precision*.)

Through boiling down memories to a line of words, and translating those words into colors, Grey questions whether feelings can be conveyed through color alone, whether it is possible to appreciate a memory that is not your own, and be affected by it. He realizes that these pictures are related to his current project, to giving it a last try. It's November 2012, he's in Seattle, he can't sleep. Tomorrow he heads for L.A., for the last shows of *Weyland-Yutani*. "It has to end. For fuck's sake, it finally has to reach an end. Back to the text, etc."

The dinners you're not invited to, and not welcome at, but still attend, are the worst kind. Max is relieved when Marcie takes pity on him and declares that she's full, and chats with him out on the porch, pouring plenty of wine to help him sleep. It turns out to be in vein, though he says 'ok' when Mischa doesn't want to talk until the next day, and bids her good night. He's not ok, and it's not a good night. He lies awake beside her, not bearing to stay, not daring to move.

When he reaches Mordecai's house the next day, having borrowed Marcie's car, he finds it empty. Mordecai's in Hungary, his portly neighbour informs Max. He's landed a main role in a film with a proper budget, one that he, as he told Max on the phone some time back, hopes might be the *Apocalypse Now* of their time. But he's supposed to shoot in Berlin, and not until September. On the phone from Budapest he sounds scared and unfocused, he's scared to stay and scared to go, he can't grasp the new character he's there to develop. Max makes him promise to leave his hotel room, to travel. In return Mordecai asks Max to bring Mischa home with him. "Call me whenever you feel like it," Max says, but Mordecai doesn't call.

The film, eventually, turns out to be a success, leading Mordecai onto other big roles, to an Academy Awards nomination for best actor in a supporting role, a big apartment in Manhattan and no time to stay in it. And doubt. Heaps of doubt.

Chapter 5

Borrowing Marcie's car, Max drives through Downtown Los Angeles out to LAX, where his dad has asked him to meet him in a parking lot. This peculiar choice for a rendez-vous turns out to be a consequence of a string of events that are all new to Max: he's left his wife, moved to San Diego, and he now spends half his week living in a trailer in this parking lot, part of a small society of airport employees uprooted from their regular homes due to cut-downs, leaving less and less work for those not living close to the great transit airports like LAX. Interrupted by planes roaring above them, they talk more openly than they have for a long, long time. Max asks his dad to contact Owen, he replies that he'll talk to him at Max and Mischa's wedding. "I'm afraid she's left me," Max says. "Then we both failed," his Dad replies.

Back in Laurel Canyon, there are people over for dinner; a graphic designer named Shane rests his hand on Mischa's shoulder long enough to make it clear that it's not the first time. Mischa ignores Max, but as he's texting Owen from the porch (not getting any replies), she turns up and agrees to talk, with an intolerable lightness to her voice. They talk. "Is this a break up?" Max asks. "I think so," she replies. He asks about Shane, she tells him not to ask questions when he doesn't want to know the answer. Nevertheless, she agrees to come back to New York with him. As they leave one week later, Marcie tells Max that it's a pity he didn't turn up earlier.

Back in the Apthorp they both wait for the other one to make the first move, to start living their lives as though everything is normal. They're interrupted in their waiting by Owen, returning from the hospital. "It seems I've got cancer," he says.

They have good and bad periods, Owen, Max, and Mischa. The two latter go to Toronto for her exhibition, Gabe's there and he compliments Max on the good *Mill Stone* reviews ("No one saw it, though," Max replies), and mentions that he visited Mischa in California. Mischa has made no mention of Gabe's visit to Max.

A week and a half later Mischa tells Max, matter-of-factly, that she's bought the summer house in Montreal and she's moving there. And that's that. Sixteen years. Max helps pack her boxes, acting understanding; when she's left, he feels a weird sense of relief. It lasts for three hours. Then the anxiety hits him.

VESTERHEIM

(OLEANNA MALAISE)
FALL 2010 - FALL 2011

(Third person narrator, internal focalization on Owen, like in the fragments)

Chapter 1

October 2010. Another day that won't come back, on the road to Iowa. He drives, even though his nephew disapproves. As if you get bad memory, reduced hearing, and lose the ability to pay attention simply because you're ill, dying.

Finally, the last doctor he saw said, yes, he'll die from this. He would've loved to have lived longer. He can't bear to listen to jazz anymore, he listens to Mischa's old records when Max isn't home, records that she left under the pretense that she didn't have room for them. He had liked her.

He's been Owen for so long, he wish he could pass away as himself, as Ove. He wishes he was home. But instead he's headed for Decorah, IA, to visit Vesterheim, the most extensive Norwegian-American museum in the world. At every roadside motel he dreads sleeping alone, fearing that Max might leave him during the night, but he never does.

After seeing the exhibition, neither of them talk of it, of this experience they've driven for days to share. Maybe they think the same thing: that the artifacts they've seen have nothing to do with themselves. That rather than celebrating the Norwegians who left for America, they tell a story of the sorrow of (and unwillingness to) leaving a place behind.

Chapter 2

Spring 2011. He sits in the kitchen a lot, by the open windows. His nephew has moved his favorite chair in here for him. The nephew is working on his new project, Owen spends his days alone, observing how odd it is to witness the world keeping on as usual, as he himself is getting closer to the end. When Max returns from work they're both exhausted. Over dinner they ask each other how they are, replying that they're fine. Neither of them are fine. He hides away the newspaper in which Mischa is interviewed about her new exhibition, *Grey on Gray*. As the title

suggests, the pictures are all in grey tones. “My days are no longer Rothko days,” Mischa says in the interview. One of the last days *Weyland-Yutani* is playing in New York, Owen manages to take a taxi to see Mischa’s exhibition. It’s gray. And beautiful. For the first time she’s made something he truly loves. He sends her a text, only writing *Thanks. Owen.* She replies two days later: *Thanks. Mischa.*

July 2011, and he’s still alive. Isn’t that odd? As if it just doesn’t give in. His nephew brings him to Coney Island, they spend a day there under a parasol, neither of them going for a swim, neither of them wishing to go home when the sun goes down. It should’ve been like that. More such days.

Chapter 3

Autumn 2011. He’s not there when Max packs up their belongings, including (but not limited to) an art print by Per Kleiva, places them in a locker in New Jersey and leaves the apartment in the Apthorp. He’s not there, he’s in a hospital, wishing this last autumn would’ve been one to remember. It’s autumn and it seems like any autumn, nothing special about it. He’s in his hospital bed, listening to the voice of his nephew trying to drown out the sound of the leaf blowers in the park below his window. His nephew comes by every day. When he leaves, it’s a blessing and a catastrophe; he’s tired of talking, he’s afraid that he’ll die alone.

If he rings his bell to talk to someone he has to wait for half an hour, when he simply wants to chat they get cross, telling him that they wish they had time for chats, but they’ve got plenty of patients waiting. He wishes he had time, he doesn’t say so. They’ve got way more time than him.

He’s prepared his funeral, suggested music, told his nephew who he’d like him to invite. Beate will be there, surely. And Mischa, he hopes she’ll come to see him off. Someone from Atlantic Studios, maybe. And Mordecai. Andy. Friends from the veteran meetings in Brooklyn. And his brother. This time he’ll have to make it. It’s enough, he’s done. He kept on for a long time. It’s ok.

November 2nd, 2011, night, 01:22. Traffic outside, silence inside. Max is in the room, beside him. His hand is warm. Everything hums.

Now.

PART IV

SANDY

(EVERYBODY TALKS ABOUT THE WEATHER … WE DON'T)

HØST 2012

Chapter 1

I'm not here. After having seen *Weyland-Yutani* uncountable times, in NYC, Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Pheonix, etc. Max no longer hears the words coming out of his actors' mouths, except for this one line, repeated thrice and almost inaudibly, only caught by a third of the audience, muttered by the character Yamauchi halfway through someone else's lengthy line on the economic obligations of the conglomerate to ensure economic growth: *I'm not here.*

But Max is here, in L.A., for the first of the four last shows of the *W-Y* tour, when his stage manager tells him that a Stanley Barnes has called. He said he knew him from high school, and had asked him to call back as soon as possible. As the play begins, Max calls Stanley, making a joke, laughing – they haven't spoken for 17 years. Stanley doesn't laugh. In a flat voice he says: "Max, there you are. I'm calling about Mordecai, I'm his lawyer. Have you heard? I'm sorry, Max, Mordecai was found dead Wednesday morning, in Burbank, California."

It's as if the air has been knocked out of Max. Nausea. High pulse. "But I just spoke to him," he protests. Eventually he asks: "How – what happened?" Stanley tells him that the final autopsy is not ready, but that it seems like he hanged himself in his kitchen in the early hours of Wednesday, October 17th. Stanley gives him the place and time for the funeral, and asks to talk to him about Mordecai's will.

Max leaves the building and at first he feels calm. Mordecai is still alive to him; Max even has their theater tickets for Monday and Tuesday. First he thinks, even though they were both in the same city when Mordecai died, there was nothing he could have done. Then he experiences it all at once; guilt, self-reproach, uncontrollable anger, and panic. And sorrow, the worst part, when it finally hits Max that Mordecai is gone. And what *gone* means. *Never coming back*. The understanding of the word *never*, the reach of it. He pictures Mordecai in his last hours, tidying

everything up, leaving hand written notes if he leaves any, smoking and then hanging himself. No drama.

He calls his mum, she cries on the phone. He understands that he'll also have to call Mischa, he never brought himself to do so when Owen died. When he finally does call Mischa, she says, "Oh no…"Poor little Mordecai." "I wanted you to hear it from me. I'll be there for the funeral," Max says, to which she replies: "I'm happy to hear it." "That I told you, or that I'll be there?" Max asks. After a long break, she dryly congratulates him on getting such a good price for Vietnamization (*Colby),* a painting done by Mischa as a gift to Max, one that had deep personal meaning for both of them. He says he's heard she's now doing pictures of Shelley Duvall. Neither of them want to talk about it. But before he hangs up, she says she'll try to be there for the funeral.

Chapter 2

Max is surprised and a bit embarrassed when the entire ensemble moves the party that wraps up their tour from the last night to the night before, so that he won't miss it. He finds their respect for Mordecai touching, and though their praise reveals that they didn't know him personally, Max doesn't stop them. When they ask him about his next project, he can't bring himself to tell them that he doesn't want to go on, that he hopes this is the last one. So he says; "I think the next one might be a western." Thinking on his feet, it's the first ridiculous thing that comes to mind. But the next day, hung over, at a height of 36,000 feet and heading towards JFK, he absentmindedly scribbles in a notebook labelled *Western?*

Chapter 3

Max meets his mum in her house in Howard Beach, it's cold, she cries over Mordecai and asks Max if he's heard about the hurricane Sandy on the news. Max tells her not to worry, it'll probably be like hurricane Irene last year, when they barricaded everything and only ended up with a couple of flooded basements. This night Max dreams of Mordecai; no symbolism, simply coincidences.

Dressed in black Max and his mum approach Garden City in her little Honda, and Max can't stop rubbing his chin, as if his face will collapse if he stops. On the radio they talk of Sandy, *this is no*

joke, folks. It's category three. At the funeral Max puts on the kippa handed to him at the door. Here's Mordecai's parents, Mr. Weintraub waxy and grey faced, Mrs. Weintraub almost smiling due to the large amount of valium she's had to get through the day; here's family and friends; a girl who would've cried more if her sister had been crying less; one who'll take his own life the following week and one who went over budget on her outfit, but sees it as an investment (there will be more funerals); here's a boy just starting to grasp the meaning of the word *gone* and understand that it will one day apply to them all, including his parents and himself; here's a man reflecting on how people who die at their own choice all seem weightless, no matter how big they were when they lived; here's Wohlman, trying not to look at Max's mum; here's Alison, now a mother of four; here's Stanley; here's a room no one wants to be in and it smells like citrus and antiseptic hand soap and the person in the coffin is too young to be there. Here's Mordecai. The rabbi has a kind face but never knew the man he's talking about, he sings Kaddish and it's beautiful, those in the crowd who know when to say their amens, do so.

Here's Mischa. Her hair is cut extremely short, she looks good, she's here alone. Max can't help looking at her. They talk after the service, and as the parents only want family there for the burial, Max and Mischa (to Max's mum's disapproval) go for a cup of coffee before Max is to attend the Shiva. It takes Max three cups of coffee and a substantial amount of chit-chat to ask her how things are in Montreal. When they part not far from Mordecai's parents' house on 10th street, they end up half kissing, it might've been a misunderstanding. "You can come visit me in Montreal some time," she says. "As your friend?" he asks. "No, I don't think I need more friends, really," she replies.

Max meets Stanley at Balthazar in SoHo for lunch, he's not hungry. They talk about Weyland-Yutani, about Mordecai, about Garden City and Alison and the girls and everyone who ended up who-knows-where. Eventually Stanley pulls out a heap of papers, explaining how Mordecai left most of his things to his family, but a few items he left for other people, three things for Max. First, a blazer, to be sent to Max's address when he gets one. Second: the painting *Vietnamization (Colby)* by Mischa Grey (Max is flabbergasted, Mordecai spent over $1 million dollars anonymously buying back Mischa's painting, from Max, for Max.) He also included a note: "What the fuck are you doing? *Sell the house. Sell the car. Sell the kids. I'm never coming*

back. Remember? … Go home, Colby. M." Third: two old, worn VHS cassettes marked *Apocalypse Now workprint pt. I* and *pt. II*.

Chapter 4

"But look at his face," Max's mum says. She's right: Mayor Bloomberg looks properly worried as he brings the latest news of hurricane Sandy, headed towards NYC. They're in Max's mum's house in Howard Beach, in zone B, and she really thinks they should leave. They've put boxes of things up on the first floor, they've positioned the sand bags that she's kept in her garage since hurricane Irene. The truth is, Max is looking forward to the storm, but as his mum keeps worrying he offers to call the Sherry-Netherland; the hotel in which he lived for seven months, after moving out of the Apthorp and after Owens death; the hotel in which he refined his insomnia. He's disappointed when she accepts.

On his way back to Howard Beach, after having left his mum in the care of the lovely, \ Audrey of the Sherry-Netherland reception: the news. Sandy has been upgraded to a category 1 hurricane, and Max is no longer sure he's driving in the right direction.

Sunday morning Sandy is closing in on New Jersey, its diameter of 1,800 kilometers making it the biggest hurricane ever registered in the Northern hemisphere. Going through his mum's attic, he finds their old VHS player and watches the workprint version of *Apocalypse Now*. The quality of the images is at times too bad for him to make out. The scenes go on for ever; the helicopter attack at the village with great surfing conditions lasts for half an hour, and there's Colby, talking of his family, *sell the kids*; it feels like it's not Kurtz but the place itself there's something wrong with, a place where you'll lose your mind and never find your way back, and Max doesn't notice how dark it grows outside, and how the windows are wet.

Then it hits. The whole fucking Atlantic. Not slowly, it's an invasion. Wave after wave hits 165th Avenue, there's three feet of water in the streets, one hour later cars are floating about, now left to themselves. The radio says *folks folks folks, if you're in zone A or B, for God's sake, stay indoors* and Max's calls to his mum are not going through; the water covers a third of the windows on the ground floor when they give in, it seems as if the water is running upward as it

reaches the first floor in seconds; the carpets grow dark. Max sits paralyzed on the soaked sofa for hours, then he decides to leave.

A wave of heat hits him as he gets out. The neighbour's house is on fire. He starts wading through water up to his chest, until the ground disappears below him; he's stepped into the neighbour's swimming pool. He spots distant boats with firemen, they pick up people. Max shouts and they can't seem to hear him, but eventually one turns back for him. As they're picked up by a helicopter, Max can't help but think that after 22 years "in country" he's finally rescued out of the jungle; as the fly above Belt Parkway, Ozone Park, and Liberty Avenue the roads grow dark green like Vietnamese vegetation with triple canopies.

From York College in Jamaica, Queens he gets to call his mum from a pay phone, his cell phone drowned. She cries as he tells her that the house is gone, it takes time before she believes that he's all right. As soon as the bridges are open, he heads by a shared taxi towards the Sherry-Netherland, to find the hotel seemingly untouched by the storm – simply with a yellow sign warning him of wet floors.

Chapter 5

The day begins. His mum is asleep, she looks like she's always looked, people that sleep have no age. They spend the last night drinking wine, him, his mum, and Aubrey, drinking to Owen and Mordecai, to Norway and knit patterns and homelessness. His mum is to stay with Aubrey for a while. On the TV people living at Rockaway and Fire Island are interviewed, they're not going anywhere; *this is where we live.* "I'm leaving," Max whispers to his mum. "Call me when you get there, ok?" "Ok." His mum and himself, both homeless. New Day Rising. He finds a taxi, goes to JFK, the city looks beautiful from the car.

Terminal 8: bright lights, toilets, TV's, passengers in transit, an information chart with a floor plan and the words *you are here.* Indeed, he's here. Having a coffee, he calls Mischa. "I didn't think you'd be in touch," she says. They talk of the storm. He tells her he's at the airport. "So … where are you headed?" "I thought I'd go to Montreal." She asks how long he'll stay for, he asks her how long she wants him to stay for. "For quite a while," she replies.

A choreographer named Desmond Nowak, headed the same way as Max, sits down beside him. He picked up Max's name at the check-in, Desmond tells him that he thinks Max was on to something with *Ocean* and *LAX*, that he managed to catch the nature of waiting. Most dancers dance too much, he says, as the loudspeakers ask passengers to place X to hurry to terminal Y. He asks how long Max is staying in Montreal for, and invites him to pop by his studio. As Max is about to accept, the message is repeated in french: *Madames et Messieurs, ceci est la dernier appel por le vol American Airlines 4166 à destination de Montréal. Nous demandons à tout les passagers de bien vouloir se présenter à la porte 14 pour un embarquement immédiat, avant annulation des billets. Merci.* Desmond puts down his coffee cup, points to the loudspeaker. Smiles. "Well," he says, "This is for us."

Then they run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHAN HARSTAD (b. 1979 in Stavanger, Norway) offers a wholly original voice and is one of the most acclaimed Norwegian writers. He debuted in 2001 with the prose collection *Herfra blir du bare eldre* [*From Here You Only Get Older*]. The following year he published a collection of critically acclaimed short stories titled *Ambulanse* [*Ambulance*], one of which was published in a *Words Without Borders* anthology from Anchor Books. His work has also been published in McSweeney's Quarterly. In 2005 his novel *Buzz Aldrin, hvor ble det av deg i alt mylderet?* [Published in the US by **Seven Stories Press** as *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion?*], which has been published in thirteen countries including the United States, France, Germany, Italy and Korea. The novel was also adapted into a TV miniseries. In 2007, Harstad published the novel *Hässelby*, which earned him the Norwegian Youths' Critics Prize and in 2008 he published his first and only YA novel, the sci-fi/horror story *Darlah – 172 timer på månen* [Published in the US by **Little, Brown** as *172 Hours on The Moon*]. For this novel he received the Brage Award, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Norway and previously won by Per Petterson. The rights to the book have been sold to eighteen countries. He has also written four plays, including *Osv.* [*Etc.*], which earned him the Norwegian Ibsen Award. In 2009 he was employed as the first ever in house playwright at the National Theatre in Oslo. Harstad has also published a non-fiction book, «Blissard», a well received and award-winning monography about the Norwegian rock band Motorpsycho, in which half of the book's 300 pages consist solely of footnotes. Harstad lives in Oslo, Norway.

His latest novel, MAX, MISCHA & THE TET OFFENSIVE, received rave reviews in Norway and was shortlisted for several awards, including the Norwegian Literary Critics Award. Harstad, also a graphic designer, was awarded the Most Beautiful Book Award by the Norwegian Graphic Design Association (Grafill) for the special box edition of the novel, which included posters, a 15ft long accordion-folded brochure and a standalone hardcover book of 200 pages, covering the paintings and career of Mischa Grey, one of the novel's protagonists.

Throughout his career Harstad has been a guest at the following book festivals around the world:

(list not complete)

Toronto International Festival of Authors, Toronto, Canada
San Diego Comic-Con, CA
Perth International Writers Festival, Australia
Long Night of LiteratureS, New Delhi, India
International Hay Festival, Nairobi, Kenya
Frankfurt Book Fair, Germany
Norwegian-American Literary Festival, NYC (Hosted by the Paris Review)

Children's Book Festival, Bath, England
Le Salon du Livre et de la presse jeunesse Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris, France
Per Petterson / Jo Nesbø / Johan Harstad / Frode Grytten Book Tour, Paris, France
Festival Les Boréales, Caen, France
Salon du Livre, Colmar, France
Lettres du Monde, Bordeaux, France
Crossing Borders Festival, The Hague, The Netherlands
Edinburgh International Literature Festival, Scotland
Reykjavik International Literature festival

Copenhagen International Literature Festival, Denmark
G! Festival, Faroe Islands
Pisa Book Festival, Italy
Cremona Book Festival, Italy
Lake Como Festival, Italy

Praise for Johan Harstad's other works

BUZZ ALDRIN, WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU IN ALL THE CONFUSION?

(Novel, 2005)

"One of the most important writers of his generation. His grandest contribution...[is] the novel *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion?*"

-N+1 Book Review (US)

"Like Jonathan Safron Foer, Harstad combines formal play and linguistic ferocity with a searing emotional directness."

-Dedi Felman, co-founder of Words Without Borders (US)

"The novel cost me a sleepless night. That's always a good sign. This is a must read."

- Fædrelandsvennen

"Immersive, amazing, beautiful and well-written-"

- Moss Avis

"An unforgettable reading experience, both for the story and language."

- Tønsbergs blad

"I was almost sure I had saltwater on my fingers when I closed this wonderful novel. (...) Quite uniqe. I will remember this story for a very long time.

- Adresseavisen

"Harstad's sense of language is of a rare kind rare, making 633 pages a joy to make it through."

- Aftenposten

"Some books grab you by the neck from the first sentence. Before you know it, you've read the first scene, the first few chapters. (...) This magnificent plea for modesty is a true respite in a time where everyone just wants to be famous, to be seen, to show off that little extra."

- Het Parool (The Netherlands)

"A splendid confusion about life, love and intrigues (...) A modern saga of rocketships, ice floes and dreams of the Caribbean, and great fun to read."

- Kirkus Reviews Starred review (US)

"A moon voyage of a novel."

- Dagbladet

"Exquisite novel writing."

- Klassekampen

"Johan Harstad, let us hope, has come to stay."

- Dagens Næringsliv

"This paradoxical desire to be seen without being heralded sets Harstad's hero apart from other tormented young men of contemporary literature . . . [an] ambitious debut."

- Publishers Weekly (US)

"(...) we should all count our lucky stars that Johan Harstad's exceptional debut novel, Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion? has finally made it into English. (...) it may have put these islands on the map but, more importantly, it has flagged Harstad as a major talent."

- The Australian (Australia)

"To be able to write like this, to to be able to conjure up a situation and build up time and space around it with such linguistic cadence, it cannot be taught. You have to be born with it."

- Jylland-posten (Denmark)

"A tremendous debut novel about life in second place. (...) It's frankly awesome how vital and precise Johan Harstad is writing on every single page, and maybe Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All The Confusion? is the great contemporary novel we occasionally long for. (...) A great writing talent which will take him very far. Maybe all the way to the moon."

- Berlingske tidende (Denmark)

"It will not be an exaggeration to say that Buzz Aldrin is a strong contender for The Book of The Year. (...) A novel packed with surprises: Already in the opening lines the reader is drawn into the author's poetic yet direct style.

- La Repubblica (Italy)

"Raw, precise and entertaining about love and friendship in the cool and rainy Faroese landscape."

- Libèration (France)

"With one word: Perfekt.

- Het Financieele Dagblad (The Netherlands)

"A significant and poetic debut novel."

- Hamburger Morgenpost (Germany)

"What the 27-year-old Johan Harstad has written, is simply brilliant. *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion*? is as poetic as it is vibrant. His style, his language makes you just want even more. The 600 pages of the debut novel is the passionate stand-off with the eternal dream of anonymity and reactions from a turbulent world around us. "

- Bücherwelt, NDR (Germany)

HÄSSELBY

(Novel, 2007)

"Johan Harstad got a lot of readers with *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion?* two years ago. Hässelby should give him even more (...) A complex, riveting and real sinister novel (...) Hässelby enforces Johan Harstad's position as one of the most interesting young writers."

- Aftenposten

"Johan Harstad is one of the most exciting authors we have. He juggles effortlessly with a myriad of cultural and historical references, switching safely between humorous irony and pulse driving seriousness and takes bold chances without losing the reader along the way."

- Dagsavisen

"Delightfully credible and easy to immerse oneself in (...) written with strength and generosity."

- Dagens Næringsliv

"Funny, scary and strange."

- Adresseavisen

"When Ibsen wrote, he brought the apocalypse down on himself. Harstad unleashes the apocalypse on an entire generation, maybe even the whole world as we know it."

- Stavanger Aftenblad

"A protest novel well worth reading."

- Fædrelandsvennen

172 HOURS ON THE MOON

(YA Novel, 2008)

"This irrestistible premise is often intoxicating and occasionally downright terrifying ... pretty darn effective."

- Booklist (US)

"Scandinavian thriller meets sci-fi horror movie."

- Voya (US)

"Well-crafted suspense ... interesting and original."

- Kirkus Reviews (US)

"Perfectly paced creepiness ... will keep you turning the pages late into the night."

- Romantic times (US)

"A chilling combination of science fiction and horror ... Harstad's story is both psychologically and atmospherically disturbing."

- Publishers Weekly (US)

"The story grabs readers and doesn't let go ... 172 hours is page-turning sci-fi."

- SLJ (US)

"A fascinating, suspense-filled novel that keeps the readers guessing until the end."

- Library Media Connection (US)

"A novel that will make your hair stand on end. [...]
172 hours on the moon will provide shivers for people of all ages."

- Stavanger Aftenblad

"Harstad's style fits the young adult novel like a hand in a glove.
[...] he creates tension that causes even the adult readers to shiver."

- Dagens Næringsliv

"Will probably be able to terrify all catgories of youth. [...]small segments of factual information gives the story a documentary effect which magnifies the terror."

- Dagsavisen

"Harstad does not hold anything back in this book.
[...] it is not hard to foresee that this may become a hit."

- Dagbladet

"Johan Harstad is presenting a superbly exciting story about three teenagers' trip to the moon together with astronauts.(...)
a book suitable for both teenagers and adults."

- Aftenposten

ETC.

(play, 2010)

”Horrifying political drama from one of the most important writers of Norwegian contemporary literature."

- Dagbladet

"Disturbing, important document."

- Aftenposten

"The drama is never violent for the sake of a shock effect, it is constantly the characters in themselves are interesting. (...) It is hard for a dramatic text to get more poignant than this. (...) Johan Harstad's dramatic scenes are in fact not fictions, but reports from the world. Therefore they do not end. "

- Moss Avis

"(...) The reader ends up galled and severely shaken."

- Norwegian Broadcasting Company, NRK

"Earth shattering, epic political drama (...) He does not write not with a moral finger pointing anywhere, just with a sincere desire that we should understand what is happening around us, what has happened and continues to happen. A sort of cry through scripture. (...) The dramaturgy offers jumps in time and space; it is a complicated construction, without the text ever feeling forced, complete with stage directions that would have made even Ibsen envious. We come along on the journey, whether it's to an apartment in Grozny or a deserted stretch of road in Rwanda. The material is made new and alive for us through Harstads pen. "

- Dagens Næringsliv

AMBULANCE

(short stories, 2002)

"Stories shooting sparks and leaving behind a pillar of fire around the normal lives of those being dragged towards their own destruction. Or rescue. One of the strongest young voices in Norway."

- Aftenposten

"Strong short stories. *Ambulance* deserve readers for a long, long time. "

- Stavanger Aftenblad

"*Ambulance* is a very strong collection of stories. (...) Harstad establishes himself as one of the most important voices in modern Norwegian literature. "

- Dagsavisen

"In short - the gifted young Harstad, who last year debuted with prose, takes a leap up in both style and format. His talent and style almost strain the genre. "

- Dagbladet

"The eleven stories are strong individually and close to something genius read as a whole."

- VG

"A one of a kind collection of short stories."

- Bergens Tidende

"It has to be admitted: A poet has been born unto us. "

- Fædrelandsvennen

"Harstad, with his two books published, has gained a well-deserved place among contemporary young, promising writers. *Ambulance* contains nothing less than noble short story writing. "

- Sandefjords Blad

FROM HERE YOU ONLY GET OLDER

(prose, 2001)

"An obvious talent."

- Aftenposten

"Certainly the texts are well written, but in the best ones the reader spots a necessity, a quiet authority voice that says these small and big episodes are important."

- Stavanger Aftenblad

"One of fall's most exciting debuts. (...) Unexpected connections and intensely linguistic drive allows for Harstad's texts at its most successful to leave a raw, almost exasperating impression with the reader. "

- Dagsavisen