THIS IS FOR US

(New Day Rising. The Battle for Hue)

Fall 2012

PART 1

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 Mordecai and my 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 仕手, 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. It 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 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 you 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.

UNTITLED NO.1

(Incidents & Accidents, Hints & Allegations)

2001 – 2005

PART III

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 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, also when it came to their interaction with the audience. Then we all went out 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 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 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 John 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 Nebraska, on one of the last days in October, with cold rain washing in off 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 that 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 know 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 out necks back until it 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 has 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 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 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.

PAGES FROM THE DIARY OF IMPERIALISM

(Front Toward Enemy. The Year of The Monkey)

1966–1970

PART III

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 performed a couple of times 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 was 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.