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Present Tense Machine

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EARTH HOUR

It is Earth Hour, March 30, 2019. It runs from 8:30 until 9:30 p.m. Anna has turned off all the lights in the house. They do not want to be the only house that hasn't turned off its lights. Last year they forgot, and a neighbor texted her: *This neighborhood observes earth hour. We are an environmentally conscious neighborhood. Turn off your lights! Smiley. Candles. Clapping hands.*

We keep constant tabs on each other, Anna had wanted to write back. Thumbs up, thumbs up, thumbs up. We keep track from behind our curtains, just like they did in the 50s and 60s and 70s and 80s and 90s. We have become our mothers, our grandfathers, and our great grandparents. Smiley with heart eyes. Party popper confetti emoji. Why did no one tell me this when I was young, that no matter what I thought or did, I would end up following this same course in life, with the curtains?

So, this year, Anna turned off all the lights. She had just forgotten, last year. She actually had wanted to turn off the lights, obviously. Maybe this could make up for her not being so good at sorting the plastics. This year she has made an effort so this specific Earth Hour will go well. She has put out bowls of chips and candy and lit candles. Elina and Peder sit, each in their own TV-chair over in front of the extinguished TV set. She can see their faces in the bluish light of their personal iPad screens. Lit by the bluish light of his iPhone, Jostein's face is visible on the sofa. She sits in the rocking chair by the window by a candle, reading the weekly magazine insert from the newspaper. She could be reading her iPhone—it has a battery, so it's allowed—but she thought this was a good opportunity to do what she used to do as a child when she was at the cabin, where there was no electricity; she read by candlelight. She would lean over the table and read comic strips in the children's magazine, Norsk Barneblad. There is no way that one Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, The Wild Swans, was the only thing she read, although that's all she remembers. She can picture the illustrations, which were printed in red and white. Swans, who were actually enchanted brothers, came in for a landing on a lake. Sitting around a candle in the darkness: No wonder the epic primeval situation is what it is, Anna thinks. When darkness

creeps in—or do we say falls—and we see only each other’s faces around the bonfire, we want to do this: tell stories. We want to tell stories about our lives. We want to listen. We talk into the night until we fall asleep. The stories allow the soul to rest, the soul is sucked out into the immense darkness surrounding the epic primeval situation and the body settles down, by the bonfire. This is community, Anna thinks. This is returning to a kind of nothingness. Someone tells a story, everyone listens, united in the act of listening, but there are different bodies converting the words into different images inside different heads. It’s phenomenal. The voice narrates so intimately close to the ear in the darkness, why else do people open up when they no longer see each other’s faces clearly? She thinks of a seeress, who is the woman she writes about. She pictures the seeress sitting outside on a rock at night, and it is impossible for us to account for the billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a millionth of a second it takes from when this internal impression of a woman sitting on a rock outside at night pops into Anna’s thoughts until she thinks in a sentence: “And why, for example, would an Old Norse seeress sit outside at night, on an earthbound rock—a practice called *útiset* or “sitting out”—a time when she would receive warnings from everything around her?” Well, because night is when the moon comes out, at night you can listen, because you don’t see what’s around the person talking, you hear only a voice, maybe see a bonfire. Anna’s thoughts keep going. That’s what literature is, Anna thinks. That voice narrating to a reader in a novel is like that, the voice is close. I listen and convert what I read into images. The modern version of this epic primeval situation, however, appears to have a cold, blue light, Anna thinks as she watches her three family members. And it is precisely because she thinks in sentences that we can quote her this way, with “she thinks” as a steady reminder. Each one with a bluish bonfire, each one’s face lit up, absorbed in separate stories, Anna thinks, like parallel lives in the same living room. “Earth Hour,” always discussed in English even here in Norway. Why didn’t they translate the name? *Jordtimen*, Anna continues to think, *Jordtimen*. That would have been great. She feels compelled to get in touch with Liv to suggest it, but if she picks up her iPhone she knows she’ll end up surfing. She is also curious whether anyone else has thought of this before her. Maybe there already is a Norwegian name for it. (There is.) In Norwegian it sounds like something else (more like “dirt hour.”) *Jordtimen* was an earth hour when you turned off all the lights, only to remember what we would all return to: dirt. Earth hour: an hour to remember your own mortality. That we are going to fade away. That we came from the vast darkness. That our lives here on earth in the light were delineated by

utter, total darkness. That we rose out of the darkness at random times, and couldn't do anything about that, fumbled around in the light for a few decades, until we were led back to the darkness, and disappeared just as suddenly as we had arisen. An annual reminder of this would be good, Anna thinks. That would put things in perspective. Just the thought buoys her spirits. She looks at the faces of Elina, Peder, and Jostein, each so engrossed in its own bluish light, completely separate, three bluish faces surrounded by darkness. She picks up the newspaper insert. She flips through various feature articles. She comes to the advice column.

“Dear Terje,” a woman writes. “I have a girlfriend who’s feeling sorry for herself,” the woman writes. Oh, here it comes again, Anna thinks, the neighbor behind the curtain. These columns are full of girlfriends like these, who feel frustrated with their own self-centered friends. Of course they aren’t self-centered themselves, and they demand affirmation that they are right. “I mean, she has reason to feel sorry for herself. It’s not that,” the woman writes, “because she did lose her first child more than twenty years ago. They think the child was kidnapped by its foreign father, and she has never gotten over it, even though she has been in a new relationship for ages, and has three children who are nearly fully grown. But she still keeps dwelling on that loss and feels unbelievably sorry for herself. I’m a preschool teacher and have observed first-hand that there are two kinds of children: the ones who need comforting and have to sit in your lap, and the ones who sit under the desk and want to be left alone. And the ones who need comforting get it! But as a grownup, I think people need to accept the hand they were dealt and move on. I’m tired of having to comfort people all the time. I have my own issues, too, but there’s not much space for them in our friendship. Thanks, 48-year-old Woman.”

Anna sits gazing at the words. She looks over at Jostein’s face. It’s bluish. New since the last time she looked at his face are the two white earbuds he has in his ears now. White wires hang from his ears, merging into a single white wire that runs into his phone. He’s watching TV on his iPhone. She looks over at Elina, staunchly playing games, her fingers sweeping quickly across her screen. Peder appears to be typing. Suddenly he laughs out loud, but isn’t looking at any of them. He’s laughing at what he’s reading, someone texted him something. It’s a miracle that he’s even home at all. He’s usually over at Espen’s, playing. Does she constantly feel sorry for herself? Did Liv actually write that letter? She’s tired of listening to Anna talk about the emptiness. Maybe she just altered a few facts? Anna looks out the window. All the buildings across the street are dark. The streetlights just shine and no one responds. Where did it all go, she

wants to ask, where are you, she wants to ask Jostein, and where did Peder go, sitting there typing and laughing, where did his little hands go, and his fascination with beetles, where did that moment at the cabin go when he was stomping on the ants, alternately stepping on them and then stopping to say: *Poor little things*, and where did Elina go, where did her ponytail go, and where did that moment at the petting zoo go when they couldn't find her in the crowd of people and animals, and Jostein pointed and suddenly they found her up on top of the swing set, where she was balancing, of course, and they hurried toward her, as she calmly and elegantly squatted down, grabbed hold of the pole, and lowered herself down, hand over hand, where had that gone, where had it all gone, Anna wanted to yell, and what was the meaning of it all? Oh, Anna wants to tear off her head. She has to smile at the thought of herself, calmly taking her head off in the rocking chair and remaining seated there while her husband and children swipe away at their screens while she took earth hour seriously on a more visceral level. She thinks about the first time she took the head off her Barbie doll when she was a child and saw the little round bump at the end of the doll's neck and thought she must have a lump like that inside her own head. Now she's not thinking *where did it all go*. She's just picturing that little neck bump, which she had taken a black pen and drawn two eyes and a smiling mouth onto, but then she had found it completely impossible to play with. It wasn't believable. The make-believe was completely ruined by this doll with the little pro forma bump of a head. *Remember to go to the eye doctor* pops up on her cell phone screen. She has been referred to a specialist for her eye infection, which does not go away. The doorbell rings. Anna looks at Peder and Elina to see if they look like they're going to get up, but there's no sign that either of them even realize anything is happening beyond their screens. The doorbell rings again. Jostein has his earbuds in and obviously doesn't hear the bell. Anna gets up with a little sigh and walks through the living room to the front hall and opens the door: There is no one there. Just darkness.

THE SANDPIPERS

But in 1986, Bård stands on Tromøy Island with a fish in his hands watching a girl swim in the sea a little way off. He is slightly too young in this fish-holding moment for him to think about or envision any of this: that he is going to not only grow up, but also have a child with that girl, but that the two of them, mother and daughter, will be separated from each other forever, and that in each of the universes he will thus lack one of them, without knowing it. That he himself will be split into two versions. But here comes Anna walking toward him in a red bikini with wet hair. She's eleven years old. Bård is also eleven and is wearing shorts and a t-shirt. Hi, says Anna. Hi, says Bård. Are you going to the theater workshop? Anna asks. I don't know, says Bård, is that a thing? Yes, says Anna, it starts tomorrow. First we're going to make marionettes out of stuff we find on the beach, and later we'll create a puppet show and perform it for the whole camp on the last night. It's super fun. You have to come! They speak a kind of children's language in this scene, and we do our best to mimic it by using expressions like "super fun." Bård doesn't realize that Anna has been studying him and thinks he's cute. She wants to get to know him, she knows this with her full eleven-year-old identity. Come with me, says Anna, and Bård puts the fish in his bucket. It's a tiny little fish. He doesn't know what kind of fish it is, but he caught it with a net. Are you staying at the campground or the school? asks Anna. She knows he's staying at the campground, she's seen him there, but she doesn't say that. We're staying in a camping trailer, Anna tells Bård. What are you staying in? A tent, Bård says. Anna knows that, too. She saw him sitting outside his tent the night before with a book, and that's when Anna's full identity told her that she wanted to be friends with this boy. Hi, says Anna. They're standing in front of a man who is squatting on the beach building a sandcastle with a girl who is littler than Anna and Bård. Oh, hi, says the man. This is..., says Anna and looks at Bård, and Bård says, Bård. He really wants to take the puppetry class, says Anna. Um, says Bård, I think I'm actually signed up for the outdoor activities class. I have to check with my mom. The sandcastle man says, well anyway, there's room for you in the puppetry class if you want. Oh, you want, says Anna. We

need more people in the puppetry class! She's beaming. Bård notices that. Well, I do like puppet shows, lies Bård. He likes outdoor activities. He loves outdoor activities.

Five days later: Bård and Anna stand side by side behind the tent canvas that they have strung up between two big poles. There are several children beside them, all holding puppets. They made the puppets out of things they found on the beach, things that washed ashore: driftwood, plastic caulk gun tips, a pen, buttons, a plastic jug, seaweed, a chunk of Styrofoam. The entire No Nukes camp sits on the other side of the tent canvas, about five hundred grown-ups and children. It's evening. In the picture of this night in Anna's parents' photo album, there's a gentle, reddish gold sunlight. The audience sits on the grass watching the puppet show some of their children have put together while they attended various seminars, and right now everyone feels a sense of unity and hope, feels that this is useful, that sitting on the lawn and watching a puppet show is useful, that standing behind the canvas and suspending a marionette over the edge of the puppet theater stage is useful, that it's useful that as all the puppets gather over the edge of the stage curtain for the big finale, Anna along with the other children and all the puppets yell out a resounding: NO NUKES! Which causes the entire audience to join them in yelling: NO NUKES! And they break out in applause, and everyone feels that this is useful, it's actually useful, to clap, it's going to be OK, the world will be a better place! And there are so many of them, they feel the warmth of five hundred people, and it feels like there are enough of them to stand up in opposition, as if the collective will of five hundred people were enough to stand up, just for an example, to an atomic bomb.

But that's not what Bård is thinking as he gets off the bus on Inndalsvegen in May, 1998, now twelve years older. Bård thinks it's unusually warm for May. He has grown used to the far more northerly Finnmark spring, but he remembers another month of May in Bergen when there were no leaves on the trees until closer to June, or was that maybe in Stryn, up near the glacier, it could certainly could have been, flits through Bård's mind. He pictures himself in his denim jacket and blue jeans with moccasins on his feet holding a Norwegian flag, and he feels the wind nipping at those exposed, hatless fourteen-year-old ears of his. It was snowing in Stryn that 17th of May, Norwegian Constitution Day, sometime in the late 1980s, Bård was in seventh grade, he pictures the photograph, that's what he's doing, thinks Bård, he pictures his spiky hair, the

Norwegian flag flapping, and how he smirks at his parents behind the camera, his ears are bright red. Here, on the other hand, it's very green, and warm. He's sweating and has to take off his jacket. It's a denim jacket, he suddenly realizes as he sets his tightly packed backpack on the sidewalk, removes his jacket and drapes it over one arm, pulls the packet of smokes from his chest pocket and lights one as he walks. Bård has been living in Kirkenes for a year to work off his student loan. He was going to work off NOK 25,000, that was the deal. You move to Northern Norway after school, and the government knocks NOK 25,000 off your debt for each year you live and work up there. When Bård finished his master's degree in teaching and biology and Anna still had one year to go on her master's, they realized that the only sensible thing to do was for Bård moved to Finnmark. Anna could certainly look after Laura on her own. Laura spent her days in daycare on campus, and one of Anna's strongest qualities was that she was extremely disciplined, far too disciplined if you asked Bård, and what was childhood anyway other than a big porridgey mash-up of childish experiences that faded away into memory anyway. After all, it's more important for me to be around when she's older, Bård said. The Finnmark plateau, rural Lyngen east of Tromsø and north of the Arctic Circle. Tent, campfire, snowy owls. Quiet days alone, just him and a pair of binoculars. Anna understood. This was in him, the same way that all the other things that were in Bård were in Bård, like his intestines, his heart, his bones, every bit as much as that puppetry workshop wasn't what actually he would have planned to do at that No Nukes camp on Tromøy Island that summer when he was eleven. Bård went to Finnmark. Anna saw the upsides. They would knock NOK 25,000 off the loan. Bård got to do what he had always dreamt of. She had quiet, peaceful evenings so she could write. But now he's here, on Inndalsvegen, heading toward the apartment. Bård hasn't said anything about how he quit his job, and that he was coming home earlier than planned and that they would thus not be able to knock the NOK 25,000 off. He would have had to have stayed there until August for that to happen. But he couldn't be there anymore, if he stayed any longer things were going to go badly: He was going to end up with Sara. He was going to sleep with Sara, love Sara, which he probably already did, he would vanish from Anna and from Laura. He didn't want that, he was a man of strong principles, loyalty being the most important principle. He was loyal to everything he loved: the mountains, the natural world, his parents, the village, Anna, Laura. He had been loyal to Anna since that puppetry class in 1986. He wasn't going to sleep with Sara, wasn't going to love Sara, in addition to Anna. Sara wasn't going to replace Anna. On Constitution Day in

Kirkenes, Sara had worn her traditional Finnmark folk costume. It was almost too much for Bård as he stood in the supply room when Sara peeked in on him and asked if he would be along soon, and she had the traditional wool bonnet on with her dark bangs peeking out from underneath the bonnet, and her eyes were so dark, and she had never done anything to flirt with him at all, that was what he liked so much, she didn't seduce people, she was just Sara, in the teachers' lounge, Sara at a concert with a friend, Sara who was moving to Volda next year to study journalism. She was genuine. The way Anna was. Just that Anna wasn't Sara. He had to leave. Bård walks down Inndalsvegen in 1998 not knowing that he will never see Anna again, will never think about Anna again, will never remember that Anna ever existed, because at the very instant that Bård buys a newspaper in the shop across the street from their apartment, Anna reads the word "tårdgård" and thus vanishes into a parallel universe, and Laura vanishes into a parallel universe, and he himself splits into two parallel versions of himself. If it could be captured on film and the two universes overlaid on top of each other, you would obtain a picture that creates a cautious sense of doubling, that Bård was double, that there was a body a couple of centimeters outside his body, that there was a hand a couple of centimeters outside his hand which was paying, that there was a shop a couple of centimeters outside the shop, that there was a whole neighborhood a couple of centimeters outside the neighborhood, and that there were fluffy white summer clouds in the sky a couple of centimeters outside those same fluffy white summer clouds. There wouldn't be anything more. What happened from there would thus take place in two versions: A) When Bård walks into the apartment, there's no one there. He has an odd sensation: shouldn't there be someone here? He calls out a cautious hello, but no one responds. It's completely quiet. There's something in him that is very quiet, it's as if he's trying to open a door into a room, but when he opens the door, there's only mist in there. Bård sees that the balcony door is open, there's a chair there, as if someone was just sitting there. But no one is sitting there, he walks over to see: It's empty. The yard is quiet. The white lilac is blooming and deeply fragrant. Bård sits in the chair with the newspaper and looks down at the paper, and three seconds later a chill runs down his spine when suddenly he sees a little girl on a tricycle in the yard, she must have come around from behind the building, and he sees that it must be Laura, she's just gotten so big since when he was home at Easter, and she hasn't noticed him yet, she's just riding her tricycle with those chubby, little legs, and then the pedaling gets tough on the lawn, which is full of moss, so she puts her feet down in the moss and pushes herself along. He yells, "Laura!" B)

When Bård opens the door to the apartment, he sees Anna there, her face is white, she's talking to her mother on the phone, "I have to go to the doctor," Anna says, "I think I've had a stroke." She looks at his face. "What is it, Bård, what is it? I can tell there's something wrong," Anna says. And without Bård knowing why it happens, he confesses. He fell in love with another woman. He didn't want to, it just happened. He's distressed. Anna lies down on the floor, writhing in nausea, and then runs to the bathroom and throws up. She throws up and throws up. Bård drives her to the doctor, her face just white and motionless. I thought... Anna laughs, her lips pale and her head leaning against the seatback in the taxi, I thought I had forgotten we had a child. I was so sure that there was something I had forgotten, something that had changed all of the sudden. And then it was just a kind of absurd premonition that you were going to leave. I'm not leaving, Bård says. I'm staying with you. I don't want you with me, says Anna. When they come home that night, the lilac fragrance is strong. As the tears flow where they're standing out in the yard because Anna needs some air, she says during the day, when the sun shines on the lilac, it's so extremely bright, and at night when the sun sets the fragrance is so strong. Imagine having that kind of power. That everything in you just pours out beauty, you just sort of radiate with all your might. She smiles with those same pale lips, all the color in her face has drained into her head, Bård thinks and manages to catch her before she faints.

Sara orders octopus at the little restaurant in Monterey, Bård orders grilled chicken. Going to the aquarium kind of turns me vegetarian, Bård says. I can't order octopus right after watching the octopus hide up in the corner of his tank, as if he were trying to avoid being caught. Bård raises his shoulders up by his ears, pulls his arms in close to his body, mimicking the octopus shrinking into the corner. So you ordered chicken instead? Sara asks and laughs. You can be quite sure that chicken ran around squawking and clucking when she realized she was being caught. Bård looks down at the chicken breast. It's cut into thin slices, with a crispy crust of skin, fat, and spices. They had spent the night in San Francisco, rented a car and driven down the coast to Monterey. At the aquarium there was a rectangular room with an enormous wall of windows looking out over the bay. There was a strip of beach sand running along the wall, with some water and coastal wetland plants. Seabirds hopped on the sand, sandpipers, maybe they would fly a few meters farther away in that little miniature world of theirs and then land. Farther off beyond that the Pacific Ocean rolled toward shore in regular waves. The light was a rich, deep golden brown,

amber-like, the water seemed steely blue, bright. There were swinging doors at either end of the room. On a sign on the wall it said that all the birds had been brought to the aquarium because they were injured, none had been born in captivity. Bård stood as if hypnotized, staring at this make-believe world of real birds and sand and seawater, it was as if someone had completely succeeded in creating an illusion of the truth, but at the same time knew that there wasn't anything true about it at all because the authentic world, the authentic ocean, and the authentic sand were outside of the glass walls, and Bård doesn't know that in both versions of this instant, where in one universe he is Laura's father and has forgotten that Anna exists, that the child has a female origin as well, and where in the other universe he is Anna's ex-husband and they have both forgotten that they lost Laura, he would think about this fogginess that he can't put his finger on that walks alongside him every day like an insistent empty space, like a shadow without a shadow. But in both universes, the sight of a sandpiper taking off and flying from one edge of the miniature world is what makes him think of it. Sara notices it in both universes. She notices when he does this, what she calls sensing absence. One doesn't always need to know what is missing, says Sara, but something is. It's just that, the sensation of an absence. When she notices that, she gives him space or she runs her hand gently over his arm. I'm getting fat, Sara sighs as she puts fried octopus into her mouth. I'm going to be so crazy fat. Bård says he's never heard of anyone getting fat from octopus before. Sara laughs. Not from the octopus, she says, from all the fried food! Everything is fried here! They drive onward but it turns out Highway 1 is closed due to a landslide. They have to cut over and take the 101. They drive through tinder-dry California before taking a small road toward Big Sur. The sensation of absence—he feels it more strongly here. There's something that's not there—what is there: highways, cars, the thunk of the tires as they drive over the seams between the concrete slabs the road is made of, the succulent plants that grow along the coast with those intense, beautiful colors, pink, purple, blue, yellow, the cliffs, the Pacific Ocean, some dolphins. Why is the sense of absence more pronounced here? he asks Sara. Because you're where the sense of absence comes from, Sara says. From something that's gone. You're gone.

THE MEGAPHONE

This is the fourteenth chapter in which God speaks through a megaphone, but no one hears what he/she says. God lowers the megaphone, a little dejected. When the hand holding the megaphone lands more or less in the middle of God's thigh, against the white, cassock-like outfit God is wearing, we notice this: God has human hands.