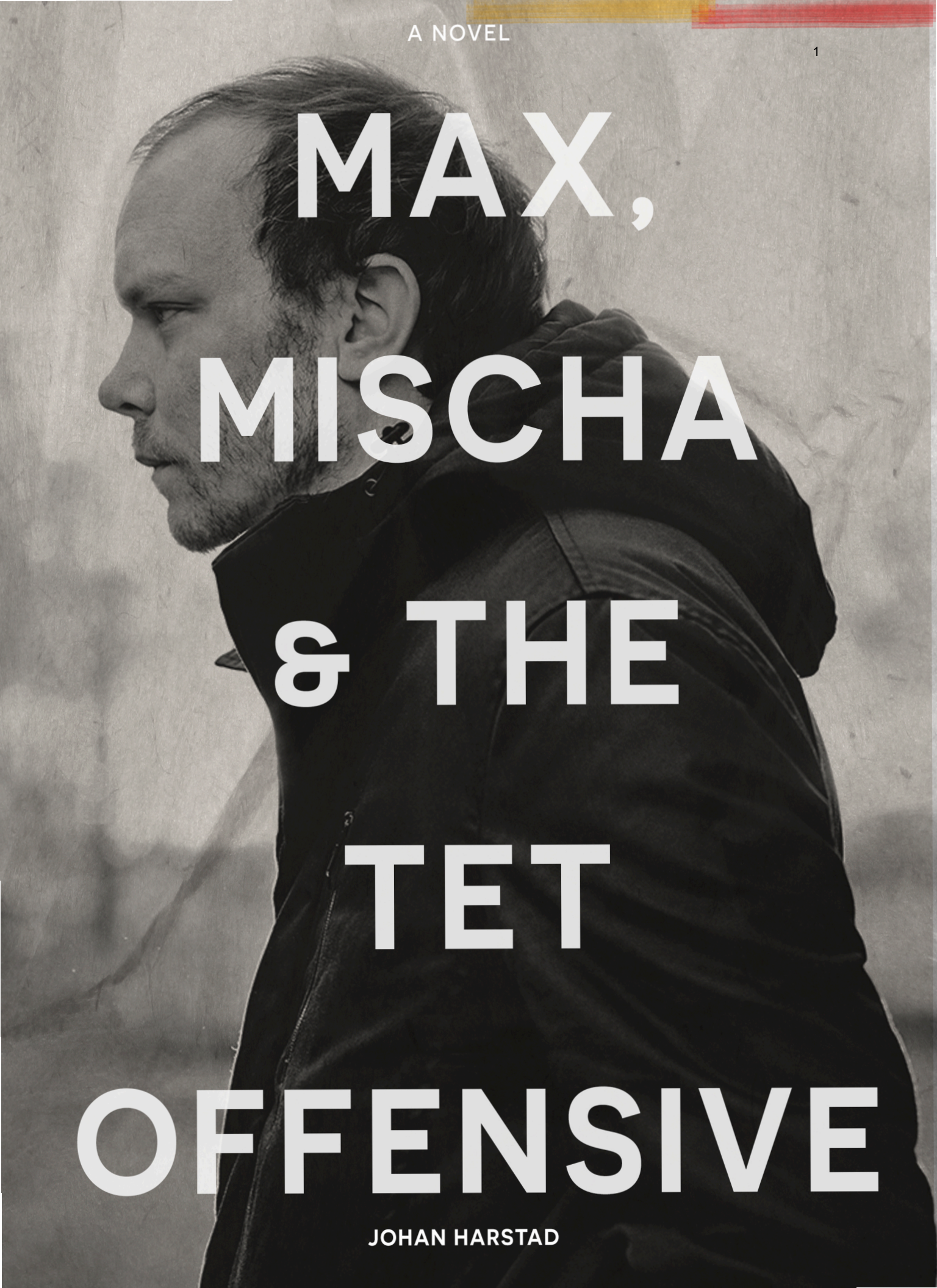
A NOVEL



MAX, MISCHA & THE TET OFFENSIVE

JOHAN HARSTAD

JOHAN HARSTAD

MAX, MISCHA & THE TÉT OFFENSIVE

A NOVEL

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

– JOHN FREEMAN –

"Harstad's novel is both big and small, sweeping in its scope but intimate in its telling. Dense with the overwhelming detail of the everyday, it brings to mind the great realist novels of the past but without their all-knowing narrators. Written in a demotic, urgent prose that moves from suburb to city to war zone on our ever shrinking planet, Max Mischa, and the Tet Offensive *is nothing less than a lament for our age—the rootless cosmopolitan's search for what he can't seem to find: home."*

– SIRI HUSTVEDT –

"There are many ways to say this, but this is probably the simplest:
Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive *is a great novel."*

– JO NESBØ –

– Table of contents –

Praise for Johan Harstad's

MAX, MISCHA, AND THE TET OFFENSIVE

Norwegian original edition (2015)

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

*VG ****** (6 out of 6 stars)*

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

*Dagbladet ****** (6 out of 6 stars)*

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

Aftenposten

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

Dagsavisen

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

Adresseavisen

"Brilliant colossus."

Stavanger Aftenblad

"Listen to Harstad's magnificent song."

Vårt land

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

Morgenbladet

Dutch edition (2017)

Winner of the European Literary Award 2018

"The literary event of the year."
*Het Nieuwsblad ***** (Five out of five stars)*

"Fucking brilliant."
Fleur Speet

"One of the most interesting writers of our time ."
*Standaard der Letteren ***** (Five out of five stars)*

"The talk of the town."
Jeroen Vullings, De Nieuwsshow

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

"A monumental novel."
Trouw

"A story like a painting by Rothko."
Het Parool

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

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

"Rarely have I read a book that got under my skin like this."
Wim Opbrouck

"An enormous, sprawling story about homesickness, art and the question of what home means."
Jan Magazine

Danish edition (2018)

"This year's Great American Novel is written by a Norwegian. Johan Harstad takes on the best of the best in his behemoth work on art, love and war. (…) The novel contains all the elements that characterize a classic, and then some, for the author and playwright Johan Harstad is a rarely generous person. The novel stretches over a mere 1,100 pages and a half a century, and it's not a page or a paragraph too much. (…) Remember the name Johan Harstad. He is the next big name in Scandinavian literature."

*Jyllands-posten ****** (Six out of six stars)*

"*Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive* is not a single page too long. (...) Johan Harstad has an admirable ability to convey social and cultural inspirations that over the years form Max's view of the world and itself. (…) Harstad, whose love obviously does not confine himself to literature alone, also lets Max recount all the (fictional) theatrical performances and works of art that both himself and Mischa produce over the years, and this literary cultivation of art's many forms of expression has rarely been done better."

Weekendavisen

"(…) when I feel confident that I will also remember the novel in a special way, it's not just because I've spent so many hours in its company these recent days – it's also because it's deeply breathtaking. (…) Such a comprehensive book cannot be given justice in this little review; Therefore, let me conclude by saying that it deserves all the readers it can get. *Max, Mischa & Tet Offensive* is simply among the most wonderful I have read for a long time.

Information

"Johan Harstad creates magic with the novel's epic possibilities. (…) There are many types of novels, and then there's - I'm tempted to say - Norwegian Johan Harstad's 1,066 pages long *Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive*. (…) Goddamn impressive."

*Politiken ***** (Five out of six stars)*

"The ultimate Norwegian novel about the United States and the longing to find home. The translation of *Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive* is a real event. (...) absolutely amazing prose. The novel (...) has bids for all conceivable readers: The politically interested , the US-interested, the Norwegian-interested, the art-theory-interested, the coming-of-age-novel-interested, the love-interested. In short: To anyone with an interest in superb art that transcends time and place and in the most peculiar way is about the reader himself ."

*Kristeligt Dagblad ****** (Six out of six stars)*

German edition (2019)

'It's entertaining and smart, compassionate and cheeky, sharp and rousing – simply a great novel.'
Deutschlandrundfunk Kultur

'[A] new I*n Search of a Lost Time*, a double *Buddenbrooks* for the very last generation, who was a child in the pre-digital age and who wrote letters to their parents from the holiday camp and played their favorite films on clunky VHS-tapes.'
Die Zeit

'Johan Harstad's *Max, Mischa and the Tet-Offensive* is […] an attempt to combine a coming-of-age drama and an artist's novel with stories of emigration and love. Harstad's prose overflows with flair, cameos and details, which are never mere ends in themselves, but part of a larger whole […].'
Süddeutsche Zeitung

'With his sumptuous novel, Johan Harstad conducts a grand experiment. A virtuoso, the Norwegian author joins the dots between the Vietnam war, friendship, art, and migration to the USA into a credible story about life.'
taz

'[…] like a natural phenomenon, almost a tsunami […] As entertaining as it is astute, and as amusing as it is melancholic. He takes on so much and still manages not to overexert himself. Have we ever read a book that deals with so much, has such high aims and works with so many references to art, theatre, literature and film, all without failing?'
Berliner Zeitung

'Johan Harstad has written a "great American novel".'
NDR

'Johan Haarstad's novel is wonderful, but - if I was to complain about anything – it would be that it is too short. This story deserves more than 1200 pages!'
Matthias Brandt

'The most recent Great American Novel comes from a Norwegian: Johan Harstad's *Max, Mischa and the Tet Offensive* is a shrewd epic of hapless people.'
FAZ

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

Germany (Rowohlt)

France (Editions du Seuil)

The Netherlands (Uitgeverij Podium)

Spain (Tres Hermanas ediciones)

Denmark (Politiken / C&K)

Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive

Quick overview

Max Hansen is sleepless in the Midwest. He is a theatre director on tour across the US. It's possible that he has turned into an American. He hasn't been home for over 20 years.

If it was up to him he would never have left the place he was born, a suburb of Stavanger on the west coast of Norway called Forus, where kids could make as much noise as they wanted while their fathers were working on the oil rigs in the North Sea, and where a heavy silence descended on the houses when they returned. But no one gets what they want. In the summer of 1980, just as Max turns 13, his family leaves Norway behind and migrates to the USA where his dad's new job awaits. In Long Island, NY, Max is forced to find new streets to call his own and meanwhile his family is breaking apart around him. It is here, in this place, that he will meet Mordecai, the best friend anyone could have – at least when he's actually around; and Mischa, the Canadian girl seven years older than the boys, looking like Shelley Duvall anno 1970 and spending her summers out on Fire Island; and finally Ove, Max' uncle, now calling himself Owen and living at the Apthorp on the Upper West Side; the reclusive member of the Hansen family who migrated from Oslo in the late '60s to be a jazz musician among the top names in New York, but failed or arrived too late, ended up volunteering for Vietnam as the war was winding down instead, got lost for years in Northern California and who no one in his family has seen or heard from since 1970. (Some of the novel's sections are told from from Max's point of view and some from Owen's.)

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

– Novel contents –

PART IV

Max, Mischa & The Tet Offensive

A NOVEL BY JOHAN HARSTAD

Samples translated by Tara Chace

Original Norwegian title:
MAX, MISCHA & TETOFFENSIVEN

- Sample Pages & Synopsis -

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

[I]

THIS IS FOR US

(NEW DAY RISING. THE BATTLE FOR HUE)

Fall 2012

EXCERPT FROM START OF NOVEL:

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.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 2

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

Chapter 3

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

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

Chapter 4

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

Chapter 5

Stavanger, 1988, the forest between the factories in the Forus area. Max, age eleven, is dead for the eighth time in a role-play game of the Vietnam War (having watched plenty of films not meant for boys his age, including *Apocalypse now*). To his parents' frustration he even plays at being American, not the NLF. It was Max's father who sparked his interest in the Vietnam war after Max found a few NLF buttons in the attic, and now – in these last days of the summer holiday – all the games they've played, strategies (some of them) have worked out, costumes they've made and films they've watched culminate in one last, great battle of Hue. This final battle results in a frenzy of shouts, fire extinguishers and – somehow – CS gas, resulting in Max falling out of a broken second floor window, breaking his wrists and collar bones.

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

(EXCERPT)

6

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

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

WE MEET IN THE GYM at the school outside Stavanger every Monday, Wednesday and Friday in our dark blue track suits with *Forus and Gausel Athletic Club* printed on the back, always on time, well, at least Stig and I always arrive at the same time, we slide our bikes into their spots on the bike rack and shiver in the cool afternoon air. Then Andri comes, a few minutes later. *Sorry*, he says, *my mom kind of took her time with dinner*. She always does. Cooking isn't her forté.

We've been told we have a lot of potential, that we can go far, we have athletic potential, and our coaches, mostly local parents who have varying

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Think so."

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

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

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

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

But I won't be here then. No one knows, because I haven't told a soul that we're moving in a couple of weeks. Leaving Norway for good. I should have, and I had every intention of doing it, at least Stig and Andri. But I just haven't,

I've been pretending like nothing is up, even when we talk about what classes we hope we'll be in in the fall and the welcome letter from the middle school that I lie and say I received, too. I've put it off and put it off so long that I've started thinking it might be best to just disappear one day.

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

AND THEN SUDDENLY the day arrives. I should have been home already, but I don't want to. I'm sitting up on top of Ulsberget with Stig and Andri, the gravel sports field is behind us and if we want we can just barely see the eleven-year-olds who just started training track and field, running back and forth across the short side of the field while the coach, probably one of their fathers, yells at them to run faster, better, cleaner, with more control—but we're facing away from them so we just hear them, as if from far away, the yelling and their feet running back and forth across the gravel and in front of us, below us, is Forus, with its factories and gas stations and the Scania plant, rows of trucks parked for the night and I should have been home already, but I'm here. I don't want to go, I want to keep sitting here, because it's a hopelessly nice night and we're sitting together on top of Ulsberget with Forus below us and it's starting to cool off even though the sun hasn't set yet, it won't do that for another hour and maybe how nice it is doesn't have anything to do with the whole thing, maybe it's not the kind of night where it matters what the weather's like. Maybe it could have been raining and I'd have been just as happy, I don't know, I just know that it's an almost uncomfortably nice evening and I don't want to go home, but I have

to, because everything that's not packed and ready, labeled with my name, and placed in the specified locations before my dad goes to bed for the last time in our house, will be left behind.

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

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

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

It's after ten. It's starting to get colder, I zip up my jacket, pull my knees in closer even though the sun is still in our eyes. It's one of the first days in July, there's usually bad weather when everyone's on vacation, but a lot of things are wrong with this summer. Just hours before we walked down the hill to the fjord, down to the wharf behind the Sønnichsen metal tube and fittings plant where Andri usually goes fishing (even if there's no way what he catches there can be all that healthy to eat); we strolled over to Gausel Beach and went swimming, in water that was probably slightly too cold, but Stig believes it's important to swim in the summer, it's good luck, and I know he just made that up on the spot, but I stagger along after them across the rocky intertidal zone with goosebumps all the way up to my face and I step on a starfish before it's deep enough to switch to swimming and make my way out into the fjord, swim hard enough to warm

up, and think that if nothing else at least I can swim better than all of them. I swim the seven hundred meters around the little islet of Gauselholmen, where three boys and three girls in their mid-teens sit barbecuing and smoking, they've set up a silver-colored tent and will surely spend the night out there, it looks nice, I envy them, and one of them, a guy with shoulder length hair in a wool sweater and bell bottoms with a freshly rolled cigarette hanging from his lips, stands up as I swim past them, smiles and cheers me on, and for a second I almost think he looks like me, but then he turns and says something to the others, they laugh, I can't tell what at, and I swim back toward the shoreline below the big houses where Stig and Andri are sitting by the edge of the water, throwing rocks at the crabs to break their shells and waiting for me to come ashore. We sit there and dry off without saying much and afterward we retrace our steps back up the same hills, just walking, we roam around in Forus, down Storaberget Terrasse to Heddeveien, down Kviestølen and Bamsefaret, Ulsbergbakken, Petroleumsveien and Løwenstrasse and back again, I don't remember what we talk about, just that it feels like a procession, all of it, like the end of something that was meant to last much longer and along the way, by the grocery store in Kviebakken, we run into several of our former classmates who will be in class with Stig and Andri in the fall, I enter the store instead, walk back and forth between the shelves to kill time while they chat outside, and I don't go back out until I see that they're alone again. Afterward we each buy a bottle of Coke and big baguettes that we eat plain, sitting with our backs against the warm, red bricks on the store's facade. Then we keep going, as if we're busy, and we are, too, we cross our own tracks and enter the woods behind the big residential area, up on Ulsberget, the highest point we can find, that's where we sit down, that's where we've already been sitting for way too long before I finally say it:

"I'm moving away tomorrow."

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

"A while."

They nod slowly.

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

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

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

"To America. Long Island."

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

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

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

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

"Maybe."

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

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

"Huh?"

"I said that this one time to some lady who came to our house and rang the doorbell, I think it was sometime last year, she only spoke English and was looking for Ullandhaug, I guess she was trying to get to the university or something like that, and then she asked: *Is this Ullandhaug?* so I told her it was Forus. But I guess it came out wrong, I think she misunderstood me, because she seemed offended and turned around and left."

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

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

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

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

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

We did not know that.

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

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

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

"E-ty-molo-gy?"

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

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

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

Easy to picture that, too: My parents, Stig and Andri's and everyone else's, how they all drove out here, independently, and studied the real estate prospectuses and the lots with skepticism or enthusiasm, discussed among themselves and spit into their fists, stuck the shovel into the dirt and called the

bank to set up a meeting about a mortgage loan. We put down our roots here, tentatively and hesitantly at first, eventually with increasing conviction. And those of us who stayed, among the factories and the industrial buildings that rose around us on all sides, we bore our belonging to Forus like a badge, proof that people can survive in any kind of conditions. We were citizens. We were in the house. In the burbs. With dry feet in the swamp.

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

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

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

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

"Of course," I say.

But that'll never happen.

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

Instead I tell them about the reorg at SAS and how my father got a tip that American Airlines in New York was looking for pilots, and I tell them that American Airlines has those really big planes that my dad has always dreamt of flying, the jumbo jets, Boeing 747s, and that that's why we're moving, so he can fly longer, bigger planes, earn more money, have more predictable work hours, and maybe we'll move back again after a few years, that could happen, I say, but mostly because I want it to be true, and I talk and talk about the differences between the Boeing 737 and the DC-9 and the 747 and the other types of planes I know about, all to keep silence away, and we agree to at least write letters to each other, of course we can do that, I promise to send them my address as soon as I can, and we make plans to see each other the following summer, as if that were realistic, and by then it must be getting close to eleven p.m., we finally get up and come down from the rocky knoll, through the woods, and we say goodbye to each other on the gravel path between the soccer field and the houses, they each shake my hand as if I'm leaving for some official mission. I turn my back to them and walk home, hear them parting ways a little behind me, each walking off in their own direction after having agreed to meet up the next day, maybe go down to the beach if the weather is nice, you never really know

how long the nice weather will last after all, it's usually always raining in this cruddy town, and it's not cold anymore, the heat is coming back, it's humid now, my sneakers stick to the asphalt on my way home and I swear the thunder and lightning started that night, a terrible storm over the entire Stavanger region, which probably lasted until well into August and gave way to an unseasonably early winter.

(END OF PART 1)

[II]

GARDEN CITY

(BRACE BRACE HEADS DOWN STAY DOWN)

1990 - 1993

(EXCERPT)

1

64 Poplar Street, Garden City, Nassau County, Long Island, New York. America. A village enclave of just over five square miles in the heart of the town of Hempstead, complete with three golf clubs all competing to be the most exclusive and at the same time therefore also the most exclusionary. Neatly maintained tree-lined avenues and tidy sidewalks all year round, and Mexican or Puerto Rican landscaping crews who popped up out of nowhere and blew the leaves off our driveways as they whistled melodies we never took the time to learn.

I have this memory of us here, on that first day in America, my parents, my sister and myself, on a July day in 1990, our very first day. We were definitely overdressed, shuttling back and forth from the moving van by the curb to the new house with its unfamiliar rooms that we were going to move into. We had departed on a cool morning in Stavanger, and our appearance, dressed heavy wool sweaters with distinctly Scandinavian patterns, must have been the final confirmation our new neighbors were waiting for to nod knowingly to each other: we were not prepared. And then I remember how afternoon turned to evening as Dad single-handedly hauled our enormous, light-brown sofa across the lawn toward the house. He was breathing hard, pouring sweat, and the heavy

sofa legs dug deep ruts into the grass, but he was determined that he would be the one, no one but him, to move our most important piece of furniture in its place, it was something of symbolic importance, I think; only after it was in the house and moved into the proper position would we be home. Or so he thought, and he was the only one of us who did. Several of the neighbors who had gathered out of curiosity to more closely inspect this peculiar maneuver, offered their helping hands, but he just shook his head.

"Thanks anyway," he smiled bravely, carrying on with his struggle, "it'll be fine."

Midway across he allowed himself to be talked into a pilsner and took a breather, and this remains my strongest memory of that specific day: Dad standing on the freshly chewed up lawn in front of our sofa, surrounded by neighbors wearing lightweight shirts and sundresses whereas he was in wool, and how in the end he pulls off his sweater and tosses it on the sofa. And that our new neighbors applaud him. And that I keep my sweater on. And that the last rays of sunlight hit the back of his head and make it shine and glow and look bigger than it is. And that Mom comes out of the house and hugs him and takes a swig of beer from his bottle and smiles and greets the neighbors who toast with her.

And that I feel cold and head inside.

WHAT IF WE had settled down in Manhattan from the beginning instead, everything could have been different then, everything would have been new, nothing recognizable at all, just a steady stream of distractions and noises that would have kept our attention off this infernal longing that wouldn't let go. Because the biggest problem with Garden City was not that it was in America, but that it looked so much like home without being home. Sure, the houses here didn't look like the ones I'd grown up in and visited friends in, and the streets and the tree-lined avenues, they were nicer than what I was used to, better maintained. But it was the same anyway, the same billowing absence of noise, cars that drove slowly while carefully watching for children playing in the street, neighbors who said hello to each other in the mornings and turned off their sprinklers in the evenings after they had moved hypnotically back and forth over their yards and the edges of the sidewalk all afternoon; that same suburban

feeling which emphasized to us that we were on our own and ought to be happy about it. Garden City drove that point into us, into me, the whole time, that we weren't where we were supposed to be; every time I walked into the kitchen to get myself a glass of milk the way I usually did, having forgotten for a while that I wasn't in Stavanger, only to feel that sudden jolt in my hand as my fingers grasped the milk carton and sent a signal back to my brain that the carton was bigger than I was used to and couldn't be gripped the same way. Or on days when I imagined that I was happy and was listening to music in my new room, singing along, daydreaming about the future and how one day, sooner or later, in a little while or a long time from now, but anyway definitely someday—maybe long after people had given up on me and had started to forget me—I would return to Stavanger, triumphant, set down my luggage in the middle of the street and say: *Here I am.* I would be famous. Or as I patched my bike tire and caught myself humming a song I had heard on the radio, or lay casually on the sofa thinking that it would go great, this, could go great, until Mom barged in abruptly to point out that she had noticed someone my age farther up the street, and that maybe I should go out there and say hello to them, make an effort, not spend my time putzing around indoors, vegging out, procrastinating; she had an arsenal of words for laziness.

Then the day would be ruined for me. It fell apart and once again it became impossible to forget where I had come from; impossible to forget that I was somewhere else now. There was no recovering.

Through the window I saw the kids she had been talking about, three boys and two girls, one of them beautiful. They were coming down the street in the late summer's glittering, to put it mildly, afternoon sun, the boys riding slow zigzags between the girls on cool BMX bikes and talking loudly among themselves. They laughed and nudged each other and seemed carefree. There was nothing I wanted more than to go out to them, maybe aside from being part of them. Most of all, I wanted to run out and join them wherever they were going. I would have talked like them, their language would have been mine and I wouldn't have been aware of the words forming in my mouth, or needed to concentrate to make the difficult "th" sound at the end of words, or felt ashamed every time I couldn't get it quite right. But I didn't go out there. That just wasn't how it worked anymore. As a five-year-old, maybe, or a ten-year-old,

you could walk right up to anyone at all and when you came home several hours later, exhausted and happy and your mouth full of things to tell people about, you would have made new friends.

Not anymore. Not as a thirteen-year-old. Not now that I no longer had any way to speak.

The phrases, the references, the subtle nuances, the ambiguous connotations and the absolutely honest pronouncements that could not be mistaken, overnight all of my local know-how, my security in knowing that my language would bolster me, the silly jokes and the dialects I could do, which would pepper my speech to the great amusement of my friends back in Forus, had been rendered useless outdoors. There was nothing I could say, I had been de-voiced. I could already speak English before we came here, but I lacked fine-motor precision in the new language, the subtle details. Worse, my mouth and vocal chords were stretched between two continents. The Norwegian words sat at the very back of my throat, slowly choking me. They were dissolving, decaying because they no longer served any purpose, running down my esophagus and leaving me with heartburn. The English language in all its fullness on the other hand sat on my tongue, tasting unaccustomed and floury, ready to tumble rampantly out of my mouth if I opened it. To try to gain the upper hand over it, I binged on such enormous quantities of American English, which would come back up in big belches. I lay motionless on the sofa in front of the TV for hours at a time letting myself be waterboarded by the voices and sentences because I thought I could purge myself that way and that it was the only solution, if at the same time I took care to gulp down and digest all the old language, force it through my system and be rid of it once and for all, because the stomach aches I got from walking around with a useless language were almost unbearable, especially in the evenings, and at night, and especially during the day and in the mornings, after those first few seconds when I woke up and realized where I still was and shouldn't be. I just wanted to feel alright again. I never thought I would feel alright again, and I wanted my parents to notice, to be painfully aware, I wanted to make them feel excruciating guilt, to hold them personally accountable for the misery they were subjecting us to and brutally punish them for their choices by suffering in the full glare of the public eye and to isolate myself, stop, shut myself down, cancel all life and all progress. I

implemented Stalin's order 227 in reverse: *Not a step forward!* I rejoiced in the tension that intensified in my mother and father every single time I refused to step through the doorway, even though I also hated sitting around inside, hated not having anywhere to go and hated myself for my stifling reluctance and childish rebellion that only left me increasingly isolated, until my sense of not having a single person outside my family to turn to took on such horrendous, shameful and claustrophobic proportions that it sometimes made it hard to breathe. I remember crouching down behind the window as the kids with the BMX bikes went by our house, afraid they would notice me and think there might be something wrong with me since I was inside at this time of the day, at this time of year. I feared my loneliness would be visible from the street and that it would become the subject of gossip. And that the neighbors would crowd around in front of our house chanting for me until I reluctantly came out to them, my arms outstretched to the sides, to let them witness the moment when the feeling of foreignness finally detonated with a crash sending shock waves over the ocean and capsizing ships and drawing a reporter from the local paper to come snap a blurry picture.

Each night I went to bed relieved that the day was over and exhausted to know another one waited at the far side of sleep. For a while my only motivation for getting up was knowing that the day would be over quicker if I kept moving. I tried not to look at the clock, hoping that the hours would pass faster that way; at times I would feel something that approximated happiness realizing that four hours had elapsed when I had feared it couldn't have been more than two. When it got dark out, I relaxed, knowing there wasn't anyone who could demand anything more of me that day. The evening was mine to do with as I pleased. I read a lot. I stared at the wall. I sat up in my room and read while I played (to death) the same Jane's Addiction album I had bought at the record store at Roosevelt Center one day when Mom took pity on me, or just found a sly way of getting me out of the house for a bit by telling me I could buy two CDs if I went shopping with her. I played the same song, "No One's Leaving," over and over again, loudly, until Mom had to take an aspirin and started making a show of sighing loudly during the brief pauses before I put it on again. *Ain't nobody leaaaaaviiing.* That was where it was at. I was sad and furious, I don't think she caught the lyrics. She was just waiting for me to get sick of it. I listened to

music and I read, and when I didn't feel like doing either anymore, I turned it off, set the book down and wrote. I wrote mostly words, disconnected words, but also sentences and longer things I could imagine saying to people I met, if I ever met any. Jokes, anecdotes, opening lines, words that could explain how I was doing. I wrote in Norwegian, and while I was busy doing that, I could also sort of hear my own voice through the language; there was something safe about it. Something to hold onto. I wrote *I'm not doing so well lately*. I wrote *I'm going to the dogs*. I wrote *we could share a kiss, we could be great together, but one day I'll be on my way*. Then I translated these into English to the best of my ability, hunting for equivalencies and connections, constructing a language based on what I needed to convey. I filled whole notebooks, and each time I hoped someone would come knock on my door, that some member of the family would come and see the effort I was making after all to become another person that we could all live with for the rest of our lives. But when someone finally did come, and it was usually my mother, whom I punished more harshly than anyone by denying her the affection and friendship we had shared ever since those weeks when she helped me use the bathroom, brush my teeth and wash myself after I was injured in Hue, and which had lasted until the day we moved; I punished her the worst because she needed me the most and she must have been just as lonely as I was, without anyone to lean on whenever Dad was away and he was almost always away. And I could see it in her, how sad it made her that I turned my back on her and everything about my body language communicated that we would never find our way back to each other again and that she could just forget about receiving any help at all from my side, now that she had seen to it that we wound up here. In trouble. Still, mostly she was the one who came upstairs to me, time and again, after one rejection more brutal and heartless than the previous one; she was the one standing in the doorway with clean laundry or something to eat or to ask if I didn't want to join her downstairs because *Twin Peaks* was starting soon and after all the two of us sort of watched that show together. She eyed me uncertainly and steeled herself so the doubt and fear of being dismissed yet again wouldn't show in her eyes. Then I would hide my notes, as if I'd been caught and didn't want to own up to my project, and I would follow her down to the living room where she would have gotten everything ready and put out a glass for each of us and two bowls of chips. And

while we sat there, my mom and I, next to each other, barricaded on the sofa with pillows and throw blankets and wine (soda for me) and potato chips and even during the theme song she would have already leaned forward in anticipation and would remain that way, her arms crossed and the glass she forgot to drink from, completely disengaged from everything around her as the episode rolled across the screen without our understanding much, but we still had an incredibly good time together and she seemed relieved to see that, if nothing else, I had enjoyed myself for that hour, whereas I was thinking: *If you only knew.* But you don't deserve to know that there's hope for me, none of you do. After evenings like that I went back up to my room afterward with a newfound ease, believing that things would work out. My fingers were itching to jot down something I had thought of while I sat in the living room and convert it into words that could be understood in this country. And each time the same thing would happen: I sat down at the desk next to my bed, browsed through my collection of words, pleased at how many there were now and how soon I would have enough, and then I constantly fell for the temptation of looking back at the very first words I had written down, first in Norwegian and then in English: *Ingen/No one.*

I knew no one. I had no one.

No one.

I loathed that word and I was that word, was no one, had no one. The Norwegian word was sharp and harsh: *ingen*. It was worse in English: *no one*, doubly unpleasant, a solid *no* followed by *one*, an abomination, making the loneliness even more visible, a diagnosis: *Have you been alone for some time? Completely alone? Right. Hmm. Well, I regret to have to inform you that the test results have proven to be positive and that unfortunately you have contracted NOONE, the chronic variety, it appears, advanced stage and incurable. We have seen an uptick in cases of this, there are a number of indicators that attempts to cure this via social contact have instead resulted in spreading the condition from patient to patient. It has begun to resemble an epidemic. Unfortunately in these cases remission is rare and unlikely, but who knows, with a little luck you may have a good six months ahead of you, possibly a year or more. There are examples of people with NOONE who have hung on for decade after decade before they've been brought to their knees. Yes, well, of course one can ask whether it's advisable to drag yourself out or if that will just prolong the suffering in the short term. I know this isn't what you want to hear, but I*

can't give you anything other than a library card and a video store gift card. These cases rarely end well, unfortunately, but I'm obligated by the state of New York to inform you of the prognosis as we see it. You will most likely die with NOONE metastasized throughout your whole body, you will be unrecognizable to your family, if you still have one. You will emit NOONE until they—and by they *I mean your next of kin or representatives from the government, depending on your wishes and what is available when the time comes—put on the lid and send you back where you came from. You can read more about the whole thing in this pamphlet from SGPN—The Support Group for People with NOONE. They don't have very many members. You'll have to make your own coffee and pull out your own chair, confide to an empty gymnasium. By the way, before you go: Unfortunately, feeling sorry for yourself is also a common side effect often observed in conjunction with NOONE, but, well, here's what I should have said: Stop by next week so we can, uh, take some, you know, tests.*

I was screaming inside by this point to find a way back, a way out, a solution, anything; sometimes I dreamt of coming down with some actual fatal condition, something that would make my parents stand solemnly by my bedside with their faces furrowed with worry and say: *I think it would be best if we went home.*

Dad: "Will that help?"

Mom: "We can only hope."

Once back home, I would quickly recover.

Home.

The most beautiful word in any language.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 2

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

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

Chapter 3

One week into the first semester of his years at Garden City High School, Max finds himself at the deep end of the high school swimming pool, as one out of two people to have chosen *advanced swimming* instead of *swimming for beginners*. Neither of them turn out to be more than fairly average swimmers, but they both – to Max's great surprise – prove to be great at quoting *Apocalypse Now*. The other one is Mordecai, who'll shortly become Max's best friend – a fairly secular Jewish guy with impeccable hair, great taste in films and music, and memberships in a number of school clubs.

They're on a new friendship high; watching films, listening to music, having endless conversations, discussing the workprint version of *Apocolypse Now* that is almost impossible to get hold of. They never talk about swimming outside the swimming pool,

and in the swimming pool they're doing ok at best. Though they don't ever win the races, the swimming hall is where Mordecai one day is asked out by Alison, one of the prettiest girls in school. And as they start going out, Mordecai and Max eventually drift apart.

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

Chapter 4

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

Chapter 5

As a kid, Max went to the theatre a lot with his mum, always playing a game of "*The Art of Not Throwing an Orange"*: Max would get to hold an orange, knowing that the illusion of the play would be broken had he thrown it – and thus, if not always old enough to fully appreciate the content of the play, he became aware of how fragile this illusion is. When Max's mum takes him to see *The Zoo Story* in the autumn of 1992, it's their first play together since they moved from Stavanger.

One night in December Max wakes up to several snowballs hitting his window. Outside he finds Mordecai, wanting to talk. He's still not in love with Alison, he confesses, even after all this time, and he talks about how hard it must be to be The Prettiest Girl, as everyone must eventually end up treating her like shit. Max still suggests that he should break up with her, and when he does so in January, he does it by writing and publishing a short story about her. Not a mean one, but an utterly revealing one. It earns him respect from some people, but turns way more against him, and leads to him being excluded from most of his clubs. Mordecai thus having way more spare time than

before, joins Max roaming around Garden City, having a ball. Mordecai even hangs out with Max's mum a bit, having a coffee with her before heading up to Max's room when he comes over, and sometimes joining them for an Off- or Off-Off-Broadway production. It is Max's mum who suggests that they audition for the school theatre program, and despite their skepticism towards school theatre members in general, they do audition, and they're both accepted.

Chapter 6

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

Chapter 7

March. Eventually Wohlman allows the school theatre members onto the stage, and he tells them that they are no longer human, assigning them an animal each. Hesitatingly, they start acting like their animals, but Max simply can't bring himself to pretend he's a polar bear. The furthest he's willing to go is to lay down flat, like a rug. As the task is repeated again and again, Max stays himself, fearing that he might get kicked out for it. One day they're all asked to be rhinoceroses, and it turns out that they are to do the absurdist play *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco. In this play, an entire village, one by one, willingly goes through a metamorphosis, becoming rhinoceroses – this, Wohlman tells them, is to question the human condition and the wish for conformity, and by that to question how nazism and fascism could gain the amount of support that it did. In the play, the character Bérenger is the only one who refuses the metamorphosis. Wohlman offers Max the part.

Chapter 8

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

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

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

FAIRFAX

(THRENODY FOR SEQUOIAS & UXO)

1990 - 1993

SYNOPSIS

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

Chapter 1

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

Chapter 2

April 30th, 1975. The Fall of Saigon. Owen pays close attention to the news, he goes in to San Francisco to get international papers they don't have in Fairfax. Martha grows tired of hearing about the war, so Owen stops telling her about it, but he doesn't stop reading. Millions of refugees are on the move, big numbers are being evacuated, far bigger numbers are being left behind. Hundreds of thousands dead. Millions wounded.

130,000 refugees from South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are granted permanent residency in the U.S. There are more to come.

Chapter 3

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

FIRE ISLAND

(LET'S HEAR IT FOR OLIVE OYL)

Summer 1993

(EXCERPT)

1

It was hot in an almost unreal way. People were walking around with their mouths open, gasping for breath and having a hard time concentrating for more than minutes at a time, even early in the morning the temperature was already nearing eighty and after two o'clock it was officially barbecuing season in the low nineties without a lick of wind; we vacationers fell into a communal torpor, our eyes bleary and sluggish, we wondered where the heat would end and what would happen the day the thermometer gave up, if it just kept getting hotter. It seemed plausible that all of Fire Island might eventually live up to its name, engulfed in a violent sea of flames. But we were among the lucky ones, the heat we lounged around in on the beaches and among the clusters of beach houses in Fair Harbor, where Mom and Dad had decided we would spend the summer of 1993, was nothing compared to the heatwave farther from shore on Long Island and in Manhattan, where people were boiling in their offices in temperatures around one hundred and ten and were understandably devoid of sympathy for those of us out on the coast.

Fire Island is just over thirty miles long, but only about 1,300 feet across at its widest. It was like vacationing on a straight line in the ocean. This barrier island is located off the south side of Long Island, just over a half hour drive from Garden City and a quick ferry ride from Bay Shore in the town of Islip and

they had picked it because it gave Dad a relatively short commute to and from JFK so that he could come and go as his schedule permitted. And, I have to add, because Mom and I had so adamantly resisted yet another plastic-vacation in Florida that he hadn't dared to grumble when Mom informed him that she had "made a few calls" and inquired about the possibility of renting a summer place out on Fire Island, more specifically in Fair Harbor, one of the sleepy villages on the island, which for the three summer months of the year experienced a population surge from a few families to well over a thousand tourists who brought along sun umbrellas and the keys to every single available beach house, safely stashed in their shorts.

I loved that place. It was the antithesis of Florida.

It must have resembled something of what my father had once wished for before he gave up on the idea and tried to pretend that those kinds of visions had never been a part of him, a small place with pleasant people everywhere you turned, where community spirit seemed strong, a secluded area covered with a tangle of shrubs and ticks, where you stuck your shovel in the dirt and raised vegetables in your allotted square meter (or could have done so); a place where cars were banned, devoid of asphalt, just transport routes in the sand for the maintenance crews and wooden boardwalks between the summer houses, which were all one-of-a-kind and varied a fair amount in how well maintained they were, surrounded by trees, bone dry bushes and sand, sand, sand everywhere, and people biking or pulling small wagons behind them, filled with supplies and tools to make minor repairs with. If there was a place in America the summer of 1993 where the zen peace hadn't broken yet, it must have been Fair Harbor. Even the birds chirped slowly and discretely so as not to disturb each other. Farther out, by Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines, the scene was totally different, there gay men splashed undisturbed in the pools at their bungalows or at the hotel on weekends, to the sounds of booming ghetto blasters, and looked forward to long evenings of partying at the many clubs where the DJs would keep things going as long as necessary. They found themselves in a well-deserved break from the storm raging around them, they were remaining survivors, the ones left over in an epidemic that despite increasing attention from the powers that be and universal treatment with AZT and ddC and ddI was constantly closing in and taking the lives of more and more of them. The noise

from these partiers never reached us. But we watched the same sunsets, from different beaches, and we knew of each other. And I would really have liked to come back here, year after year, the way so many of them farther east did, because there was no other place in the world quite like Fire Island; I would have been more than happy to stand next to Mom and argue that we did better here than anywhere else, I would gladly have lain next to her on the beach for years and watched people setting up a volleyball net only to realize that it was too hot to play and decide to lie back down on their towels instead; I wouldn't have protested against the work of walking back and forth on this island to make time pass. But that opportunity never came, Fire Island marked our last summer as a family. In the fall, everything would be different.

THE SAME CLOTHES everyday: a pair of dark blue shorts and an olive-green t-shirt, plus the Jesus sandals I had bought in Florida. And every evening I rinsed or washed my clothes and hung them up to dry on the porch, they would be dry the next morning. Mom hinted at regular intervals that she thought I was taking the life of leisure a little too literally and that I could stand to go to the trouble of opening the suitcase of clothes I had brought with me, if for no other reason than so that the other vacationers could at least stop having to feel like time was standing still and that every day was the same. But my simple summer outfit was my uniform. I was the guy no one could mistake. Each morning I pulled on the same clothes, pleased at how easy the summer was. Nothing to think about, nothing to worry about, just an unbroken series of days spent in the heat, a short stroll down to the beach to lie down and later swim and then a few hours of ambling among the summer houses in Fair Harbor, up to the dock and down again for one of many meals. Sometimes I brought a book and did a little reading. Usually I didn't bring anything with me, which is how I happened to end up chatting with quite a few of the summer visitors. They saw me amble by on the wooden boardwalks several times a day in my blue and green clothing, they heard the sounds of my sandals clop, clop, clopping as I approached and if I suddenly didn't show up one day, they always had to ask where I'd been and say that they thought maybe I'd left. *I'm here for almost the whole summer*, I replied then. *I'm not going anywhere*, I called to them where they stood in their tiny yards, grilling, I called up to their porches where they sat/lay in their folding beach

chairs with their beer bellies and wrinkles and saggy upper arms and turkey necks, because it was mostly retired people who noticed me, the ones who went down and swam so early that the sun had scarcely risen and then withdrew again long before it started to get crowded, people who had spent their summers here since the fifties and valued not having to go places to see people the whole time. They invited me over and I sat on their lawn chairs and hammocks or on their fence and accepted a glass of water here, a hot dog there, chatted, answered their questions, and when they asked what I did, I always answered that I was an actor or that I hoped to become one; I tested out that identity on them and it was always a hit, they all had opinions about that, either it made them relate the half-forgotten plot of a show they had seen ages ago or warn me about the pitfalls and financial insecurity of acting as a profession. *You need to have something to fall back on*, Mrs. Rogers always said when I sat with her and her husband on their porch, three streets down from our house, she had a brother-in-law who had performed in a play back home in New Haven and after that he moved straight away to Pennsylvania. The connection between those two events was unclear at best. She wore light weight floral dresses and an enormous hat. I was happy in its shade. Her husband, Edwin, had been on a boat at Iwo Jima and Okinawa during the war, but every time I asked him he stressed that he had never gone ashore. "I just saw the smoke from the deck and the soldiers when they came back. It was quite a sight. Both things. Then I sold car insurance. For forty years, Max. A respectable career, I was happy with it. You wouldn't believe how many things can go wrong with a car and how many factors play into calculating the insurance premium." Mrs. Rogers shook her head and brought out more drinks. "That's why we come here every summer," she said, "because there aren't any cars here. If there had been, there'd never be any end to his fussing about why this car or that car was a bad investment." "You have no idea how many things can go wrong with a car," Edwin repeated, "and how often it happens. If you can, buy a Volkswagen or a Volvo. Steer clear of American and French makes, you hear? The American ones never seem fully on the up and up and mechanics never seem to be able to figure out the French ones. I know what I'm talking about."

I helped Edwin stain their bungalow, it took us almost a whole week, not because the place was especially large, but because Mrs. Rogers kept insisting

that we take breaks and come into the safety of the shade with her, away from *those killer rays*. She equipped me with a set of Edwin's oversize pants and shirts so that I wouldn't ruin my own clothes while we worked and insisted, deaf to my objections, that I had to wear my hair in a ponytail (*stain and hair don't go together*, she said). I did as she instructed even though I looked like a fool standing there on the ladder, a skinny, younger version of her husband, swimming in his discarded clothes. I accepted it because I needed some company and I had nothing against giving them some. There was nowhere I needed to be. Plus, my mother was so excited to see me helping out like this. I made a point of not changing before I went home in the late afternoons, but rather strolled through Fair Harbor in those oversized clothes and was welcomed as a worker when I reached our summer house, dinner placed on the table before me, and permitted to smoke at the kitchen table after the meal if Dad was away. *This is what it's about,* she said, *generosity. Consideration for others.* I suppose she was also satisfied that I wasn't spending my days just hanging out napping and feeling bored, but there was no altruism. The real reason that I spent so much time with the paint brush at Mr. and Mrs. Rogers' was the two beers that were ritually served to me on the porch immediately following completion of the day's work. They must have thought I was older than I was, the Rogers, as many did at that time; maybe it was my height or my face, with the beginnings of stubble and relatively adult features, it may have been the way I talked. It could have been so many things or a combination of things, but sometimes people thought I was in my early twenties. We had some fun with that, Mom and I, the days we spent together on the beach, lying side by side each on our own towel, with my mom in the role of the adult woman while I played The Young Man, bringing her drinks and adjusting her sun umbrella, putting lotion on her back and making her laugh. She was a female casting of von Aschenbach, lying there, under the unsuspecting weekend visitors' bashful condemnation, taking long looks at me as I Tadzioed myself out into the water for a dip (what she was actually watching to see was if I was shivering in the cold water or having to maneuver between stinging jellyfish, either of which would be a clear indicator that she would just as soon not prefer to join me).

So, as the clock approached six in the evening, Mrs. Rogers would come out to Edwin and me with a chilled pilsner for each of us, wobbling on a tray

that she would carefully set on the little wooden table between the two chaise longues on the porch, and then we would call it a day, make ourselves comfortable and open the bottles. Mrs. Rogers herself rarely joined us, she mostly spent that time calling their daughter and grandchildren in Cleveland to hear the daily report on what they'd been up to, but she must have had eyes in the back of her head because she always came out again with a second beer for each of us as soon as we reached the bottom of the first one. Sitting there in the afternoon sun it always took us a little while to find something to talk about. We had discussed stain all day, so there wasn't any more to say about that; he didn't want to get into the war too much, and he'd only ever been to the theater once—as far as he could recall. A musical, he'd forgotten what it was called, but the occasion had been one of his early dates with the future Mrs. Rogers which had apparently been successful enough that he had never seen the need to take her to another one later on. And so, I usually let him talk about whatever he wanted to, in other words, car insurance.

"Naturally, you have all the factors related to the vehicle itself," Edwin said, "like how expensive the car is, how safe it is and what kind of ratings it received if the NHTSA and/or IIHS subjected it to crashworthiness testing, what it's being used for and how much you drive it, how likely it is to be stolen or not and if the model in question is on the annual list of the fifteen vehicles most likely to be stolen, and whether or not the car has a car alarm installed in it or not. Cadillacs and Fords and a number of the Hondas are stolen surprisingly often, while Mercedes, Subarus, Volvos and VWs are pretty much left alone. Don't ask me why, but that's how it is. And then there's the size of the car, a big car is generally considered safer than a small one, so the premium is lower, but the engine performance relative to the car's size also factors in here. A V4 will almost always cost less to insure than a V8. More horsepower means more dollars coming our way. And so on. But then there's all the other stuff that has to be taken into consideration, like the driver's age, sex—I'm sure you know that young men are statistically more likely to get into an accident than young women, but the opposite is true when it comes to older men and women. Married men are also involved in accidents less often than single men—especially if they also had an untarnished driving record before they got married. And then of course there's where you live. Whether you live in a safe

neighborhood or not, urban or rural, and what's your occupation? Doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers, salespeople, business owners and managers are considered high risk in the auto insurance industry due to their routinely high level of stress, a lot of overtime and not much sleep, not to mention frequent meetings to attend with the associated travel commitments. But did you know that architects are also considered particularly risky? And then at the other end we find scientists, nurses, pilots, accountants, teachers and artists, primarily because these are seen as detail-oriented professions, which in turn means that these car owners are more vigilant drivers. Statistically speaking. Teachers are actually the group that stands out the most when it comes to traffic safety. And a higher level of education corresponds with an increase in traffic safety. But of course it's not as simple as that. A doctor—if we assume that he or she earns a good living—might be more likely to end up in an accident than a teacher, but at the same time the probability is higher that the doctor will pay for the repair costs on his or her own without filing a claim with us. So, whom do we give the better rate? And what if the doctor takes the bus whereas the teacher drives everyday? What if the individual in question has children who also use the car? What if they have a long commute to work? You see? You have to learn to look at all the moving parts and search for systems, get to know people and understand who they are… do you have a car yourself?"

"No."

"That's the cheapest, of course."

We drank our two beers while inside the house Mrs. Rogers hung up and then came out to us wearing her apron and cleared away our bottles. She squinted up at the sky as she said: "I think it'll be a nice day tomorrow, too." Then I would get up and thank them, head home in my work clothes and with my head full of beer, with a faint buzz and the nascent sensation that if this was still my childhood I was in, there couldn't be very many days of it left, because it was flaking away under my sandals as I walked, the very last remnants of it, a markedly bittersweet sensation, not entirely good but every bit as magnetically dizzying. I tried to pinpoint the hearth at which this realization was kindled, but it escaped me the whole time; I walked home like a worker, that might be it, that I walked home after the end of the workday, in those strange, adult clothes; or how over the last six months the way people talked to me had changed, since we

started doing theater, Mordecai and I, that was a job, too, a place where we learned responsibility and the importance of giving it our all, we learned a completely different seriousness; Wohlman suddenly talked to me as if we were the same age, the way otherwise only my mother had ever done, and the teachers had expanded their vocabulary when they talked to me in the days after opening night, as if they had been holding me back and now could finally let loose all their words; or the Rogers and the other vacationers I talked to that summer on Fire Island, almost none of them asked me questions about my parents, as if they were no longer a significant part of the picture or because they assumed that I was here alone or with friends; or it could be this summer, this place in and of itself and that for the first time we weren't at the mercy of Dad's travel agency, but rather had selected our own destination and suddenly I was the one who knew how things worked, where you went to run the various errands, it was me greeting people in the streets and on the beaches while Dad shuffled along behind me; it could have been any of these things or maybe all of them together, I don't know, I only know that there was something in the air and that it frightened me and I couldn't face it fast enough, and soon, in a few days, Mordecai would be finished with summer camp and would come down here.

I walked into the summer house and sat down, I ate, Mom and I recounted our days. She finished faster than I did. I changed into my normal summer clothes, the normal shorts and the normal t-shirt. I went out again. With each step I got older.

MY CLOTHING regimen, on the other hand, was nothing compared to Dad's.

Mom and I had already been on Fire Island for almost three weeks whereas he had only spend a total of eight days here, and—with Ulrikke away on a trip to Mexico with friends—his days in Fair Harbor were far from a vacation for two. That suited us fine. Truth be told, it was almost a relief every time Dad got dressed and went to work, because when he was around he made an extravagant effort to maximize his utilization of his limited number of vacation days while he had the chance, without comprehending or considering that the world around him might think he was overdoing his relaxation project. Which is to say, Dad preferred to lie flat on his stomach on the lounge chair in the yard or on the beach from right after breakfast until it started to get dark. It resembled a

protest; we weren't sure if it was he was opposed to us or his work life. And he insisted on drinking out of the cartons so as to avoid unnecessary dishwashing. If he made dinner, he served it on paper plates with plastic utensils that snapped if you pushed on them even faintly too hard. But still, worst of all were the cut-off jeans shorts he incessantly strutted around in. At first I think he was sincerely proud at having made them. That was his first and only creation and he probably hoped for standing ovations for having taken the scissors into his own hands and demonstrated his creative abilities. Later on, irritation took over that we hadn't said anything and after that I suspect he wore them out of sheer spite because the complements had failed to materialize. He had made the shorts—if one could call them that—one evening in June by cutting the legs off of a pair of his worn-out pants, and either he had been distracted while he was doing it or he had just misunderstood the concept from the beginning, because the pockets hung down perilously far, dangling below the rest of the denim fabric, as Mom and I both silently shook our heads. All told, I worried a lot about those shorts, they were a sort of constant anxiety for me, especially if I was out in the neighborhood walking with him, or if he bent down to pick items up off the low shelves in the only store. Then I would be overcome by panic and needed to hurriedly avert my gaze before the image burned itself into my retinas, of his scrotum straining against the fabric of his underwear in a way that just couldn't have been very comfortable, or worse, if it was one of those days when he was feeling carefree and unencumbered enough to skip the underwear altogether or was planning on swimming and wanted therefore to wear as little as possible, the scrotum-*an-sich*, in all its hairy splendor, oozing out along his thigh, and only sheer luck or preternatural bodily control keeping one of the testicles from slipping out of captivity and achieving absolute freedom, for public contemplation. I just couldn't fathom or comprehend how he didn't notice this, or that he simply didn't care at all. That's what was so terrible, the indifference he showed made it impossible to resist thinking about this when we were together. I could stand next to him and see him squat down for something or other and think *surely you must feel that something is not right down there now*; I observed him as he leaned over the waist-high freezer counter to find the ice cream he was searching for, and as I watched the white frost mist would billow up toward his shorts and I waited for some sort of reaction as the bitingly cold

air took hold of him down there. But it never happened, he showed no sign of noticing, and maybe it was that, too, even more than the obstinacy he showed toward me and Mom, that he had this idée fixe—I would have almost said a Norwegian ambitiousness—that it was somehow a human right to allow one's scrotum freedom of movement when it was on vacation. I didn't dare say anything to him, the very thought of putting words to it disgusted me; I don't know if Mom had tried either, I don't think so. So we lived with it and laughed about it when he wasn't there, when I would parade through the living room with two apples in a clear plastic bread bag which I would let dangle out the bottom of my shorts until Mom blurted out *Ugh! Please!* and asked me to knock it off.

IT HAPPENED that I would go for long walks in the evenings, too, after we had finished dinner, when the temperature had dropped below the mid-eighties, after the retirees had turned in and everyone else was sitting out on their decks and porches and enjoying the summer night as they waited for their mosquito repellant to take effect. I heard people's radios, TVs and baseball games. I strolled between the beach houses, back and forth and over the hills, down Burma Road to the lighthouse, back and forth along the beaches, sometimes even all the way to the parking lots, where civilization began the moment the key went into the ignition. I didn't miss it. I walked and it was good to walk, good to be able to walk without thinking about anything at all, just breathing the fresh air that came in off the ocean with the evening breeze, before I even woke up the next morning that same air would become heavy and stale in our rooms, all day we would fight for the last vestiges of it, opening windows wide, hanging wet towels in front of table fans in the hopes that it would help if only for a few minutes.

Mostly Mom turned in early, she was very tired that summer, it wasn't uncommon for her to be asleep when I returned, slipping back into the living room. I often stayed up for a couple more hours, sprawled on the wicker sofa which was nowhere near long enough with its blue and white striped pillows as I surfed the channels looking for a movie or something other interesting thing to watch with the volume just barely turned on. A couple of nights when it was unbearably hot and stuffy inside, I went out yet again, climbed noiselessly onto

the roof, even though that was expressly forbidden in the binder of information the owner of the place had left us. I sat there and smoked with a view over all of Fair Harbor and the ocean. And to the east. If I stole a boat and set sail in that direction, sooner or later I would reach Norway. If it was still there. It was actually impossible to know anything for sure anymore. And it had been a long time since I'd heard anything from those parts. I was listening for a sign. There was silence from Norway. For all I knew, the country had been shut down, sold and packed up into boxes, labeled and shipped to China, and then everybody used the money they had made to go to Thailand.

Mom slept soundly as I tiptoed past her door, which stood ajar, on my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I stripped off my t-shirt, stuck my head under the shower and let the cold water run through my hair and over the back of my neck and shoulders. That was the only way to cool yourself down enough to be able to fall asleep. With my hair soaking wet, I dripped my way into my bedroom and lay down under the muggy sheet that clung to me within a few seconds and the hum of the neighbor's air conditioner working on max would drone me to sleep.

In the morning Dad was back again, maybe from Phoenix. I heard him set down his suitcase in the hall with a bang and immediately afterward the arguing was fully underway. It was one of those mornings. A morning with a bang. Mom was mad at him because he hadn't brought groceries home as agreed, at any rate that's how it started and there was no hope of keeping up from there, their arguing followed a crazy-eights logic that I doubt they fully understood themselves; they seized what arguments they could grab hold of and lobbed them at each other with a violent vigor; Dad said something about her demanding that he be home all the time and that he was the one in this household who brought in all the money, she accused him of not taking the lawnmower at our house in Garden City in for repairs like he'd promised, and—she would generally add—that was only one of the many promises he had broken; that made him yell at her that she only cared about appearances and that if she was going to run around tallying up his shortcomings this way, maybe he ought to leave for good, then we would all be happy, so why didn't she just write *that* down, and it kept going like that; I lay in bed listening to them and realized that it wouldn't be just another day at the beach for Mom and me, she was going

to stay inside all day, in protest or because she didn't want the neighbors to see that she'd been crying and have to explain to them what the fight had been about this time. As long as this was going on I lacked the heart to get out of bed and tried to concentrate on the heat of the morning sun coming through the sheer curtains. But I was listening to them the whole time and the few lulls that occurred were always the worst, because then I knew they were pacing around each other in circles looking for new and worse things they could bring themselves to say, something even more painful to hear, that would sting longer and have bigger consequences, and after one of those silences the name Owen Larsen was mentioned again. That name had popped up several times in recent months, when they were doing this kind of thing and yelling at each other from their trenches, I had no idea who he was, but I had begun to suspect something ages ago, because she said things like *yes, actually, I have seen him, in Manhattan*, and Dad's reaction left no doubt about it: he did not like that at all. But then suddenly she said, *you should see him, too, Svein! YOU'RE the one who ought to do it* and then obviously I didn't understand anything anymore. It's possible that Dad didn't either, because he grew absolutely silent out there, they were probably standing there staring at each other, thinking that they no longer liked what they saw, and in the end Mom was the one who broke the silence between them:

"Your balls are showing," she remarked indifferently. "No, you know what? It's not attractive. People are talking about you."

Then he walked right out into the yard and flopped down on his stomach on the lounge chair. He lay there for hours, until the stores were closed and it was too late to eat crow by going shopping as he had been asked to do to begin with. By then his shoulders and back were also so severely sunburned that Mom had been grudgingly forced to apply some soothing lotion, and for dinner we ate leftovers of whatever we had on hand and watched TV together without laughing, even though we thought the shows were funny.

THE HEATWAVE stuck around in the days that followed, and on one of the hottest mornings Mordecai finally arrived. I borrowed one of the bikes that came with our summer house and met him at the parking lot a little before three o'clock. He was standing there with his father who had driven him out from the airport and was wearing an enormous backpack.

"So, this is where your family is spending the summer?" Mr. Weintraub looked around at the island without seeming very impressed. Although he couldn't see much besides the lighthouse from there. Well, that and bushes. And sand. We had to walk almost two kilometers from the parking lot until we reached the first of the summer homes.

"That's right," I replied. "We've been here for a month already."

"Well," Mr. Weintraub said resignedly, "as long as you're having fun. You are having fun, right?"

"Absolutely."

"That's good. And your parents are getting to take a break?"

"Mom is, at least. Dad is working a lot. I'm supposed to tell you hello from them, by the way."

"How nice of them," he replied and then turned to Mordecai. "Stay out of the grasses and shrubs, OK? I don't want you coming home with Lyme's disease or poison ivy or something even worse. Your mother and I are going to the Hamptons on Saturday. You're sure you have the number out there?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"You *klutz*. Look… here." Mr. Weintraub pulled a small notebook out of his inner pocket and wrote down the number then ripped out the page and handed it to Mordecai. "And you'll call sometimes, right?"

"We don't have a phone at the house," I said.

"*Oy vey*." Mr. Weintraub wiped the sweat from his brow, wondering why everything had to be so darned difficult. "Well, there has to be a phone somewhere where a person could…"

"We can call from the store," I hurried to add. "Mom does it all the time."

"Good, well then that's that," Mr. Weintraub replied, seeming a touch reassured. He hugged Mordecai and politely shook my hand before getting back in the car and then sticking his head out the window.

"Have a good time, boys. And remember: no swimming on a full stomach!"

He started his engine and the Volvo spun away from us, back to the World, and Mordecai and I started walking down the path to Fair Harbor.

"My dad definitely ought to take some lessons from your mom," Mordecai moaned. "In how to take it easy and let people fend for themselves, I mean. He's like that all the time."

"He just wants to show that he cares about you. Nothing wrong with that."

"He treats me like a little kid, though."

That's because they're afraid of what you might do, I thought. But I said: "You want me to carry your backpack?"

Mordecai started unbuckling the waist strap to take it off.

"Hey, I only asked you to be polite! Um, you were supposed to say, *nah, that's OK, I've got it*."

"Oh, thanks anyways. But we could strap it onto the back of the bike, if you're going to push it anyway."

We hung out on the beach a lot the next few days, just sat and talked about the summer so far and spent a lot of time swimming. We thought we were better swimmers out here than we ever were in swimming pools. It was a shame we had ever stopped. It was definitely a choice. We both agreed on that. Mom took on a slightly different role after Mordecai came, was kind of a little more formal about things and she always came up with excuses that kept her from coming down to the beach until after we'd claimed a spot. We saw her coming and she must have seen us, but she would pretend to look around for us and then give up, find another place and get herself settled. Only then, a long time later, would she look in our direction and wave, before gesticulating with her arms in a way presumably meant to communicate that she didn't see the point in packing up all her things to come join us, and that she would be just fine where she was. I think she was really lonely on those days; she read a lot, she rarely swam. Dad hardly moved from the lounge chair in the yard up at the house. They didn't talk to each other much. He lay there waiting for fall.

On a couple of occasions, Mordecai and I biked all the way out to Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines to watch the gay men and lesbians and drag queens strutting around pouting; we spied on the guests at the fashionable Belvedere Hotel, which only permitted male guests, and wondered how many gay people there were in the world, if the number was increasing or decreasing or if there had simply always been the same amount. And in the evenings, after dinner with Mom, we would go out again, sit on the beach below the house with the boom box that was usually in my room. I had brought a stack of my CDs and I remember that we played the *Loveless* album a lot that summer even though I was the only one who liked it, and Blind Melon, of course; Mordecai had heard

Björk at Camp Wekeela in Maine and had bought her album at the airport. He said he was a changed man, that this could definitely be the beginning of a new era, no less. There were indications that music itself had only been warming up so far.

"She's Icelandic," Mordecai said passionately and then put on "Human Behavior." He played it three times in a row and then some of the others: "Come to Me," "Violent Happy," "The Anchor Song." Go figure. That last one sounded downright grumpy to my evidently untrained ears. But I liked the parts where she sometimes almost screamed, that was nice, it sounded so genuinely desperate.

"I had a buddy from Iceland," I said. "Before… when I lived in Norway. Andri."

"Have you ever been there?"

"To Iceland? Nah."

"I'd love to go there. We should do it someday, don't you think? Just go. That would be so cool."

"I don't know if there's very much to do there, you know? I think people pretty much stay home and watch the weather report."

"We could watch with them."

"Ah, but they do have a revolutionary chocolate," I tossed out.

"A what?"

"A chocolate. It's a joke. Andri used to spend every summer in Iceland and when he came back he was always the palest of us all, I mean, like totally see-through, right? So no one envied him, and we asked what he'd done for all those many weeks he'd been gone, he just shrugged and mumbled something about fishing and rain… so, well, to portray his homeland in a slightly better light, I assume, he started telling us about this chocolate he ate all the time when he was there, this kind that wasn't sold anywhere else in the whole world. Svefnlausar®, it was called. That means *sleepless*. He said it was called that because it contained so much sugar that you couldn't sleep for 48 hours after you ate it. But when he came back for the third year in a row without bringing any back with him, we stopped believing him. But he wouldn't back down, just claimed that it has been confiscated by customs, classified as speed or something like that."

"Sweffenloser," Mordecai tried to pronounce the name.

"*Svefnlausar*. For safety reasons they even printed the emergency room phone number on the inside of the wrapper."

I wondered what Andri was up to now, back on the streets of Forus. It was strange to think that music like this could come from the same place as him, it didn't really seem to fit. Had he heard of her, maybe he even knew her? Maybe that given him a social boost in Stavanger, made him more popular? Was he walking around talking about how he'd med Björk on one of his summer vacations, hung out with her in Reykjavik, staying up all night because of the chocolate? I had known him, used to know almost everything about him. I still remembered his phone number and the smell of the soap in his bathroom and how the runner rug in his front hall looked, but I no longer had any idea who he was or what he looked like, if he even lived in the same house and still hung out with Stig. Just as he had no idea that I was sitting with a guy on a beach, smoking cigarettes, listening to Icelandic music and talking about him. Once one of my best friends, now reduced to a funny anecdote. It was an unusually long walk home that day, hard to say if that was a good or bad thing.

"So, how was summer camp, really?" I asked Mordecai after a while. "Do you think it made you more Jewish this time?"

He stopped smoking and buried his cigarette in the sand.

"I decided to become an actor," he said. "For real. I figured that out up there, one day it simply clicked, just like that; we did one of those exercises where you're supposed to answer as if you were ten years in the future, you know, like, answer without thinking… that way your answer will reflect how you feel deep down inside. Well, someone asked what I did, and I just said it: *actor*. I lay awake that whole night thinking about it, why that had been my answer, if that's really what I wanted to do. And it just felt so right. This is the first thing I've ever really cared about, you know what I mean? I *want* this."

"That's the only job where you never need to be yourself. A whole career based on pretending that you know what you're doing."

"Exactly. Although there is one thing that's for sure, my parents have been picturing something completely different than that for me, they have my life planned out, no doubt about it. And my father, he won't consider anything an actual job if it doesn't involve numbers, he's going to freak out when I tell him. I think they're dreaming that I'll be the one to restore the family honor by

working at Lehman Brothers and stuff. But screw them, I'm not going down that same tunnel, no fucking way. I saw how *that* turned out. It's all or nothing."

"It's not going to be nothing."

"What about you? Do you ever think about what you're going to do, later?"

"Don't be surprised if you run into me on the subway on your way to an audition," I replied. "We may both be heading to the same place."

I explained how I had made the exact same decision and had already introduced myself to the Rogers and the other senior citizens in Fair Harbor as an actor, to sort of test the ice and see if it would hold.

"Let me get this right," Mordecai interrupted me part way through. "You *finally* manage to wriggle your way out of yet another Florida vacation and the first thing you do is seek out all the local old folks? So, tell me, do you have some kind of fetish or something?"

"They give me a half dollar if I clean their dentures for them. I walk around with a big bag full of fake teeth and rinse them down here on the beach."

"Yuck."

"Plus I get a dollar for every corn or bunion that I rubbed lotion into."

"Stop."

"Ten dollars if I emptied their catheters or bedpans."

"I mean it, knock it off!"

"They're nice, OK? And then they give me beer when I'm done."

"Well *that* changes things."

We went over to the north side of the island, popped over to the marina and ogled the boats moored there, deciding which of them we would buy ourselves someday when we had enough money to buy one. We would have houses here, too, on Fire Island, somewhere to run off to when theater season was over and we were left to being ourselves. We could have been swimmers, we would have reached the shore in time. We knew what we wanted to become, what we wanted to do with our lives, it was a tremendous relief. We wanted the same thing, too, that was an even bigger relief. But then it came again, like a wave, this vague feeling that we were standing on the threshold of something that was impossible to get a bird's eye view of the consequences of.

"You never told me how your father got fired," I said. We had each picked two boats, fishing boats, one more beat up than the next; we had simple taste in boats.

"But you've heard the rumors, I imagine, and must have settled on some opinion like everyone else."

"Maybe so."

He rubbed his face.

"To put it briefly? He was honest. They didn't value that. Honesty costs them clients. My father became too expensive for them. But I'm assuming that's not what you've heard."

"So, what's he doing now?"

"Apart from stewing in silent regret and waiting for a phone call to tell him he can come back in from the cold again, you mean? I'm not really sure, but it's some kind of investment thing. And he has a lot of meetings with people he knows at Goldman Sachs. If you need a loan, just let me know." Mordecai checked the time. He didn't say what it was.

"Oh, by the way, I met a girl at summer camp." He must have noticed my face stiffen a bit, because he immediately added, "Easy now, it's not what you think, she's just a friend."

I wasn't sure I believed that. I was picturing a whole nother Alison situation.

"Is she, you know, pretty?"

"Hmm…" he turned that over in his mind for a few seconds, "I haven't thought about it like that, she's twenty-three, she was one of the counselors. But, no, I suppose she's not The Most Beautiful Girl.

I was a little relieved to hear that, actually.

"What about One of The Most Beautiful?"

He sighed. "What does it matter? She's not girlfriend material, everyone doesn't need to be categorized. I just like her, that's all. How should I put this, she's… interesting; we spent a ton of time together, I could talk to her, and… I learned a lot from her. If I'm going to… do you know who Shelley Duvall is, she's actually a little like her. But not *The Shining*-Duvall, just to get that out there. In a different way, pre-Kubrick, if that's a thing. Gentler, sort of. Less

screaming and googly-eyed. But don't tell her that, you know… no one wants to look like Shelley Duvall."

"What about *Brewster McCloud*? 1970. She was actually very beautiful in that."

"Haven't seen it."

"It's true. You'd be surprised."

"Anyway, I guarantee you'll like Mischa."

"*Mischa*? That's her name? What kind of name is that? Is that some kind of Jewish thing?"

"I think it's Russian," Mordecai replied, "but…"

"Is she Russian?"

"Are you going to repeat everything I say, or what? She's from Poland. Or, she's Canadian, but her grandparents are Polish. Were Polish, I mean. They're dead. Citizenship expires at the grave. But that's not the point, she's seven years older than us so you can just—oh, right, I guess you're fond of the Elderly, so who knows? Like I said, she's just a friend. She was one of the camp counselors, she was the one who helped me realize that I wanted to become an actor. She's really cool. And smart. She paints."

"I stained a summer house this summer."

"She paints pictures, Max. She earns money. Very successful, too."

"What was she doing at summer camp, then?"

Mordecai grew frustrated.

"What is it with you, she was an employee, she taught there. Have you ever heard of bringing enjoyment to others? She worked there because she likes it, because she used to spend her summers there when she was a kid. You've never been to camp, so you have no idea what you're talking about."

"So, then there's nothing wrong with her?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, there definitely is. No doubt about it. But unlike us she doesn't go around dreaming about a career, she *has* one. And even better…"

"What?"

"She's on Fire Island."

"Right now?"

"Now. For a few weeks."

"Where?"

"Out by Leja Beach, Davis Park. Do you know where that is? This is the fourth summer she's renting a house out there, apparently she throws parties all the time. I promised that we'd stop by one night."

"It's a long way out there, must be at least ten miles, maybe more," I said.

"We'll just bike out there. No problem."

I thought that over for a few seconds.

"Fine. Let's go out there on Friday then."

"But what are we going to tell your parents?"

"What do you mean? They don't care. Not my mom, anyway."

"Oh my God, can I adopt them? My parents packed by backpack full of tick repellant."

"We're going to Davis Park to meet friends of yours from summer camp. It's no big deal."

"Awesome."

"It gets better: There's a guy who lives right down the street here, his porch looks like a liquor store. I know him, he sits out there and drinks all day, every day. We might be able to buy something from him."

"Even more awesome."

I reached over to the CD player and turned on *Loveless* again.

"That music makes me totally seasick," Mordecai said.

"That's the point," I replied.

The alcoholic I had mentioned was the person I had long since designated as my go-to-guy numero uno in situations just like this. He was one of the first people who started greeting me that summer in Fair Harbor, I think he might have been the very first one. His house was on the corner a few streets from ours, I saw him every time I passed through that intersection of the boardwalks; everyone must have seen him, he was hard to miss, they must have seen him and chosen not to notice him, because you could tell right away: This guy was not on vacation. He was a huge, burly guy who was about 50 years old and he always sat in the same place, the whole day, every day, every evening, sprawled in a chair on his porch with a bag full of beer on one side of him and a bag of empty bottles on the other, like a retired blue-collar worker who, out of old habit, was still keeping the production line going, moving the bottles from A to B by way of his throat. In and of itself this was as unimpressive as it was appealing, but

add to it point C which was that this guy at exceedingly regular and frequent intervals was forced to make the trek to the only store in Fair Harbor that sold alcohol—the only store at all—to stock up on his requisite bottle fodder (and, one can hope, a little food), ideally in a respectably mild state of intoxication so that he wouldn't be turned away from his mission or cause any nuisance worth mentioning to families and barefooted children in swimsuits with sun and sand in their hair wandering around looking for the ice cream section and the most luridly colored candy, and then, just as unseen as he journeyed from his house to the store, do the return trip with a very full wagon to his safe figurehead's position on his porch—all without it seeming like he'd budged an inch. And then there was also point D, the bottles of whiskey and vodka, etc. that had to be bought somewhere other than the store in Fair Harbor, providing fertile ground for the suspicion that in spite of everything he possessed a finely developed savvy for logistics and long-term planning and that he had laid up the necessary quantities needed to stay the course until the tourists had gone their way and made it possible for him once again to utilize his driver's license (a highly sought after privilege reserved only for year-round residents) and transport his next shipment securely back from the mainland.

The alcoholic didn't listen to the radio, he never sat in the sun, he didn't read newspapers. I don't even think he was bored. He drank. That was his line of work. He sat and drank, mostly beer, when the sun was up anyway. When it got dark the bigger bottles came out and I always detoured around his house then, the person who sat in that chair in the evenings was someone different, far less charming, clinically antisocial. He might yell, scream, to all of us who knew he was still there, but pretended like we didn't as we moved past in silence, shyly lurking in our own summer houses until we heard him slam his door and go to bed.

His days were better; mornings were his best time.

I could be gone for hours and when I came back, it was like the day had been on pause. He was still sitting in the same place. The only thing that had changed was the size of the bags. The left one had shrunk while the bag on the right was filled to the brim. He sat motionless, in worn jeans and what had at one time been a white shirt, in seventies sunglasses and a prophet's beard that covered the majority of his face which wasn't covered by his baseball hat with

the word *FURTHER* in red, aspirational letters. Only four of the times I passed him had he ever happened to make a sound. We were the only two people on all of Fire Island who didn't change our clothes.

"Hi, man," he said loudly to me from his porch, his voice dragging, the other day, the fourth time I passed him. "Where you headed?"

"Nowhere."

He took a big swig.

"I guess you're probably in a hurry then," he said. Then he put his bottle into the one bag and took a new one out of the other bag, opened it and seemed to completely forget about me, right up until he spotted me the next day, I was on my way home for dinner, that must mean it was late afternoon and that also meant that he didn't have long left before the difficult hours set in.

"So, you're still here? Well, I guess *nowhere* is the hardest place to find."

I couldn't think of any response to that.

He leaned forward in his chair.

"What's your name, man?"

"Max."

"Max Kansas," he proclaimed loudly. "Nice."

"Hansen. My name's Max Hansen."

"Swedish?"

"Norwegian."

He sat back hard in the chair, the fabric creaked. "Too bad. I've always been partial to Sweden. Tell me, Kansas, have you ever heard of a unicorn with AIDS? No? But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist, does it, hmm?"

"Certainly not."

"That's what I've always said, things are strange in general."

He invited me up onto his porch and that was the summer I wasn't scared of anything, so I sat down next to him in the hope that he'd offer me one of his bottles, but it turned out that he only had exactly enough for himself, at least he never asked if wanted any, not any of the times over the weeks that followed when I stopped by and patiently sat and listened to his monologues and answered the many odd questions he asked, he never offered. Never got out an extra chair for me either, I always sat on the porch, staring straight at that big

beer belly of his. But that was OK, that too, the daytime version of him was not at all bad to listen to.

"Do you live here?" I asked, studying the façade of his house, it was run-down at best. Ramshackle. He practically blended into it, like camouflage.

"Yup. For 22 years. I was in Paris before that, lived there with a gal." He thought that over for a while as he finished his current bottle. The minutes passed, apparently there was a lot to think about. "Right by the Bastille," he suddenly continued, as if there hadn't been any lag whatsoever, "have you been there? It's a beautiful place. Although nothing beats this place, in the winter. You should be here when it's completely deserted. Very few see that sun."

"What were you doing there?"

"In Paris, you mean? As little as possible. But I was good at what I did, I think."

"So then why did you move here?"

"Some places aren't for living in, Kansas. A few places are like hotels, you know what I mean?"

"Not really."

"Oh." Suddenly he looked disappointed. "I'd hoped you would."

I lit a cigarette and held the pack out to him, but he waved his empty hand in front of my face.

"No, no, no, not me. I quit smoking the day Reagan was shot. No more."

My conversations with the Alcoholic were like that, a whole string of questions and statements that didn't actually lead anywhere specific, he seemed mostly preoccupied with hearing his own voice and knowing that someone was listening to him, I suppose that's why most people steered clear of him, long since sick of going through meaningless ersatz conversations with him. That, plus his steadfast nightly tirades against everyone and everything. But I had plenty of time and had figured out that if you just took the time to wait until all his nonsense ran out of steam and didn't make any suggestions along the lines of "don't you think it would be a good idea to ease up on the drinking a bit," then a clearing in the jungle would open up and he would share about his family, whom he no longer had any contact with, about where he'd grown up and the time he'd spent in Paris. Then—even if he was drunk or heading steadily in that direction—he was completely coherent and intelligent, without a trace of his

drunkard's sentimentality and self-pity, but with things to say, and I think in many ways I liked sitting with him better than with the Rogers. He needed me more, too, he rarely talked to anyone. And the last time we talked to each other, he said:

"All the things I tell you, Kansas, everything we talk about, none of it is meant for anyone other than yourself. You got that? The consequences would be too great. If other people were meant to hear about this stuff, you'd have read about it in the papers."

He said it just exactly like that, I dare to claim that I remember it word for word. And so, I'm not going to tell you guys any more than I already have. The curtains fall here. I owe him that much, especially after what happened and what I did before it happened, if it hadn't already happened when I did it. Sorry, I'm trying to be clever here. At any rate, the time is more than ripe for a newspaper with only blank pages. But you guys would have liked him. You all would have liked him.

2

(...)

DAVIS PARK WASN'T hard to find. There was pretty much only one way to get there. It was far, though. We pedaled until we were sweaty and exhausted, along the rough, uneven sandy roads that only the park rangers were allowed to use for motorized vehicles on the rare occasions when they had to go out and repair something or other and we hardly ran into anyone walking either. In some places the sand was so deep that we were forced to get off our bikes and push them to the next village where we hopped back onto them and toiled tirelessly onward, with the beer and the whiskey clinking and rattling on the rack. We broiled under the sun in the endless expanse of no-man's-land between Ocean Beach and Cherry Grove, thinking that we were there the whole time; we took the Judy Garland Memorial Path east and didn't need to think twice to know who had given it *that* name; the path wound its way through the woods like a river, we definitely crossed over into Cambodia along the way, I was just waiting for someone to start throwing spears at us from the bank or for some anachronistic, French plantation to appear in front of us, but all signs of human activity had ceased, we were forced to toss down our bikes and take a break under a cluster of trees to recover while we each drank one of the beers. We seriously debated turning back and swore at ourselves for not having brought any water. We kept going through Cherry Grove without stopping, the sounds from hundreds of swimming pools around us and people getting ready for yet another evening, back out into the tangle of trees, we biked along the beach and into the woods yet again, only these woods never ended, growing steadily denser

and darker and we thought we would never get there, but then a bungalow came into view through the branches, a new path and several summer houses, then a whole village of them.

This was Davis Park.

Mordecai hadn't gotten the address from Mischa, any precise time, or a date for that matter, so we had nothing to go on. We were forced to use our ears to search for signs of life. It's hard to say how long we meandered back and forth with Mordecai muttering the whole time through his clenched teeth *it has to be here, it has to be here somewhere*, but it was long enough for several of the residents, who had been utterly indifferent to our presence at first, to suddenly start following us with neighborhood crime watch eyes, convinced that we had come here to rob them of everything from their money to their bedclothes. Finally, I forced Mordecai to narrow it down to five alternatives, and from that point there was only one thing to do.

"There," he said, pointing. "It's that house. Listen."

I listened. Music was coming from the house, but I wasn't so sure.

"It has to be that house," he said. "Let's knock."

It was the wrong house. The man who opened the door was wearing a maroon silk bathrobe and regarded us for a long time as a massive gray mutt licked his hand. He whispered something about it being too hot out and invited us to come in for some tea since we were here, he was just about to put on the kettle. We declined and backed our way to our bikes. It wasn't until the third try that Mordecai hit the mark, the door opened.

And there she was.

Just that sentence, broken up into its fundamental components: *There. She. Was.* A beautiful sentence. It's twenty years ago and I still catch myself thinking about the simplicity of it, that she was there, that she *was*, that she could just suddenly stand there existing, and with nothing more than this minimal effort on her part turn this event into the most important of all second only to my parents making the final decision to transplant us to America in the hopes of full compatibility between the continents, become the end station for the myriads of coincidences and accumulated connections that made it possible for her, in all simplicity, to be there. Lately I have often thought about how it would have been if she hadn't been there. Right then. Would I be living in Norway now if

she hadn't been there, if she hadn't gotten there until the next day, or had already been there and hadn't seen any reason to go back. But there she was. She had dark hair and a white Calvin and Hobbes t-shirt (addendum: Mischa told me in retrospect that immediately after she saw us she was embarrassed about this specific piece of clothing, since it was a kid's t-shirt she had originally bought in a second hand store in Toronto, basically as a joke, even though the point of it had been forgotten long ago and she just kept wearing it after that for the two simple reasons: that it was super comfy and especially because the tiger was colored in a really intense way that appealed to her, plus, when she was with people her own age it evoked distinctly nostalgic connotations of the previous decade that no one would dream of criticizing or looking down on her for highlighting, but which when encountering two teenagers in the mid-nineties at best (the way she saw it) sent pop.cult.ref. signals that were way too sarcastic and trendy and at worst broadcast a suspicious childishness on her part. Therefore, I am including this justification in her defense,), she stood leaning against the door frame in a slightly awkward, ungainly pose with her arms hanging straight down at her sides, wearing a dark gray skirt that aside from its length looked like the skirts my grandmother had worn to dress up for fancy occasions or government holidays. And she (Mischa) had bright blue sneakers on her feet. She crossed her arms and looked at us. Maybe it was because her sleeves were especially short, even for a t-shirt, and I was able to see half of her shoulders, but the first thought that struck me was that she had unusually long arms. Tan. Soft. The next was that she was incredibly beautiful. I thought. But then, of course, at one time I had also been told that I had *communist taste in women*. She looked like Shelley Duvall, that's how she looked, the way Shelley Duvall had looked in 1970, her best year, before the hysterical crying, before the hyperventilating and Kubrick, before the increasingly weird role choices and whatever else it was, maybe nature's course and unforeseen circumstances; before the big earthquake in California that made her go back home to Houston, give up acting to take care of her cats instead. Shelley Duvall in 1970. With her inscrutable smile, careening through the streets of Houston in a red Plymouth Road Runner in Robert Altman's *Brewster McCloud*, with yard-long eyelashes and those big eyes and the softest hair in Texas and not the slightest inkling that the movie was being filmed at all (Altman had discovered her in Houston, where she was selling

pictures her boyfriend painted, and invited her to read for a part in Brewster. She had never done any acting work before, she had no idea what he meant when he asked her to *read for the part* of Suzanne); her, with that narrow face and beanpole figure and that fascinating mouth with all those teeth, the red-striped t-shirt and the bad ideas; the scatterbrained flirting, bordering on childishly naïve, but calculating and dazzlingly intelligent underneath. Shelley Duvall anno 1970 or 1969 or somewhere in between, caught magically beautiful in the crossfire of two decades.

And Mischa.

Mischa.

Did I fall in love with her on the spot as she stood there leaning against the door frame? Did it really happen so fast? I don't know, don't remember, I don't think so, I think it was too much to take in at one time and that it wasn't until later that night, somewhere over the course of the night, that it crept up on me and grew, grew to reach fabulous proportions, and I just wanted to let my hands touch her and talk to her and listen to her and devour her and have her near me twenty-four hours a day, ideally even more. Love bordering on cannibalism, solidly rooted in insanity. But I remember all of these details, I can still remember the scent of her at that moment in time, even now, twenty years later, I can zoom in on her, see the shape of her fingertips, her fingers, how they looked, her arms, her upper arms, her skin; her knees, her legs; I remember the contours of her stomach and breasts inside her clothes, how she was standing, leaning slightly and the look of her shoulder blades when she turned around, her throat, how her hair followed the contours of her skull, dipping in at the nape of her neck and delineating the little bump at the back of her head that is usually more pronounced in men than women and that we learned (and have since never forgotten) was called the external occipital protuberance, aka the *bump of knowledge*, but that we also never understood the purpose of; her teeth, her nose, the mole in the crook of her right elbow (cubital fossa); her eyes; I had never seen a person come to life in front of me that way before, I had met girls I liked and kissed a couple of them, I had had crushes and it had blown over, but the first time I met Mischa was also the first time I became aware of what a human being really was, purely physically: a body, its physique and mobility, its anatomy.

And later the bracing experience of something as fundamental as holding her, of being allowed to simply do that.

Embracing her is what I miss most of all.

And her hair.

And her chin on my shoulder. And how warm she felt. And the way she would exhale, and finally relax with a seatbelt of arms fastened around her.

But most of all I remember that day because all of this still lay ahead of me.

Mischa opened her mouth. She had a deeper voice than I had expected.

"Mordecai, what are you doing here?" She seemed both confused and genuinely shocked, it took us half a second to realize that she hadn't been expecting us at all. I couldn't stop looking at her, I was staring. She looked back. I was almost sure that she saw me. I never wanted to leave this place.

"I… we," Mordecai fumbled, searching for the right words, equally confused. "That is, we're here for a visit…?"

"Oh, really?"

"…like I promised. You did say that… well, that I should come visit you."

She turned away from us for a brief instant and whispered something to another girl who had appeared in the hallway behind her. Then she came out on the front step and closed the door behind her.

"Mordecai," Mischa began, putting a long arm around his shoulders, "did you guys bike all the way out here from Fair Harbor?"

"Yes."

She smiled. I liked it. She had interesting teeth. But then she noticed the alcohol we'd brought with us and grew serious again.

"You guys brought beer? Look, you can't just show up like this. With… you know, with beer."

"I know that," Mordecai responded, but he didn't know that. That much was clear. What followed was even worse, I hardly recognized him as he groped for words with his voice breaking, he suddenly seemed so little, as if he almost didn't exist. "But you did say that I should come visit. So I thought…"

"I'm sorry," Mischa said. "I did say that, didn't I? But I didn't mean it like *that*. You know. It's… it's just surprising, that's all. But it's OK. I guess."

"Ah, right. Um, h-h-how did you mean it… then?" he managed to stammer.

She sighed. "I guess I don't know, really. To be totally honest, I didn't think you would come at all, after all it is really far to get out here. And then… I don't know, I guess I figured you would stop by during the day, you know, to visit, sort of like at camp. And that we would swim and hang out together on the beach." She looked at me again, this time I had no doubt, she held the gaze just a few seconds too long. "But it doesn't matter," she said. "I mean it. OK?" She put her arm around him again, I could see into her t-shirt through the arm hole, it was exactly like catching a glimpse behind the scenes at another human being.

Mordecai twisted free from her arm, aggressively.

"Screw it! Just screw it, OK? We're leaving."

"Mordecai, please…"

"What? What? What the fuck do you want, actually?"

Things were starting to go downhill. It was already devastating. Mordecai was on the verge of tears and I didn't really know what to do. But that's not true, I knew exceedingly well what I ought to do. I ought to take him with me and go, bike back to Fair Harbor where we could sit with Dad and have a perfectly adequate time. Or go down to the beach and drink the beer and pretend we were having a wonderful time. But I wanted to stay. There was nothing else I would have rather done. That was the problem. I wanted to pretend as if it was no big deal, so I opened a beer and sat down on the front steps. It seemed like a bad idea, like everything else I thought of.

Mischa stepped over to stand in front of me, her eyebrows raised.

"What about you?"

Those were the three first words she said to me. *What about you?* Ironically enough, much later, those would also be the last three.

"Yes, what about you?"

"How… I mean, how do you know Mordecai?"

"We're in the same class."

She was a little taken aback at that.

"*You're* Max?"

"Um-hmm."

"So… you're also sixteen?" she asked, dubiously.

"Afraid so."

"Doesn't look like it," she said, and I thought she sounded a little disappointed.

I dug around in the bag, pulled out another beer, held it out to her.

"Would you like one?"

"No, I don't think that…" she cut herself short and scratched her scalp for a moment. She studied me for a long time and then she sat down next to me, so close I could smell her. I had to swallow and stare at the ground for a few seconds. "Alright then. Better that I should drink it than you guys, I guess." She accepted it, she had lovely hands. "Thanks."

"Mordecai?" He didn't answer, had taken a seat on the bottom step and was staring ashamedly down toward the beach. I stuck a beer into his hand anyway and clinked my bottle against hers.

"So, you live here?" I asked to change the topic and buy time.

Mischa nodded. "But only for this summer. Normally I live in Brooklyn."

"Where in Brooklyn."

"Dumbo."

"Where's that?"

"Under Manhattan Bridge."

"What? You're homeless?" I said, surprised. "What do you do in the winter?"

She laughed. "It's not as bad as all that. DUMBO stands for *Down Under Manhattan Bridge Overpass*. That's just the name of the neighborhood, the bridge goes right over it. I have an apartment there. What about you, do you live in Garden City, like Mordecai?"

"I've been there for three years now."

"And before that?"

"Stavanger."

"Never heard of it, where's that?"

"A city on the southwestern coast of Norway."

"Wow, that's cool."

Cool. I lit a cigarette.

"Oh my God, what is it with you two, you smoke, too?!"

I held the pack out to her. "Would you like one?" I asked.

She nodded and took one.

"Gauloises, I have to say that. Don't you have parents?"

"Dad's watching TV. Mom's in Manhattan tonight. *Swan Lake* at Lincoln Center."

"Oh," she said then. "Damn, I would have liked to see that. Have you ever seen it?"

I took a sizeable swig and smoked half the cigarette.

"Well, that von Rothbart guy isn't so great, but Odette is cool."

"A boy who knows his ballet. You two are full of surprises."

Mordecai snorted dismissively and tossed his half-empty beer bottle down onto the grass in irritation. Mischa abandoned me and went to sit down next to him. I heard her talking to him softly.

"Hey, how are you doing?"

"Fine. I'm doing great, thanks." Then he turned to me: "Hey, Max, let's get out of here, eh?"

I didn't know what to say, so I kept my mouth shut and pretended I didn't exist.

"Hey, don't be like that," Mischa said, putting her arm around Mordecai again. "My dear."

"There's nothing going on out here anyway," he mumbled.

I think she felt guilty then, or something else happened, because she drank up her beer and tossed it just like Mordecai had done his.

"Ah, screw it. We're not at summer camp anymore, are we? You guys are coming in with me, OK?" She stood up and led the way in.

Mordecai didn't move, everything about him radiated his desperation to get out of here and go home, I had to physically drag him across the threshold with me in the direction Mischa had gone, while I convinced him that the only bigger defeat would be for us to get on our bikes and go home now with our tails between our legs. *Just one hour*, I said, *then we'll go. Two beers each and then we'll go. A little sip of the whiskey and then we'll get on our bikes and go.* I said everything I needed to say, I didn't mean a single word of it.

IT WAS THE END of the river, alright. We moseyed into the summer house and came into an oddly dark living room, at any rate that's how I remember it, that our eyes needed to adjust to the dimmed lighting and that the people sort of

stepped forward little by little. There were candles lit on the table and secretary desks and two floor lamps in one corner glowed in vain at 30 watts each. I also remember, quite clearly, that no one did anything other than give us a quick, skeptical glance and note our presence before they dove back into their debates as if our newsworthiness were long past and we were of no concern. Even I wasn't sure if it would be better for us to just turn around again and leave. But then I spotted Mischa, she was sitting with her legs in the lotus position in a big wing-back chair, talking intimately with the same girl we had seen in the doorway, as if she hadn't noticed that we were standing hesitantly in the room wondering what to do. But then she suddenly looked up, right at me, for a long time, and smiled in a way that made it necessary for me to find someplace to sit or lie down. I shoved Mordecai toward a decrepit sofa where it looked like we could squeeze in among the three other people, set the bag with our goods on the floor under the table and took out two beers. The other three people on the sofa adjusted their positions and complained under their breaths that it was starting to get crowded around here. Mordecai shrank like a turtle, making himself even smaller, squashing his knees together, parking his hands on his thighs and trying not to be a bother. But I, without thinking about it, unfurled as much as I needed to and closed my ears to the guy next to me who immediately took to grumbling about how little room he had and making a show of leaning forward with his entire torso every time he wanted to pick up his glass until he realized that no one felt sorry for him and gave up his one-man show.

But we were the youngest ones in the room by far, there was no escaping that, in this company we might as well have been holding rattles as beer in our hands, because among the ten or twelve people in the summer house that night, we were the only ones under twenty, most of them were more than ten years older than us and they all, boys and girls alike, appeared to have longer hair than me. Some of the guys also had impressive quantities of facial hair, and when I looked around it struck me that in many ways they looked like the people we wished we were and maybe would even become someday, but it was also clear that we had a ways to go before we got there and that these people would already have been us for a long time by then. The squished guy next to me warmed up after he spilled ashes on my pants while gesticulating spiritedly to the group and then apologized, to which I responded that it could only improve my

pants and then he asked me and Mordecai if we *dug* Pink Floyd, but we hemmed and hawed, for a long time, unsure if he genuinely meant it or if this was one of those questions where a positive answer would set off a chain reaction of derision and mockery, so we probably said no and he switched into falsetto, I recall, leapt up from the sofa and put on the last track of *Meddle*, loud, but we could hardly hear it anyway because he wriggled his way back into his seat and just kept talking about how important this album was, about the guitars and the vocals and the amps and what was incorrectly said to be the sound of a theramin and where and when and why the recording had been made and who had been responsible for what and the rumors about the twenty-three-minute-and-thirty-second-long closing number, "Echoes," which took up the entire flip-side and its ostensible correspondence in length and tonality and *mood* to the final crucial *Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite* segment in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and why it was so historically significant, this release specifically, this one song, *now listen*, he said but we couldn't listen because he kept blabbering on, *it's ingenious, isn't it ingenious, I think it's ingenious;* he said the words *Pink Floyd* so many times that it just became a sound in his throat, a touch of Tourette's, *pnkfld*, he had spittle at both corners of his mouth, we felt his breath wash over us every fifth second, but in one of those brief instants when the guy had to take a drink and there was oral silence from him, I looked over at Mischa, engaged in a confidential conversation, she was leaning back contentedly and stretching, those long, thin arms behind her head and her t-shirt had slid up a few inches from the top of her skirt and then the guy was back in my field of vision again, he loomed over Mordecai and me on the sofa, we nodded earnestly at his musical guidance, he could have been on the "$64,000 Question" with that song as his category, and I stuck my head down into the bag under the table, mostly to get a few seconds' break from his blathering and file what I had just seen in the wing-back chair into long term storage, and just as I grabbed two more beers from the bag, a bearded guy two seats down from me gave a shout.

"Hold it!" he yelled, and I didn't dare move a muscle. "That there was not a beer sound."

"What do you mean?" someone else asked.

"Turn off the music, right now." Someone got up and did as he instructed. "You there," he continued, clearly referring to me, even though I couldn't see anything other than people's feet. "Make that sound again."

I did as requested. The bottles in the bag clinked.

"Did you hear that?" he asked the crowd. "That is not beer."

I came back up again and set the whiskey on the table. He put his hands around it and caressed the bottle.

"Chivas Regal," he whispered reverently. "Twelve years old—in 1968. That was twenty-five years ago. Where did you guys get this?"

"We—"

"We stole it from an alcoholic," Mordecai quickly said, before I launched into a long-winded explanation that would have involved my father and JFK and some sort of off the cuff explanation of how someone from the lost and found had given him a forgotten bottle of liquor. Sometimes the truth is a good diversionary tactic.

"Well, at any rate, a gift from the gods. Welcome, boys!"

Things immediately became easier after that. I'll even go so far as to say that it became easy. We were invited into this community of curators and authors and artist colleagues of Mischa's, mostly from Canada, and a bunch of others that I couldn't really understand what they did, just that they were pleased with whatever it was that they did and we were indiscernibly transformed from teenagers, who made everyone queasy because we were out of place there, to actors, by way of questions like: *As an actor, don't you feel that,* and it was as if my mouth opened wider and wider, the words flew out of me and I wasn't afraid of anything, I told long stories about Norway and the people I had known there, about how the longing for the places I had known still sometimes came washing over me and left me dazed and exhausted, usually little things, details, a random smell in the springtime or when the first snow fell, or the stiff, brown grass late in the fall, how suddenly for a few seconds I might be in doubt about where I was, so much so that I could feel the confusion spreading through my body for the few seconds it took until I found my footing again; and I wasn't the only one, the Canadians had many of the same stories, they weren't at home either, they came from Quebec and Toronto, a couple all the way from Vancouver, they had lived in Brooklyn and Manhattan for five, ten, fifteen years and what

most of us had in common was that we had come from the suburbs. They talked about growing up on the outskirts of cities and how much they had hated that back then, always needing to rely on buses and cars and trains to get to where things were happening, how envious they had been of those who had grown up in the urban cores and how as adults they had realized that they were profoundly grateful for having been the kings of these tiny suburban kingdoms no tourists knew about and no one wrote about or made movies about, places created out of pragmatic financial considerations. They talked about they had owned the parks and dead-end streets and places where nothing happened, about BMX bikes and the picket fences and the overgrown footpaths along the train tracks where plastic bags and empty beer bottles piled up, about throwing water balloons at cars from the highway overpass, the unfailing feeling that spring was coming so people put away their heavy winter boots, and summer days when people sat in circles on the sidewalk or other random places, killing time, soccer fields lit with floodlights and lots where houses were going to be built but never were, about the girls and boys they remembered and how almost no one moved, you were born into the neighborhood and grew up with people who had been there from the start, you made do with the friends you could find within a five-house radius and what was perfect was that almost everyone moved away from there at the same time, they said, when we got too old to live there, a whole generation was swapped out, for some said the suburbs belong to the kids, and the teenagers, they're the ones who rule those places and transform the bleak neighborhoods and industrial areas and the boring middle class streets into hurricanes of drama with crazy crushes that take place on foot or by bike; but most of all the suburbs are about waiting, while life in the cities is life, life in the suburbs is planning, waiting for something to happen, things to start occurring any minute now, the experience of standing at the cusp of something important, how our lives would start to unfurl, bigger and bigger and wilder and more vivid and even more colorful, we were just waiting, bicycling around and around and around in these suburbs, a circle of light from the power substations in the evenings in April or September because there's nowhere to go and the playgrounds and schoolyards and parking lots in front of the shopping malls and the gas stations and the dilapidated parks that town hall doesn't care about become landmarks, national icons, like Mount Rushmore, Niagara Falls, and

only after you've moved away do you realize that the rest of the country has never even heard of it much less been impressed. And when you go back as a grownup, you can no longer understand what it was that made this specific place so unique; it just looks like any old suburb now.

I remember how Mordecai sat in silence and listened, there wasn't anything for him to say, nothing he could contribute, he was from the Upper East Side and hadn't needed to transform his surroundings into something they weren't. He had lived a block away from Central Park—the movie theaters, video arcades, skating rinks, the jam-packed toy stores: everything within reach. People everywhere you turned, not a single hour when it was just raining and there was nothing going on. Three years on Long Island wasn't enough to qualify him as a veteran of the burbs. It's actually a shame when you think about it, how quiet he was during this discussion. Because Mordecai definitely ended up missing Garden City far more than most people who longed to return to their old neighborhoods. And so, while we kept singing the songs about the places we had come from, Mordecai slipped away from me and into a dialog with a guy named Paul (*like McCartney in the Beatles, but without the talent and still alive*, he added), and they hit it off, Paul had weed and a peace pipe, an Indian he had met on one of his many trips had sold him this special blend, he explained in confidence. Over and over and again. An Indian with a plan, he would add each time, without our being able to catch the specific nature of the plan. Sometimes the "Indian" was a Native American from Arizona, other times from one of the indigenous peoples of Mexico or even a sentimental naked sadhu he had run into in Varanasi in the course of his travels through India, it was a little unclear, that part, exactly where he'd been and who he'd met, but the marijuana was potent, of that there was no doubt. And it went on like that, we drank, we talked, we smoked, we grew older and the others grew younger, we met in the middle; I danced like I hadn't done in years, with Mordecai, with Mischa, and at one point I discovered that Mordecai was gone and then suddenly grew scared, scared that I hadn't spent enough time talking to him in the last few hours and that he'd left, ridden his bike away on his own, but then he showed up again out nowhere, along with Paul, I saw them disappear into the kitchen to fetch some fresh bottles of wine, and when they passed me, Mordecai mumbled that they were going back down to the beach and if I needed him I could find him there

and Paul slipped me the Indian peace pipe on his way out and I didn't say no and I couldn't stop talking and I couldn't stop laughing and I couldn't stop dancing and I couldn't stop loving Fire Island and the next thing I remember I was lying on the floor, my arms and legs out to the sides and the room spinning slowly and comfortably at 33 1/3 speed with Mischa lying beside me, her head on my chest, and I asked her what she painted, actually just like that, in fact:

"Right now? Washing machines, mostly. I can show you sometime."

She turned her head, so she was looking straight at me.

"And you? So, you're going to be an actor?"

"You mean when I'm older?"

"That's not what I said. It seems like Mordecai has the same plans. Do you guys always do the same thing, or what? I heard you guys were both on the swim team and in drama together at school."

"Yup, we're going to merge, become one person. We're going to be bigger than Klaus Kinski."

She ran her hand over my hair.

"I'll still be able to tell you apart."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, you have nice sandals."

"I bought them in Florida, the only thing available. Everything else was sold out."

"Can I try them on?"

I kicked them off and finagled them into position on her bare feet. We looked at them for a while before she pulled her leg back over to herself.

"Sadly, my feet just weren't made for sandals. I wish they were. I'm doomed to remain a shoe girl."

"You don't even need feet," I said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Have you ever thought of how each person on this planet misses 99.999995% of what happens while they're alive. If you include everything that's going on everywhere in the world."

"Good thing you guys rode your bikes out here, then."

She scooted a little closer, her face came into view over my own, it just hung there for a few seconds before lowering over me. Then she kissed me.

Rather thoroughly. I could have described it fully, I could have frozen that image here and reviewed all the wonderful details, how long it lasted and how time sped up and slowed down at the same time, or I could have written about her mouth, and her tongue and the prolonged instant when I realized what she was doing. But I choose not to do that; I choose to let something remain mine alone.

Then it was over, she raised her head and looked at me.

"I just wanted to know what that was like," she said. "You don't taste like sixteen."

We were quiet for a long time after that and it was only then that I noticed that there weren't any other voices around us anymore and that the rest of the group had either left or gone to bed. On the other hand I saw the sun blazing in on the floor, a morning invasion. I wanted only to keep lying there, but I asked anyway.

"Do you know what time it is?" I said.

"No." She lifted my hand which was lying on her belly but found no watch.

"We're actually going to have to check the other one."

I maneuvered my other arm up over her head and felt a quick flash of panic when I saw that it was five thirty.

"Do you have go, or…?"

"I think so," I replied and then such a great calmness came over me. We were going to be too late getting home no matter what now, there wasn't anything we could do. We were where we were, and I was in the right place.

She rolled off me and got up. "But I'm going to play a song for you before you go, as you go," she said. "It's perfect for right now. In every way."

"What song is it?"

"Wait and hear. It's the best song in the world."

I got up and started looking for Mordecai. Luckily he was easy to find, he was sitting with that same girl on the front steps, right up close to each other, his hands gesticulating in big motions, that made the beer bottle he was holding look as if it were moving across the entire sky.

"We have to go," I said. "We need to get home. Now."

"Already?"

"It's almost six."

"That is a little late, yeah," he said calmly. "Or early. Depending on… things."

He said a lengthy farewell to the girl while I waited for Mischa on the top step. And then she stepped out the door and the morning lit up her face.

"Oh, the song!" she exclaimed. "Wait here." She disappeared and came back a half minute later, just in time for us both to be caught from behind by the first manic drums and the sharp guitars that crackled out of the stereo system at full blast in the living room behind us.

"Hüsker Dü," she yelled over the music. "'New Day Rising.' Isn't it amazing?"

And that's how that day began. That was exactly how it started, the morning rose out of the Atlantic Ocean in front of us, carried on the angry guitars and Bob Mould's vocals, which left me unsure whether he was singing in euphoria about what was starting or if it was in despair that the sun was moving along in its course and that it would eventually be over, and Mordecai slowly got up into a vertical position, wondering what the hell was going on here, and then stumbled off toward our bikes and I stood there until the song was over and Mischa disappeared again, coming back out with the CD she had just played, which she gave to me.

"I want you to have this," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Mm, you'll like it."

"Thanks," I replied, looking at the cover. The light on it was the same as in the water off Fire Island. I looked at the titles of the songs. "The Girl Who Lives on Heaven Hill," I said.

"Have a good ride home." She gave me a hug, and I liked that it lasted so long, that hug, it was as if it was put on pause partway through and then advanced frame by frame, so that all the nuances emerged. It must have lasted for more than a minute. We hugged each other tighter and tighter and I had time to smell her hair, her skin, time to feel that she was there, time to become so incredibly dizzy. And I had time to think of Mordecai who was surely standing there watching, thinking his own thoughts.

My memories of those ten miles home that morning, on the other hand, are foggy at best, but I have a recollection of the sun which continued to rise over

us and made the backs of our heads hot, and that we didn't talk about what had happened, but that Mordecai was in a weird mood and that there was a lot we could have said to each other that we didn't manage to get said, and then I remember that at one point, between two villages, we spotted a young whitetail deer standing still on the path a ways ahead of us and that we both slammed on our brakes at the same time and stood there staring hard at the animal for the long minutes that it looked back at us without moving; we were hypnotized by the sight and convince that it was a sign, just like the rings around the sun in *The Deer Hunter* had been, although I might have been the only one who thought that, and then we went the last remaining bit of the way home, tiptoed past the bedroom where my dad was snoring and possibly didn't suspect a thing, and we tumbled into my room, I got my clothes off and flung them on the floor, climbed into bed and, feeling dizzy, pulled the sheet over me in the roasting room, and Mordecai undressed next to me, then climbed into my bed instead of his own, and I remember that he lay down right up against me and that he felt hot, and I noticed that he had taken off his underwear; he put an arm around me and he said something didn't quite catch, it was actually very nice and maybe that's where the memory stops.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 3

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

Not until Max's mum take them out for burgers do they seem to regain their balance, and Max finally asks her about this Owen, whose name he's heard mentioned several times in his parents' rows. Owen is his uncle, his mum tells him – his dad's brother, who went to America as a young man, served in the Vietnam war, and only wrote home twice. Max's mum has met him – he lives in Manhattan. But she forbids them to discuss Owen in front of Max's dad. After going fishing with Max's dad (not mentioning Owen, but dropping heavy hints), a trip none of them enjoy as much as they would've wanted to, Max and Mordecai get caught in a tremendous downpour. Though already soaked, they seek shelter, and Max finally builds up his courage and tells Mordecai how he feels about Mischa. Mordecai says he's happy for him, and goes on to tell him what Max has yet not understood – that he likes boys, that he memorized the lines of *Apocolypse Now* in order to get to talk to Max in the first place, after overhearing him talking about the film; that when he pulled away from Max last year it was at the advice of his therapist, *to create room for reflection*. He says that he's not in love with him now, but that his parents could've saved a lot of money on that therapist – it simply made him realize that he did like boys, nothing to be done about it.

Later that night Max and Mordecai bring a bottle of wine down to the beach and they talk about Mischa and the girls and the boys and the future; they make plans and solve problems, they talk about how they'll visit Owen in the fall, of how Max's parents will leave each other.

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

Chapter 4

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

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

Chapter 5

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

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

Chapter 6

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

Mischa tells him about how it was growing up in Canada, how she missed out on the puppy love crushes most people have when they're fourteen, and how she later missed out on home parties and getting drunk and doing silly things. She never had the time – she was always training. What started off as gymnastics later turned into pole jumping. She was really good, good enough to be a star, she was told by her coach, and for years she did nothing else but push herself to be the best she could possibly be. But one day when she was 18, at a summit in Lille, France, she had had enough. Buying her

own ticket back to Canada, she up and left ("it's the nicest plane ride I've ever had, Max"), and on her return she applied to film school in Toronto, finally getting friends she could really talk to (but not a boyfriend, she replies when Max asks). A looped video montage of a fighting scene in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* gets her accepted to art school in Manhattan.

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

APTHORP

(CLOUD CUCKOO LAND)

Fragments 1978 - 1980

SYNOPSIS

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

Chapter 1

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

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

Seymour Hall turns out to be a huge, fairly terrifying man in his late forties, and he turns down Owen immediately. But Owen persists and Seymour gives in. So it starts: he plays for two hours every Saturday. Thrilled to be playing again, Owen thinks of his old

band mates (though one of them, Eric, is dead), and he can feel his old ambitions returning to him.

Chapter 2

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

When Owen suggests that Andy could join him for the new Coppola film, *Apocolypse Now*, Andy refuses with all possible subtlety and politeness. Owen ends up going alone, and though he had no problems with *The Deer Hunter*, this film makes him

extremely uncomfortable. Returning to the Apthorp pale and unwell he finds Seymour and Debbie fairly lightheaded, drinking wine, giving him plenty. Owen's head is spinning, and when Debbie leans over to kiss him, Seymour mouths that it is ok, and after even more wine Owen ends up in their bed.

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

LEAF BLOWER BLUES

(THE SPRAWL)

Fall 1993 - Summer 1995

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

keep it secret from her. “You can tell me everything, Max,” his mum says. “You can always tell me everything.”

Max’s dad, though, speaks of Max dating Mischa as a mistake and one night enters Max’s room and sits down for a chat. Max might or might not have replied that his father’s having an affair in L.A., he can’t remember. If he did, his father doesn’t reply – instead, he talks of the Vietnam war, of the late sixties, of how he met Max’s mum, by recruiting her to the Communist party. Max has heard the story plenty of times, he knows how it goes on: how they eventually were excluded from the Party as his dad started his job as a pilot (his mum still selling the Party newspaper for a few years); how their neighbors never the less kept seeing them as communists.

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

Chapter 3

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

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

Chapter 4

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

A few days before Max’s dad leaves, Mischa comes over for dinner. Due to her efforts they get through it, even though the air is heavy with the realization that whenever

they are saying things like ‘could you pass me the salad, please,’ it is for the last time as a family.

Chapter 5

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

Mischa doesn’t drive them back to Brooklyn, but continues to Manhattan. It turns out she’s looked into Owen’s address. There’s only one Owen Larsen on Upper West Side: in the Apthorp building on the corner of West End Avenue and 78th Street. Though he sees right through their made up stories of having an appointment with Mr. Larsen, the elderly Indian doorman lets them in, and Max suddenly finds himself face to face with the uncle he’s only known of for a couple of months. He looks nothing like Max expected him to – short, plump, rather resembling an accountant in a small firm from the Midwest rather than a war veteran. He clumsily greets them speaking partly in rusty Norwegian, partly in English, and invites them in. The big rooms are largely empty; they end up in the kitchen, which is the only room with enough furniture for all of them. Owen serves wine, they talk of sports (Owen likes to listen to old recordings of sports events, prefers to know the outfall of the game so that he can concentrate about the game itself), Max tells Owen about how his dad is still a pilot, but that he doesn’t speak to him much. Max is itching to ask about Vietnam, but it somehow feels impertinent. On his way out, he mentions it anyway.

Christmas. Max, Ulrikke and their mum don’t really know how to behave, they talk a little louder than they normally do at dinner as if to hide the fact that one guest is missing. Max is watching his dad’s favorite Christmas video (that he purposedly made sure his dad didn’t pack when he left) as Ulrikke knocks, and they share a weirdly nice Christmas moment, Ulrikke tells Max that their father is ok, though missing them all; Max tells Ulrikke about Owen. That’s not why she knocked, though – she came to tell him that she’s moving to Germany to study. Outside the winter service vehicles have replaced the leaf blowers.

Chapter 6

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

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

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

leaves. Max hesitates for a second – and then he plays *Krapp's Last Tape*, all according to plan, for a room filled with absent people.

Chapter 7

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

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

KPM

(FROM THE MIXED-UP FILES OF MR. OWEN LARSEN)

Fragments 1981 - 1992

SYNOPSIS

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

Chapter 1

September 1981. Owen considers writing home, but ends up not doing it, his drawers and pockets filled to the brim with unwritten letters. Spring 1982, Owen, Seymour, and Debbie hardly ever spend long nights drinking wine and listening to music anymore, the two latter have rows almost daily. Owen sees a few women, but doesn't fall in love; he attends baseball games, but doesn't really get the sport. 1983: Bad times for Weber Piano & Pianola Co.

One day in 1984, Seymour tells Owen that he and Debbie are moving to Chicago. With Debbie's parents gone, there's no reason for them to stay in New York. "But," Seymour says, as Owen thinks about how there's nothing he wants less than to move again, "you could stay here, of course."

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

Chapter 2

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

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

In a worn down building in Harlem Owen starts taking piano lessons three times a week. His teacher Solomon is a stout black man in his early seventies. He hasn't had a piano student for a while, blaming the rush for quick entertainment and distractions. Owen suspects that the worn cane standing in the corner might also have something to do with it.

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

Chapter 4

In September 88' he receives his first KPM album solely with material that he has composed: sound landscapes with a slightly 'artic' feel, and titles like "Trekking on Svalbard" and "Across Jotunheimen." It fees like a musical advertisement for a place

he'll never visit. Pleased, he listens through it a few times and mails a copy to his parents with a note: "Owen Larsen = Ove Hansen. All is well. Greetings, Owen." He does not include a return address on the envelope, leaving his whereabouts unknown to his parents.

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

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

[III]

UNTITLED NO.1

(INCIDENTS & ACCIDENTS, HINTS & ALLEGATIONS)

2001 - 2004

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

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

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

Mordecai finally calls. He's been "method acting" on set for a new film and hasn't been allowed to call. Max is frustrated by him but agrees to do Mordecai a favor and check on his Tribeca apartment. Being a kilometer away from the towers the streets are dusty with fragments of concrete scattered around. Mordecai's windows are covered in dirt though it's hard to say if it is due to terror or laziness. Apart from some moldy food in the fridge, everything seems fine, but Max finds three things that surprise him: four pictures of Mischa from the summer camp in 93' (kept in Mordecai's copy of *Heart of Darkness)*, a prospect for a house in Burbank, California, with a note from a real estate agent saying, "*What about this one? Call me*," and finally, approximately twenty neatly

stacked cardboard boxes, each marked with a date and an address. Max recognizes ten of them as addresses in Garden City. He realizes that they are tied to a series of break-ins that Mordecai was rumored to be connected to, where nothing of value had been stolen. True enough the boxes contain lip sticks, TV catalogues, car keys, newspapers, scissors, and Max's old swim cap.

(EXCERPT)

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.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 4

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

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

Someone knows someone who knows someone, and after two weeks two massive brown envelopes, containing what'll become the play *LAX*, arrive in Max's mailbox. It takes Max eight pages to call up the playwright.

Chapter 5

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

[1] Of Sonic Youth

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

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

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

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

LEAVES FROM THE DIARY OF IMPERIALISM

(FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. THE YEAR OF THE MONKEY)

1966 - 1970

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

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

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

One day in December he approaches a guy he's seen around, a poet called Jan Erik,[2] who introduces him to a guy named Per.[3] They discuss jazz, they discuss the Vietnam war. When Owen's home for Christmas his dad says that he's changed so much, it's almost as if he's become someone else. Owen takes it as a great compliment. The next summer they arrive at Owen's apartment in Oslo uninvited, his parents and his brother, staying for a whole week. Owen doesn't like it, though he's happy to see his brother again. Growing up, they were extremely close – whatever Owen did, Svein did as well, and even though Svein was four years younger, none of Owen's friends questioned it when he joined them for hikes and weekend trips. The brothers shared a bedroom, in the evenings Svein would sing them a psalm before they talked until they fell asleep.

---

[2] The Norwegian poet Jan Erik Vold

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

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

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

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

(EXCERPT)

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.

(END OF EXCERPT)

BURNING MEN

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

2005 - 2008

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

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

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

Chapter 2

Max is greeted by Mordecai's parents when he rings their bell in Garden City, they offer wine and awkward small talk as he waits for Mordecai, who eventually turns up in loose trousers and a tight blazer, looking a bit like Chaplin. They go out and start driving around in Mischa's old wreck of a car. Max is relieved to find that things haven't really changed between them. When they can't be bothered to walk about anymore, they sit down, drink cheap wine and catch up. Max gets to learn that Mordecai is what no film star can admit to being: he is, quite frankly, poor. He's done some good films and some less good films (himself always being brilliant), none of which have paid very well.

"We'll need to find you a project," Max says. "I've been thinking the same thing," Mordecai replies. His suggestion: "Us. This place."

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

(EXCERPT)

3

But. When all was said and done, after all the elaborate preparations, after the torment, a lot of it, for and against and for and against yet again, after the mental exercises in which he had prepared himself for what was to come using techniques he had read up on which allowed him to move around inside his brain's meagre representation of the landscape he had decided to set his extremely real feet down in one more time; after daily and nightly bouts of inner agitation, outer agitation, agitation everywhere and nighttime phone calls to various people to apologize that unfortunately he needed to back out and then new phone calls the next morning to the same individuals to let them know that he had changed his mind, again, and would now be coming after all; after filling out the visa application well in advance and undergoing a doctor's appointment for a routine check-up, albeit not of his own free will or the typical self-interest but because the tour guide had encouraged (read: instructed) everyone to undergo one; once his nascent awareness that he needed to go became stronger than the arguments to stay home, of which there were many, including a whole slew of good ones; once the decision had been made to go abroad for the first time since 1970, for the first time in thirty-six years, after packing and repacking, in and out, once a decision had been made on the requisite number of t-shirts, shirts, pants, shoes, even a pair of shorts, you know, just in case, even though he hadn't worn shorts since he was a kid and had not liked them at all when he had,

largely predicated on (although not limited to) that one episode in the late summer of 1952, involving the family's weekend outing to Liseberg Amusement Park when he was eight and Svein, his brother, was only four, and therefore essentially spent the summer half of the year in shorts *by default*, which made their mother's insistence—that Owen also wear shorts like his brother who, she pointed out, wasn't making a big fuss about it—all the more unreasonable, and how his reluctance to put on the despised garment and show all and sundry his skinny legs, which he was not at all fond of looking at in their almost sickly pallor, the response being an ultimatum from his mother that *no one* in the family, least of all himself, would get to see the inside of that amusement park unless he immediately sucked it up and changed, which in turn left him feeling burdened by guilt and angry and profoundly distressed as he listened to the joyous shouts of the adults and children riding the roller coaster just then and the bumper cars and all the other attractions in there, because he knew that even though no one had been as excited about this outing as he had, they had all been looking forward to it and had talked a lot of about beforehand, so he felt like he didn't have any choice but to comply, and yet, more than fifty years later his memory of that humiliation was crystal clear, of standing there beside their car and grudgingly pulling down his pants, then his underpants, because according to his mother no one wore both underpants and shorts, that would be like wearing both a belt and suspenders according to his father, and how primevally awful it was to stand there in that parking lot half-stripped, naked from the waist down for seconds that felt like years as he wriggled into the shorts his mother had bought specially for him for the occasion of this trip, and how the parking lot seemed to be teeming with other families with kids his own age and older, who were all laughing and pointing at his privates and not noticing his tears, oblivious to the shame welling up in him, and yet it was still no big deal compared to the pain he felt seven and a half hours later when they returned to their car, which had been baking in the sun all day long, after an outing that happily had turned out to be almost as nice as he had imagined and that had really helped distract his attention from his compulsory clothing change for long periods in an almost magical way, when he hurriedly got into his seat in the back of the car because his father thought they had been gone too long as it was and really wanted to get going to stick to the schedule he had gone to the trouble to

put together and type up neatly on the typewriter *for them*, and Owen felt it immediately, the pain that shot through him as the bare skin on his thighs came into contact with the all-black leather seats, scorching from the sun, and how he didn't dare make a sound because he was afraid he had already used up his whining quota for that day, and therefore stoically remained seated in agony, without a whisper, while he swore he could smell the pungent odor of charred flesh in his nostrils, and every time his father made a sudden turn, which because of the fundamental laws of gravity caused Owen to slide a little to the right or left in the backseat, the searing pain came back with renewed force, and that night he could hardly sleep and he lay completely still with his knees up to keep his thighs from coming into contact with the rough (it felt that way anyway) sheet, and when he changed in the locker room after P.E. class the following Monday, he couldn't keep the whole class from having an unimpeded view of the extensive, still bright red marks on the back of his thighs, and it took Paul—who in his own mind considered it a badge of honor to be regarded as the biggest bully in the school—less than thirty seconds to come up with the rumor that soon took on a life of its own throughout the entire schoolyard, among both boys and girls, and which was essentially that Owen had fallen asleep sitting in the bathroom, no doubt pooping, on the electrically heated toilet seat his family had special-ordered, acquired (Paul claimed) due to Owen's father's persistent problems with bleeding hemorrhoids which had necessitated the purchase of the gadget—this despite the fact that any half-sentient idiot realized that no seat like that existed on the open market, at least not *in those days*, as they say, not in Norway anyway (but impressively innovative thinking on the part of young Paul, son of a tinsmith, given that the first electrically heated toilet seat wasn't patented until August 1963, by Cyril Reginald Clayton in Essex [UK patent number 934209], marketed under the name *The Deluxete* and manufactured out of fiberglass with heating elements in the lid, activated by a mercury switch which would heat up the seat while the lid was down; ten years later it was improved with a deodorizing model [UK patent number 1260402] and given the name *Deodar*, later renamed and sold under the catchier name *Readywarm*, yet again improved by the Japanese firm Matsushita in the seventies and eighties into a whole industrial array of things you didn't think you needed and things you didn't need to know about), and which probably wouldn't have

provided any relief or made any difference whatsoever in the late summer of 1952, since the hemorrhoids, had Owen's father even had them to begin with, would have been located around or inside his anus and not on his thighs per se, and it was Owen's thighs that were burned, not his butt, but the rumors brooked no quarter for details or hairsplitting, they sooner enjoyed a preoccupation with the father's bulging rectal veins as God's way of punishing him for being a communist, which paved the way for the double-entendre nickname Red Rump (technically speaking *rødrauå* since this was all taking place in the Stavanger dialect of Norwegian), a nickname Owen had to put up with for the 5¾ years he still had left at the elementary school and which to his concern was passed on to his brother Svein when he began at the school and for the three years they both attended together they were *Red Rump* and *Little Red*, and even though Svein laughed about it and told his brother time and again that it didn't bother him and that the most important thing was that they had each other and that he would still have looked up to his big brother even if he *had* suffered burns caused by an electrically heated toilet seat, even if he had had bleeding hemorrhoids, or something else, something even worse, even so to this day Owen still felt incredibly guilty when he thought about it, which he avoided doing as much as he could, but was now forced to face *mano a mano*, as he prepared for his departure to Vietnam, as he packed a few pairs of shorts, even though he had absolutely no intention of starting to wear them again, apart from one or two days at most while he was *in country*, if the heat became too intense; after having paced in circles in his apartment the night before his departure, unable to sleep, after having left the apartment and gotten going (in spite of everything), this was what Uncle Owen said, at about eleven o'clock in the morning on Thursday, August 17, when he returned from his big trip, severely jetlagged, sitting with Mordecai and myself over an unusually early dinner at the Chinese restaurant across the street from Apthorp, just minutes after granting his confused consent to increase the number of inhabitants in our apartment for an unspecified length of time: that he had realized *down under* how he didn't have any unresolved issues regarding Vietnam after all. Per se. That the trip had been in vain. He had already been struck by the first indications even in Saigon, he said, possibly as early as the instant he stepped out onto the aluminum staircase they wheeled over to the body of the plane, or as he unpacked his suitcase in the

hotel in a part of the city he remembered he had been in before, and also recognized to some extent, even though it no longer resembled itself at all—none of the old bars or shops, but new kiosks selling cell phones and souvenirs to western war aficionados; definitely while he was in Saigon anyway, and the two days later, standing by a bare patch on a ridge, not far from the A Shau Valley, surrounded by dense jungle and other veterans, many of them flanked by their wives, unlike him, some with their children as well, in the middle of a huge, dark red patch of dirt where nothing had really grown since Firebase Bastogne was torn down at some point or other in the late seventies, with a rising sense of nausea and for some reason or other also a guilty conscience because he didn't feel anything even as the others nodded to each other, guilt-ridden, and hugged their spouses and children and cried openly at the thought of what they had gone through and sacrificed, both back then and in the years since, which made him think that they were Americans in a different way than he was, more American, characteristically American, and they were a part of this in a completely different way than he himself could ever be, he realized that there was no longer anything unresolved for him in this part of the world, no catharsis, no healing to search for or find, just this: *boredom*. So, he ran off. Owen Larsen left his traveling companions a short message, a complaint, really, *It wasn't meant*, he said, *to be like this*, he absolutely didn't want the others to feel that he wasn't taking them seriously along with what they had all, to varying degrees, experienced together, gone through, and survived here (most of them also had more than enough to process; whereas during the second world war their fathers had experienced on average forty days of combat with the enemy over the course of a year, the number stood at 240 for soldiers in Vietnam, aided by the widespread use of helicopters which made it possible to quickly move troops over large areas in a dizzyingly short amount of time) or that he didn't believe in the psychological value of returning to the spot. Or that it was due to fear and that A Shau had finally sent him into a panic attack he didn't want to own up to. But he couldn't stay here, he said. Couldn't, didn't want to, and most importantly of all: didn't need to be there. So, he left them, said that he wasn't going to join them for the rest, but that he would return to Saigon instead, to the hotel, pick up his suitcase, check out and go back to the U.S. They reluctantly let him go, over their protests, their attempts to explain the rashness of the situation

to him and how it wasn't a good idea at all to just wander off on his own like this, not in this area, not even after thirty-five years—they understand him, of course, that's not it. It's just, they repeat, *a really bad idea.* He goes anyway. He leaves A Shau behind, a man in his early sixties, an American who isn't an American, in green hiking pants and sturdy hiking boots, a jacket with practically positioned pockets and a small backpack; he takes a walk as if he were in Central Park and is just out for a stroll before dinner, effortless, easy; a white man. The terror and exhilaration over the absurd thing he did, waltzed away from his group in the Vietnamese wilderness this way, it's completely unheard of and it gives him an enormous sense of freedom. He slogs across a field and a stretch of grassland, grinning like a lunatic, finds a dirt road with tire tracks. He will head east. Forty years ago that would have meant death, he would have been dead already, one can imagine he would have been discovered the second he made his first footprint outside Bastogne. Someone would have noticed him, not let him get away. It's not like that anymore. The past has ceased. The few local inhabitants, most of them farmers, pay no attention to him, or they smile, wave and smile, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he, *people like him*, would come walking down this road alone, and that it didn't matter one way or the other. And it pretty clearly doesn't either. He's not the first. None of them are the first. The farmers have been here for millennia, other foreigners have passed through this area both before and after the wars, speaking French and Chinese and what with one thing and another people have long since stopped keeping track; people focus on their crops instead. He waves when they wave, when he notices out of the corner of his eye that they raise their hand in greeting, otherwise he looks another way, doesn't want to bother them, embarrass them or himself by demanding their attention. He just wants to get to Hue, to the airport outside the city, buy himself a ticket and fly back to Saigon. From there he will leave the country. He's not in a hurry. He walks east even though he knows that Hue is fifty kilometers away, he knows this road, it was also here in his time, it curves and winds between the scattered shacks and the small rice paddies, they cultivated the fields throughout the verdigris-green countryside and villages, one after the other; he walks for hours and it's hot and he walks and it's hot and it doesn't matter that it's hot or that he's walking, and a car drives up behind him, slows down and stops next to him, two farmers in a

pickup, they stare at him: "You want ride, mister?" "Hue," he says and they nod, smile, open the door for him, and the one who was sitting in the passenger's seat scoots over, squeezes up against the driver to make room for Owen. They drive along the river, the river is also green, a green country. "You G.I.?" the passenger asks, he has to repeat the question three times before Owen understands what he means and nods. "Very sad," the passenger says. "You know, beautiful country." "Very sad," Owen says. "You go home now?" Owen nods again. He gets a ticket to Saigon at the airport, to Ho Chi Minh City, he still can't get used to the name, it will always be Saigon in his mind. The last plane of the night, at around ten: He sits in the departures hall for three hours and watches other passengers come and go, Vietnamese people coming home and western tourists leaving, with fanny packs and souvenirs and American accents. Teenagers, arrogant boys and girls with white teeth and meticulous hairdos, from Europe, the U.S. and Australia, bumming around Asia for the third month and looking like it, all of them with the hope of finding themselves or something more interesting before they go back to their educations and jobs in offices where they will get to watch the amount of paper increase each week and dream of a corner office and a promotion and will no longer pay attention to the symbolic jewelry they were given by a girl or a boy in Da Nang, in Thailand, or on the beach in Goa, India—where they worked for a few weeks at one of the bars and took yoga classes in the morning and drugs at night and played with the idea of staying for good—the jewelry came undone a long time ago and fell off their necks and the only evidence they have that they even did travel, is the fading tribal tattoo on the back of their neck that they can only see if they have two mirrors handy. That and all the pictures they didn't take because it felt more important to live in the moment than to document one's doing of just that. He sits in the departures hall and watches them, glad he's not one of them, relieved not to be twenty anymore, relieved that the sixties are over. The seventies, too. He drinks beer on the flight, first one, then another, the man next to him—a Vietnamese businessman—sleeps, snores, mumbles in his sleep; it's been a long day for everyone. But Owen is awake, he's relaxed in his seat, his body is relaxed and limp and he looks out the airplane window, it's impossible to see the ground, all the contours are effaced by the night and the cloud cover, an overcast night. A periodic, green navigation light from the wingtip. Had he been

sitting on the other side of the cabin, that light would have been red, that makes it easier for other planes and people on the ground to tell which direction the plane is going. And the strobes, the anti-collision lights: a white pulse that shoots out of the wingtips at regular intervals, lights up the wing and the surroundings for a half second at a time. It creates sort of a sense of spaciousness; he is in motion. At the airport in Saigon he obtains new tickets, he's not up to staying, but he doesn't want to go to New York either. He doesn't know where he belongs anymore. He isn't an American, he's a counterfeit, an imposter. He needs to belong to a place. He studies the departure board: Malaysia Air to Kuala Lumpur, five-hour flight, onward to Australia. A whim. Reasonable tickets. To some extent. He doesn't have any connection to Australia. Not to there either. Another five hours onboard. The sun sets, again it's impossible for him to see the surroundings, sparsely populated areas take shape below him stretching out endlessly below. He lands in Perth in the dark. He's been to the country before, but not this city, it doesn't look like he imagined. He takes a taxi from the airport, doesn't know where he'll stay, he says that he'll make up his mind as he goes. "Couldn't we just drive in a little more slowly?" he asked the driver. "I want to take a little look around first." It's one o'clock at night, approaching one thirty. "Now? But it's pitch black out," the driver says, confused. "Still," Owen says, "I want to take a look around anyway." He's come here at random, he already knows it will ruin him, he can't afford it. A hotel and new plane tickets will have to be bought unless he returns to Saigon, and that will cost far more than he planned, he ought to go back to Vietnam; it seems unthinkable to go back there. He won't end up using his original plane reservations, American Airlines via Tokyo Narita back to New York. They'll sell his seat again or fly to Japan with the empty seat, it won't occur to any of the passengers that someone should have been sitting there. It's morning, it's morning in Australia and winter, sixteen degrees, a chilly wind. He stays at the Duxton Hotel, a nice hotel on St. George's Terrace, far fancier than he can afford. He can't afford to be here at all, he might as well live it up. He wants to stay at the Duxton. Two blocks from the Swan River, it takes him only minutes to stroll down there, from here he can walk along the river, to the clock tower by the little marina, maybe even farther, to Kings Park and the botanical garden, he likes it there. He goes there the next few days, to the café by the little pond in

the middle of the park, sits in a chair and does nothing. For two whole days he walks around in Kings Park and it is here that he is shaken by the realization that he might just as well settle down here, live here permanently. Cut out all the shit. Tabula rasa. He could have his things sent from New York, what little he needs, it's not much. He could ask Max to deal with it. He could live here, at one time that was the plan, too, he recalled, that he would do that, live here, in Perth, a vague plan, a solution: he and Eric and Agatha. Eric is dead, he doesn't know if Agatha is still alive, if she still lives here, she may not have lived here in forty years. She wouldn't recognize him. But he could have lived here. Belonged here. Right here. Nowhere else. Here. Here. Right here. Leave his shoes by the base of the coatrack when he came home, maybe down in Fremantle, that was probably where she lived, Agatha. He should have kept his shoes on. Right here. Not there or anywhere else, not back. But here. With a wife who looked like Eric's girlfriend. Agatha. Someone like her. Or her. He was in love with her. It wasn't until after Eric died that he really fell in love with her. In Fairfax, CA, too. He was with Martha because he didn't have Agatha. He could have lived here. With someone like her. Quite simply here. Here. He doesn't know if she's still alive or if she's still here. Right here. Owen and Agatha, he has clear memories of how she looked the first time, she came down the stairs of the hotel in Sydney, wearing a dress. He fell in love with her and it wasn't his fault. He left. He didn't go back. He could have gone back and stayed. Here. He's here now. Right here. It's not inconceivable that he could have lived here. Belonged here. Perth. An outpost with a million and a half people and thousands of kilometers of outback before Adelaide, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane. He's not going to stay in Perth. 67 Hope Street. That's where she lived, in the early seventies anyway, it's a miracle and a catastrophe that he still remembers that, he hardly knows her and he remembers her address the way he also unintentionally memorized old phone numbers and birthdays of people he no longer knows. He takes a bus to Fremantle, asks for directions and finds the street, a small, light blue, wooden house almost at the top of the hill, two windows facing the street, a microscopic vegetable garden and a bike leaning against the wall of the house under an Akubra hat hanging on a hook; he rings the bell. He has come from the other side of the earth, it's been almost forty years and he doesn't know her. He rings the bell. Waits. Rings again. It's a nice house, he likes that it's so small; he would

have liked to live here with her, in a house so small that he would never have lost sight of her. She could have been in the shower, he would have heard her. He could have stood in the kitchen and seen her in the living room, or in the bedroom where she was changing if they were planning to go out. He could have worked, she would have seen him working. Big houses are a lie, the walls lie. You don't buy yourself a big house, a big apartment, if you want to be together. You buy a big home if you don't want to have to see too much of each other. The happiest people still live in the worst houses: small rooms, a crooked floor, shabby furniture, a messy kitchen. This could have been his street, he would have walked along it every morning, up and then to the left, down a block to the bus stop, he would have taken the bus to work. He doesn't know where he would have worked, what he would have done. He could have done anything. And when he came home, she would have been waiting for him or he would have had time to start making dinner before she got home. She would have been loved. It's like a Harlequin romance, this. Housewife porn. Pathetic damn shit. A man opens the door, he's in his mid-thirties, only half dressed, thinning hair, with glasses and a newspaper in his hand, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth; he just woke up, even though it's nearing noon. He stares at Owen and when Owen speaks, he replies: "Never heard of her." Neither of them is surprised by this. Owen explains and the guy yawns, it's early for him. "Sorry." Before Owen gets the bus back to the hotel he walks to High Street, Market Street, he wants to see the downtown streets where she once lived. *This is where she shopped*, he thought, *she might have walked here, right here, these could have been her places*. He would have been happy here with her. This isn't where he's staying. He keeps staying at the hotel he can't afford to keep staying at. He spends his days sitting on benches and at cafes in the business district near the hotel, visits shops, he doesn't see her anywhere. She must be in her late fifties now, he's sure he would recognize her immediately. He walks to Northbridge, takes taxis, to Subiaco, Nedlands, Peppermint Grove, to Scarborough Beach and Cottesloe Beach, where shivering people walk their dogs and wait for summer; he checks out Burswood, Applecross, Bicton, South Perth, Victoria Park, Lathlain; nice suburbs, not so nice suburbs, he spends an hour or a few minutes in each of them: Rivervale, Ascot, Belmond, Redcliffe, Mount Lawley, Maylands, Darlington, Glen Forrest, Kalamunda, Rockingham, Mount Pleasant,

Rossmoyne, Joondalup, Shelley, Como, North, East, West Perth. "There are two hundred suburbs," the concierge at the hotel says and goes on to mark on the map the places he recommends hotel guests visit. Owen takes the boat out to Rottnest Island, searches for her among the quokkas. "You'll never get to them all, never be in the right place at the right time," the concierge said. In the evenings when he leaves the hotel and heads for the streets around Hay Street, he starts asking people on the street. "Agatha," he explains and gives them her old address in Fremantle. "I'd really like to get ahold of her," he says. "She's almost sixty," he says. "She was dating a friend of mine in the early seventies," he says. It doesn't change anything. He sees her all the time, he thinks he does; he thinks that's her walking down the sidewalk across the street in the morning, and later, in the afternoon, that that's her disappearing around the corner as the taxi he's in passes by and for a second he contemplates asking the driver to stop, so that he can run after her, catch up with her. But then he is just able to see that it's not her after all, only someone who looks similar, or doesn't even look similar, really, only the vaguest resemblance at best, like all people with the same hair color, or hair length, or posture—or maybe just the same shoes does it, an army of doppelgangers, a nation of copies and reproductions, a pathetic reminder that he was too late. It has become urgent to him to prove to himself that it can't be done. So he stays longer, a few more days, three days, walks less, sits more. He sticks to his spots: the café in Kings Park, the University of Western Australia campus, four hours on a bench on Hay Street. A steady stream of pedestrians passes him, none of them are his pedestrian; he examines them all, makes himself visible. He waits to be discovered and he doesn't want to be discovered; on the one hand the desire for the impossible, the hysterical unlikelihood that she will live here, in this city, and be out on this, on this same street as him, at exactly the same time that he's sitting here on a bench and waiting and that she will recognize him and leave everything she has; on the other hand: the fear that that's exactly what will happen. That it will be possible for entropy to decrease. Thus it comes as an enormous relief the morning he wakes up in his hotel room and makes the decision: *He will leave.* He has to go back, to the U.S., it's actually not a choice at all, he's out of money, the money has already brought him too far, he's been here too long, this needs to end now. There are limits to the financial ruin one can recover from. He has to get out of

here now. But in order to go back, now that he's facing the consequences of his actions, he now has to do something that goes against his very nature: He must hand over his credit card. He needs to give it to the concierge, who enters the name and the numbers off it, those decisive digits, into the airline's reservations page. He has to watch a return trip being ordered for him. He is an aging man, an American in his sixties who isn't an American, but in his sixties, and there is also a time when the easiest thing of all is too late to do anything with. He is sitting in a taxi on his way to the airport when this thought hits him, followed by another: He will never come back here either. And then: a plane ride. Thirty-one hours. First across Australia, to Melbourne, on over the vast ocean to Los Angeles. More than fourteen hours in the same seat. He sits by the window, sleeps, wakes; reads the same magazines over and over again, it passes the time; he's not in a hurry. He flies into the dawn, crosses the international dateline. As he walks around at LAX, dazed and exhausted, searching for the gate for the American Airlines flight that will take him the last leg across the U.S., it's four hours earlier than when he left Melbourne, still the same day, as if it won't release its hold on him. When he lands at JFK, he feels only relief, a calmness. A tremendous simplicity, everything has become simple. He's back, but not home. It is what it is. Everything has consequences. He doesn't live in a romance novel. He doesn't have bulging muscles. He has a gut, dandruff on his shoulders, bushy eyebrows. He has a touch of incontinence. If he wants to sleep with someone, he will most certainly be forced to pay for it; she will smell the bracing odor of drops of urine in his underwear as she undresses him (unless he also needs to undress himself, he doesn't know how these things go down, although it probably varies); she will most definitely demand a surcharge, up front, ask him to wash beforehand, keep her eyes closed for the entire session. She won't want to spend the night. He's not a charming grandfather that everyone wishes the best, he's just an aging man. Each day is a fresh opportunity to maintain an index file of his losses, his defeats. He won't be looking up the Vietnam veterans in Brooklyn again. That era is over.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

Max is embarrassed, but pleased to see him, and he joins them for drinks after, charming Max's mum (but, as Max points out to her, he lives in Connecticut). When Max

gets back home, he wakes up Mischa though he tries not to, her Shanghai tickets on the bedside table. He misses her. She's still there.

Chapter 5

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

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

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

LESSON IN THE ART OF FALLING

(DROP THE BOMB, EXTERMINATE THEM ALL)

1970 - 1971

(EXCERPT)

1

It looked more like a job than a war. Hard, manual labor. I was in my fourth month, I had become a laborer. *I will probably*, I though as I looked down at my hands, they had grown course, grimy, greasy from the work of maintaining and dealing with the cannons, *never play the piano again.* The thought was almost fascinating. I was among the oldest of the soldiers, seven or eight years older than the kids whose birthdays had been drawn in the military lottery to be sent here. I was 27, they called me *Old Man*. I had started to look like my father; for the first time in twenty years I identified with him. We both had blue collar jobs, each in our own place. He stood on the same factory floor he always had, at Rosenberg, day after day after day, the way I repeatedly found my unchanging, specific location as an NCO in battery B, second battalion, 11th field artillery regiment, with the 101st airborne division, stationed at Firebase Bastogne, more specifically in the first corps' tactical zone, grid YD 620095, map 6441-I, map series L7014, in the Thừa Thiên province, 20 km east of A Shau, 30 km west of Hue, in the middle of nothing and just as much in the middle of what was left of

the war. The difference was that while my dad and my brother were handing out pro-Soviet (but Mao-skeptical) and pro-Mao (but Soviet-skeptical) (respectively) pamphlets about workers' rights and were eyeing Norway's nascent oil industry's stance on labor unions and the receding sense of solidarity in Stavanger with well-founded concern, my mandate was to make one last, futile attempt to prevent socialism from spreading farther (or whatever we were there to do), in cooperation with the same Americans my father and brother must have detested so much. I didn't write any letters home.

I worked, I did the job I was assigned, and there's no getting away from it: I demonstrated a certain ability at effectively allowing it to rain shells over the terrain on those occasions when that was necessary. I think I liked mastering the logistics of the whole thing. Three artillery batteries, A, B and C; the first two with six howitzers in each, 105s and 155s, and a third with the powerful and imprecise, self-propelled 175 mm ones, arranged in a star formation to give the shells the greatest possible effect when they landed, and one in the middle—the main cannon—which fired illumination rounds if the field artillery was involved in actions at night; we couldn't see it ourselves, the targets were too far away for that, on the other side of the mountains, we ran indirect fire, but for those on the ground the illumination rounds went off at a height of a few hundred meters and lit up the night sky long enough to render death visible. We sent our shells at high angles or at long, flat angles, ten kilometers away if necessary, two or three of the biggest cannons could be used, we could have about thirty projectiles in the air before the first one hit the ground or exploded from hitting the tree canopy, the rice paddies, the mountainside and the swamps, the elephant grass, the hands and arms and faces of those who found themselves in the middle of the zone; high-explosive rounds, incendiary shells, chemicals, Willie Pete (white phosphorus), timed shells that went off when they were supposed to if FDC's compensatory calculations for wind, temperature and humidity had been done correctly. And the "beehive" shells, filled with eight thousand glowing flechettes that sounded like a hornet's nest when it came at you. One time we were even issued ear protection by a division general. But the only times we wore it was when we were trying to sleep, otherwise we just stuck our fingers in our ears; we needed to hear each other, hear the messages from the forward observers out in the field, passed on to us by fire direction control,

after that to the battery commander and then repeated through the whole chain of command to the people out in the jungle, shouted to the gunner, the assistant gunner, the loader and the powder-man, turn the howitzer in the right position, confirm the information from the battery chief while a cannoneer examined the sight and the rest of the team screwed the right fuze securely into the tip of the desired shells, place them in the copper casings, pushed the first one way into the barrel until the shell was locked into position, then the powder charge in the same way, one, two, three, four, five, six or all seven of them, depending on how far the shell would be fired; wait for the gunner to spin the handwheel to his right and adjust the deflection and elevation. We didn't think we were in a war while we were working. I didn't think about it. We were in a factory, shirtless in the heat and we were the masters of our own jobs, we adjusted, positioned and calculated, oiled the barrels and swabbed out the powder residue, maintained the hydraulics and kept up the pace, ten rounds per minute from each howitzer the first three minutes, then three rounds per minute for as long as necessary, and the recoil from the howitzers and the breech blocks that were knocked back, it was like diecasting, the smoking brass shells that fell out onto the ground when we reloaded were our meaningless production output.

But mostly nothing happened. Our arsenal rested, while waiting for the line company that was stationed to protect us to go on their next patrol or waiting to assist a Ranger team out on LRP patrol near A Shau. There were days when we prayed to higher powers for something to do with ourselves and responded with an hour-long Ragnarok bombardment to take out one poor solitary sniper someone called in. On a few days I'm also certain that our officers made up orders so that we were simply attacking the landscape itself to make the time pass and chip away at the tension. No one felt bad about that, the war was coming to an end, and if there was anything we were sure of, it was that no one was going to bother to ship all this ammunition back to the States. Under Nixon's Vietnamization campaign, with the U.S.'s stepping down of the war and the withdrawal of troops that was in full swing, an unpleasant silence had settled over Firebase Bastogne which was driving us crazy. The whole time we were hearing about how the South Vietnamese ARVN soldiers were going to take over more and more of the responsibility for the war on themselves and we couldn't do anything other than wait for it to be our turn to rotate back to the

World. Still, when you were sitting there in the bunker reading the same book for the umpteenth time and the scent of marijuana wafted gently over parts of the camp, there was no escaping the feeling that throwing time away felt doubly frustrating. It was becoming clear to everyone that the only reason we were still here was the Nixon administration's plan to withdraw slowly enough so as to not lose face. *Peace with Honor in Vietnam* had been the original intention, now reelection was what it said on the poster. And you didn't need to be a general to understand that the poor ARVN soldiers were never going to be able to acquire the expertise necessary to manage to continue the war on their own, not in the short time the U.S. Army was willing to give them anyway. Lam Son 719 and the invasion of Laos made that crystal clear at any rate. We were going to leave them in the lurch, Saigon was going to fall as soon as we were on the last helicopter out of here, we knew it. I think they must have known it themselves, too. But we didn't do anything about it. Over two hundred and sixty thousand soldiers had been sent back to the States so far; we were just waiting our turn, and in the meantime the question was eating away at us—if we would all end up back home in the end or if one of us would be the one whose name went on the plaque dedicated to the very last person to lose his life in this country?

For the next thirteen months I woke up to the same uncertainty; every night when I went to bed, I was surrounded by the same mountains. We woke up and went to sleep in days that were monotonous, frustrating copies of each other, surrounded by the same landscape no one trusted, the same tall mountains and hills, covered with meter-high elephant grass, bamboo and impenetrable rainforest, three layers of canopy that only let an exceedingly small amount of light penetrate all the way to the ground. It was always dark in these forests. Death and silence. Those were present everywhere, almost viscerally: in the trees and bushes, the plants, the crawling fauna, on the forest floor and along those discrete paths we would unexpectedly stumble across and then after that steer well clear of. And then this sense of being slowly suffocated by one's surroundings, by the hours and the days that just kept going, by the ancient forest that kept growing around our feet with our every cautious footstep, a simultaneously rotting and sprouting herbarium, with an uncomfortable feeling of being completely secluded from actual reality. We squinted into the

vegetation, hard to see more than thirty to fifty feet ahead of you through the overgrown vegetation, and often impossible to move more than 300 feet in an hour, as quietly and cautiously as one could, or using machetes if necessary. Best to follow the map here, the route, patrol the area you were assigned, slowly and methodically, without taking chances, no reason to do that so late in the war, but report your position as often as possible and never let go of the temporary reference points in the topography; a broken tree, a rock, a stream that splits into two. You studied the map and saw that you were six kilometers east of the A Shau Valley, all the way over on the Laotian border, relieved that today's patrol didn't lead you in there either. Whatever happened, no one in A Shau would be left behind. That's what was on people's lips: *The Meat Grinder*. There were rumors going around about that place, and they were not good rumors. Remote, isolated and hard to access, the whole floor of the valley had been altered into an inhospitable ghostly landscape after repeated missions that sprayed tons of Agent Orange from big tanks to clear the vegetation and make it impossible to grow anything, forcing both farmers and the enemy out of there. People talked of A Shau in hushed voices. Ever since the start of the war, it had been a place to avoid. Not even Special Forces had managed to stand their ground there. Not anyone else either, for that matter; every single attempt, ever-larger in scale and more desperate, on the part of the military to gain control over the valley had failed completely. They sent in hundreds of helicopters, battalion after battalion, whole regiments, aimed all available artillery at the valley, carpet bombed the area until it was unrecognizable and let napalm containers tumble to the ground from planes racing over. But it didn't matter. It was like different rules applied, logic could find no foothold here, it disintegrated in the humid climate, under the almost constant cloud layer. A Shau remained North Vietnam's territory. And even the LRRPs were reluctant to go in with their six-man recognizance teams. The Ho Chi Minh trail, the logistical corridor the NVA used to transport vast quantities of equipment, supplies and personnel from North Vietnam into the South, ran right through the almost 25-mile-long and scarcely a half mile wide valley; American patrols who waltzed in there risked being surprised by entire divisions, hidden in bunkers and tunnels in that infernal place; they risked not coming back at all. In retrospect we realized that it wasn't the logistics there was something wrong with, but the American army. In

its zeal for technology and its endless access to equipment and personnel they overlooked something: This was an ancient realm. The Vietnamese had two thousand years of experience in freedom fighting behind them. Time after time they had fought for themselves, against Chinese dynasties, against French colonialism, everyone with their own agenda and their own understanding of the map. The U.S., scarcely two hundred years old, was little other than a momentary nuisance, a clumsy teenager that would get sick of this sooner or later or use up its allowance; it was just a matter of waiting for us to want to leave and in the meantime carrying on as usual.

The same view every day, morning and night. The endless mountains. Green and brown. And the certainty of what was behind them.

But I was never out there, in those landscapes. Every single day I considered myself lucky that my job wasn't moving around out in the field, outside the perimeter, into the jungle, toward A Shau or other places. I think that's why the view bothered me this way; *I hadn't been there. Out there. Indian country*. I didn't know it. The landscape here, it scared the shit out of me, so different from the woods back in Norway and the treeless mountains I had enjoyed roaming around in, so I tried to look at it as little as possible, to ignore it, to regard it as a sort of backdrop that would be taken down sooner or later, packed up and transported away. All the same, now and then on an afternoon when the sun broke through the clouds in that magical hour, through the monsoon rains, when the light sort of shone directly down on Bastogne for a second and reflected off the artillery and the dust and the barren, red dirt and made the grass outside the base glow in the most incredible way, and the mountains were almost obliterated by the glory of the sky, then Vietnam was suddenly a chillingly beautiful country. Then I could see it. I had never seen anything like it; none of us had. Most of the guys had hardly ever left the U.S. before, some of them had never even left their home states. They came from Des Moines and Charlotte, Houston and Mobile and all those places, farmers and laborers, hillbillies and college students from other towns and villages I'd never heard of, that no one had ever heard of; they came from a different America, far removed from everything I knew. Under other circumstances we probably wouldn't have met at all, never gotten to know each other, and if we had we wouldn't have managed to spend even a single hour together. But here

we were, forced to endure as a community in which there gradually arose a sort of, I don't know, understanding. Can we say that really happened? A mutual understanding? I don't know of any better way to say it. We would never experience anything like it again. We sat there on our sandbags, on the howitzers as they stood at ease or we stood bolt upright, with our hands at out sides, almost paralyzed by the sight that surrounded us. None of us said a word then. Cigarettes were lit, heavy helmets taken off and a reverence fell over us. Some of the guys took pictures. A super-8 camera swept over our faces and some of the guys made faces, waved. For a few minutes it was almost like being home again, those final minutes before our parents called to us to come back in and we reluctantly trundled home, with our pants dirty and scrapes on our arms, to soft sheets and questions about how our day had been, and our long, convoluted answered to that very question.

But then came the darkness. The sun would set, and abruptly the day would disappear before us; we were left behind, blind in the Vietnamese night, and we didn't like it. Only those two lights by the helipad and up by the CP revealed that we were at Bastogne, and with the exception of nights when we turned on the powerful search lights and ran them slowly over the countryside, it was like being on an island, surrounded by absolute nothingness; an eerie feeling that we had stepped into the underworld. The noises were amplified in the blackness as well. We heard the cicadas through the mild spring rain and sat completely still and listened down in our bunkers, or under rain ponchos at our watch stations, peering into the pitch darkness with those useless night vision devices and with one eye on our watches to make sure we didn't stay on watch duty a second longer than necessary.

If the view of the mountains was disagreeable during the daytime, the nights were practically unbearable. Twelve-hour-long stretches of nothing before the first light of morning pulled itself over the horizon. Many of us hoped for a nighttime call from a desperate Ranger team or someone else who had run into trouble out there, so that we could fire up the artillery and drown out the silence for a while and bring in a little light from the muzzles as they coughed out shells. But mostly it just stayed calm. We waited, every night, for yet another morning; we pinned our hopes on the many magnetic, acoustic and seismic sensors dropped into the jungle from planes, that they would pick up any potential

movement in our direction so it would show up on our equipment, and that the fields of claymore mines and barbed wire that surrounded the camp—and farther out on the perimeter: Bangalore torpedoes and white phosphorus mortars—would make sure that no one got too close. Not until it was light out anyway. Because night was not our time. The night belonged to the Vietnamese. When they came, they came at night, they called on centuries of experience and knowledge of the area and the certainty that we wouldn't have air support until the sun came up. We had all heard reports of NVA soldiers who cautiously crept into mine fields and clipped holes in the barbed wire, who carefully turned the claymores around to face us so that when we pushed the detonators we would be the ones being hit by thousands of steel balls, and members of the Vietcong who took the time to help, dug long tunnels in under the bases so they could be attacked from within. It could happen, we didn't discuss it that much, not directly and openly, but there wasn't anyone at Bastogne who didn't know the story about the battle at the outposts in Dien Bien Phu that had cost France the war in '54, or the long siege of Khe Sanh. And Firebase Ripcord. Less than thirty kilometers northwest of us. Just over a year earlier the 101st airborne division had fought for more than four months against entire NVA divisions, dug in on four hilltops, getting closer and closer to the base the whole time. Seventy-four soldiers were killed, six times that were injured. Under intense bombardment the survivors had finally surrendered Ripcord and been evacuated by air. B-52s carpet bombed the abandoned camp and leveled the remains, until there was no trace of it left. After Ripcord, Bastogne was an obvious target, located between A Shau and Hue, close to QL 547, the main road that the NVA had been using ever since the Tet Offensive. We were sticking our necks out. And sooner or later they were going to come. All we could hope for was that by that time *we* wouldn't be there anymore.

If we'd had better officers, maybe we wouldn't have taken it all so seriously; I'm sure we would have slept better in 1967 than we were sleeping in the spring of 1971. With the war on the wane and the share of negative attention steadily increasing with regards to growing drug use, racism, military insubordination and violence against officers, the hordes of career military had long since stopped extending their service periods. They found other, more attractive places to

make themselves useful back home, and as a result of that the quick-trained *shake 'n' bake* officers and NCOs who came straight from West Point and similar places were overrepresented among those who were charged with leading soldiers who were almost exclusively involuntarily enlisted men who had been forced to ship out to Vietnam. I had been here since December myself, and in this new reality I was already considered a veteran in this revolving door of a conflict. Far from majors and generals, it was more like no one came out to Bastogne to take our dangerous lack of enthusiasm seriously, far less to make sure we were following the uniform codes to the letter and make us quit strutting around shirtless in the intense heat and humidity or stop painting obscenities on the howitzer barrels. They could have at least come out and seen that there was every reason in the world to take the rat population seriously.

They came out at night.

Enormous, weighing more than a pound, hunting for American food rations and able to find their way to them just by smell from miles away no matter how clean we kept our bunkers. Glistening, swarming and unstoppable; their scratching claws made us dream about them, and when we woke up the dreams were real. You'd turn on your flashlight and find yourself staring into a dozen red eyes, they crawled over our legs, chests, they'd craw over your face if you weren't careful; we were forced to sleep in hammocks. They learned how to climb. There were periods when it seems as if FB Bastogne consisted of nothing else, when the look-out in the tower couldn't bear to look at the camp area with the night scope, but rather allowed the blessing of ignorance to prevail. We set up traps, we put out poison, we prayed silently to higher powers for a flutist to come lure them (or us) into the mountains for good.

Just as quickly as they had come, they would also disappear at regular intervals, almost to a one. It was a mystery. Relieved, we could once again focus on the boredom and dread of a nighttime attack. And then they would come back again, even more than before. Myriad footprints on the ground in the morning. The infantrymen smirked at us for the way we obsessively kept track of the number and frequency of the rodents, we were sitting under a tarp for a few minutes of blessed shade from the sun when three NCOs from the 101st came by and overheard our discussion, they said: "*Sounds like you guys have problems coming up with real problems. Get away from the comfort, away from your cooks and*

beds and showers and prosperity, and you'll get to see some real fuckery out in the bushes. Snakes. Spiders. Venomous millipedes. There's tigers out there," they said, "*and leopards; the stench of unburied bodies attracts them and from then on, they permanently change their diets.*" We blew that off, tall tales and unfounded rumors, we protested, created by the need for a mythology that distinguished their existence from ours, those of us living our lives on the safe side of the cannons. One of them put out his cigarette and walked off for a few minutes. He came back, calmly placed a stack of newspaper clippings on the sandbag in front of us. I leaned over and studied the first one:

QUANG TRI, VIETNAM – A man-eating tiger was killed by members of a small Marine patrol Monday, after the 400-pound cat attacked a 3rd Reconnaissance Bn. Marine in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam.

The Marine who was attacked is listed in satisfactory condition at a military hospital in at Quang Tri. Identification is being withheld pending notification of the next of kin.

The six-man recon team was on an observation mission near Fire Support Base Alpine, six miles east of the Laotian border, when it encountered the tiger. The team had completed its mission and was waiting to be heli-lifted from the area, when the incident occurred. Bad weather conditions had prevented immediate pick up and the team had posted a two-man radio watch while the others settled down to sleep.

The tiger struck silently and swiftly.

"Suddenly I heard somebody scream," said Pfc. Thomas E. Shainline, "and then somebody else was yelling, 'It's a tiger! It's a tiger!'"

Pfc. Roy Regan, who had been sleeping next to the attacked Marine recalled, "I jumped up and saw the tiger on my partner. All I could think about was to get the tiger away from him. I jumped at the tiger and the cat jerked his head and jumped into a bomb crater 10 yards away, still holding his prey."

The Marines quickly followed the tiger to the bomb crater and opened fire on the attacking beast. They could not be sure which one of them actually killed the tiger since they all fired at it. Once hit, the tiger released his prey and the attacked Marine staggered out of the bomb crater.

"He looked dazed and asked what had happened," recalled Pfc. Maurice M. Howell.

The injured Marine was given first aid treatment and a CH-46 helicopter arrived shortly thereafter to pick up the injured Marine, the rest of the team and the now dead tiger. The

injured Marine was rushed to the 3rd Medical Bn. Hospital at Quang Tri, suffering from lacerations and bites on the neck.

The tiger, measuring nine feet from head to tail, was transported to the 3rd Reconnaissance Bn. Headquarters.

The incident took place about 10 miles south of the demilitarized zone near the spot where a young Marine was slain by a man-eating tiger Nov. 12.

And the next one:

QUANG TRI, VIETNAM – PFC Francis Baldino from Ashland, PA, was killed by a tiger during an ambush patrol on November 14.

The patrol leader told investigators that he was only three paces ahead of Baldino – a radio operator – when he heard a low growl and a scream. When he turned around, Baldino was gone, he said.

Baldino's body was found the next morning under some bushes. Other patrols were sent into the area and saw two tigers, but were unable to get a shot at them. (Pacific Stars & Stripes, December 5, 1968)

And the next one:

(VIETNAM) Soldier from Clark County killed – not by Vietcong, but by a tiger. Pfc. Gerald R. Olmsted, 21, of Camas was out on a night reconnaissance patrol at the time. Army officials said the soldier died of injuries suffered during the tiger attack last Friday. He was serving with Company A, 3rd Battalion, 8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division. Olmstead, whose parents are deceased, is survived by seven sisters and a brother. (The Columbian, Vancouver, WA, January 14, 1969)

The other clippings all described similar incidents: "*300-Pound Tiger Charged Marines North of Da Nang," "Curiosity Cost the Cat All Nine Lives and Netted the 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Reconnaissance Patrol an Attractive Tiger Pelt," "Corporal Spent Two Weeks in the Hospital Following Tiger Attack," "Secured Himself a Souvenir Paw After Surprise Encounter with Tiger," "Soldier Injured by Tiger Near A Shau."*

The last part of the stack consisted of pictures, various groups of soldiers preserved for posterity beside their trophies. Their faces all looked serious, I thought they looked shocked. I passed the stack around, and one by one the rest of the gang from Battery A silently flipped though the clippings and pictures. There wasn't anything else for us to say. They already knew that we had tremendous respect for the work they did outside Bastogne, and we also knew that for the most part that respect was mutual, even though that was rarely said

out loud. Maybe we deserved it, too, we were the ones standing by at any hour of the day, ready with artillery if necessary. We protected them and they protected us. But this? Fuck, no one ought to be forced to go out there under conditions like this.

After that afternoon we kept our mouths shut about the rats and pretended like we didn't care anymore. But we continue to pay attention, in secret. Our aversion did not subside, and when we were alone, we compared notes, we sat in our bunker and went through our observations, their frequency, and the intervals between the invasions gradually began to stand out as vaguely regular. That made us even more intent on figuring it out. We kept track of deliveries to Bastogne, wrote down the menu that was served, observed trash routines for the various units and experimented with new traps; we hung netting around our dug-in bunkers so we could sleep in peace. All in all I don't think we spent our time in between firings on the rat question because it was an enormous problem for us—the infantrymen were right, there were bigger problems lurking on the other side of the barbed wire fence. I think that's actually why we were doing it, because it was something to do, something tangible, something that distracted us from the fact that we were in one of the most exposed locations in the whole country and from the thought that every day that passed without anything happening probably also meant that we had moved one day closer to the moment it would hit.

AND THEN: ONE NIGHT I woke up suddenly, there was a figure in the middle of the room. The person was standing stock still, I could only just make out their contours, but there was someone there, a tall figure, there was no doubt about that. Or was there? I slowly let my eyes adjust to the dark and looked around: The other four were sleeping, hadn't noticed anything. What was it that woke me up? A sound? Or just a feeling that something wasn't right? I looked at the figure again, it didn't move. So maybe it was nothing, sometimes it happened that one of us woke up like that, I had heard awful stories from people in the bush who had woken up from a non-existent hand clutching their neck and squeezing, or soldiers who had been seen running from their nighttime post screaming that everyone was dead, only to realize that they had been suffering from jungle dreams. And I was just about to close my eyes again when

the figure in the doorway moved, enough that I rolled down onto the floor, grabbed my rifle and fumbled for the safety on the weapon. The figure slowly turned toward me.

"Shhh… it's just me, Mire," he whispered. "We need to talk."

Furious, I threw my helmet at him and screamed, "What the fuck is wrong with you? I almost shot you!" The commotion woke up the others, and in a flash four disgruntled heads looked up out of their hammocks, shining their flashlights on us.

"What are you guys doing?"

Oddly enough, Mire kept whispering: "I think you guys ought to hear this, OK? The rats always come from the north, right? There's always more of them here in you guys' place than over at our place by A Battery, right?"

"So?" I replied.

"In the beginning, they showed up once a month, at the beginning of the month, right? But lately the intervals have gotten shorter, first three weeks, then two weeks, then three weeks again. About the same number each time."

I still wasn't following.

"They're not coming on their own, not with that kind of regularity. I think the NVA is leading them to us."

Along with Mire, we hurried down to the CP and laid out the case. I don't know what I'd been expecting, maybe vigorous head shaking, but people were woken up, messages passed up through the chain of command and before we knew it, we were standing with the same soldiers from the 101st who had laughed at us a few weeks earlier and explaining what we'd figured out. You could see it in them, the irritation in their faces at having been pulled into this nonsense, several of them rolled their eyes. But at the crack of dawn they sent out three teams to look into it and when they came back a few hours later, their mood had changed completely. A thousand feet north of Bastogne, one team had found about twenty empty wooden cases with little trapdoors down at the bottom in the corner. And in the middle of the security zone in front of the camp, on a slope in the middle of our claymore mines, they found a plastic pipe, half buried and camouflaged with sand, exactly big enough for a rat to pass through. Unsurprisingly, the other end of that same pipe was found just inside the base, concealed between a couple of sandbags.

For the next few days we were all on high alert. We didn't remove the pipe, but the engineers completely sealed it off and secured it and then the security perimeter was reinforced with all the devilry we could put around it. The artillery was put on high gear, several times a day, at random times we received permission to shoot H&I missions—more or less random bombardment of likely positions, access routes and gathering locations where the NVA might conceivably be located. Reports of the findings at FB Bastogne undoubtedly went right up to the division level, and no one was talking about tigers anymore; we were hunting for rats around the clock. Several infantry patrols were also sent out, with regularity and in steadily larger circles, plus we were visited by an LRRP team from Camp Eagle who spent five days in the jungle around us searching for traces of the enemy.

But they didn't find anything.

No one came back to send any more rats through to us. No more crates showed up out there either, and there weren't any signs of movement, on the whole it was uncomfortably quiet and rumors started to spread that the pipe might have been put there by the people who built Bastogne in '68. The base had later been shut down, only to be reopened in August the year after that by other units from the 101st, and for all we knew maybe they had had drainage problems, it was hard to say which came first. No one keeps detailed floorplans of places like Bastogne, and reports about what had been destroyed were always more thorough than reports about what had been built.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 2

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

It turns out he's applied for extended service, and he's been allowed a month in Australia before starting his additional six months. Eric has met a girl. Agatha from Perth. And Owen spends his last days with the two of them. Owen falls in love with her immediately, he can't help it. As he's leaving Australia, he's already planning to come back here at the end of his service and to rejoin Eric and Agatha. He'll stay for half a year or so before going back to New York.

(EXCERPT FROM ABOVE CHAPTER 2)

(…)

He had sent a letter, my father. In hindsight I see that it was probably the kind of letter I ought to have sent a reply to. I don't remember what I did with it; it's not inconceivable that I threw it out. It was there waiting for me when I returned to Bastogne and I read it quickly, basically I more skimmed it. Then I set it down; it doesn't matter with it said. Throughout the entire country, the withdrawal of the American troops was continuing, the New York Times had started publishing the Pentagon Papers, Firebase 5 in the central highlands, Firebase Fuller and Firebase Sarge just south of the DMZ were under attack, everything was burning and now we kept the artillery going through the nights, too, to help the six thousand ARVN soldiers on their way north through the A Shau Valley. But most of all, we used the howitzers because we were scared.

And the rats. The rats had come back. There were fewer than before, but this time we couldn't get rid of them. At night when I couldn't sleep or if I was on watch duty and everything was quiet, I could hear them rummaging around in my things; I heard the sounds of their feet, their smacking, sighing steps through the waterlogged mud after it rained.

Oh, it rained.

It rained maybe every day. We stood out in the pouring rain in ponchos and pushed our shells into the tube: 105-mm, high-explosive shells, white phosphorus, illumination, flechettes; screw on the fuse, place the shell in the cartridge, adjust upper register, lower register, elevation, put in the powder

charge, priming screw, shut the firing hatch, pull the release handle, open the hatch, push away the round, in with the next one, new messages on the com, FDC estimated and relayed by those in the middle of the shit: *adjust fire 5506-0305, danger close, shot over, right 200, drop 200, fire for effect,* repeat as necessary, until Doomsday or a temporary and mutual pause in the inferno or until there simply wasn't anything left to destroy and the gods only know what we actually hit out there, how many of the rounds hit their targets and how many went off in the air before they hit the ground, exploded in the canopy and against tree branches. We experimented with delayed action shells to be sure that they made it through the foliage before they detonated, we dreamt of killing them all; we would try to blast openings for ourselves in the triple rainforest with the first salvos and then after that send everything we had down through those same openings in nature; we stuck our fingers in our ears, they were constantly ringing anyway, we shot rounds so close to the ARVN forces and our own Rangers or whoever we were assisting that day/night that we had to confirm again and again that they understood and appreciated the seriousness of accompanying artillery fire so close to their own positions; we shot shells that landed between our people and NVA, we shot missions where the rounds landed behind the enemy so that ARVN could force them to run into their own death, we shot rounds that split the positions and rounds that did little other than show whoever happened to be in the vicinity that we could also hit some location or other, entire batteries shot at NVA battalions or at a lone Vietcong sniper, it didn't matter, we kept going as long as the arsenal lasted and it was like a job, we were workers again, the military's proletariat, the last bulwark of the industrial revolution; I thought of the factory scene in a grim version of *Modern Times* while our howitzers ran and the sound of them, *tchu-ngn, tchu-ngn, tchu-ngn, tchu-ngn, tchu-ngn, tchu-ngn,* like a piston or God's final report, his fingers as he hammered the typewriter keys down one by one at the other end of the howitzers' rainbow, and if God really still existed, then he was dirty, hidden in the shells and trees, in the filthy rivers and in the maggots crawling around in the faces of the corpses that hadn't been picked up, and I wondered if my father also knew that, that God was over here, too, where more sparrows had fallen to the ground than anyone could even count anymore, a God who was either too worn out or too incompetent to lift a finger, a practical and outstretched hand, mumbling something about free will

and congratulating himself about *that* concept, while what people actually needed was help a jammed rifle or if nothing else putting our friends into body bags before the stench made it unbearable to approach them at all.

AFTER THE RACKET, the silence. It felt suddenly so unaccustomed, like something that had never been there before, it didn't belong here. Our ears were ringing. We talked loudly, yelling even if we were standing right next to each other, the cooks clattered the pots, and at night, in the dark, we kept the radio on, loud: We didn't want silence, not like this, there was no peace in it, it wasn't a silence you could relax in, sleep in; we couldn't sleep, we lay awake listening to the creaking of the trees, the breathing of the man in the next hammock, the truck convoys that brought ammunition to Bastogne over the roads that wound their way up through the hills from Hue. We heard them coming long before we saw them and we missed them when the left, when we could no longer hear the rumble of their diesel engines and knew that we were alone again. We were scared, and we never saw the people we were afraid of, our fear was faceless and that amplified it, made it more unmanageable. We talked with the foot soldiers from the 101st and begged them to tell us what they'd seen, what we could expect if they came and attacked Bastogne someday. Their answer was short and sweet, no exaggeration or showing off, that worried us even more, the way they just set aside their subtle but obvious scorn over our camp existence. Now they were openly preparing us for what might come; they made no secret about it being a question of what would come first, the attack or the order to abandon Bastogne and return to the World.

Someone yelled, Lentz came running over to us, despair in his eyes. "JIM IS DEAD!" he yelled, he screamed. We were sitting on the sandbags by the B battery and we panicked: *Jim, Jim?* We didn't know any Jim, who did he mean, what happened? We got to our feet and wanted to get our rifles, but Lentz got to us first, threw down the newspaper and collapsed to the ground. "Jim is dead," he repeated, "no fucking way." I picked up the paper: *LOS ANGELES, July 8 (UPI) Jim Morrison, 27, vocalist in the rock group The Doors, died last Tuesday in Paris, according to a spokesman for the band. The death was attributed to natural causes, but no further details will be provided until the singer's agent returns from France. The funeral will*

be held at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris today. Lentz looked at us. "It's a fucking bad sign," he said. "*None* of us are going to get out of here alive now."

We could have punched him, beat the crap out of him and not stopped until he was unrecognizable for having scared us unnecessarily, until he would never have been able to walk again and would have had to crawl for the rest of his life; instead we chewed him out, that was louder, and in the din of all the choice words that were lobbed at him, my eyes were drawn to the week's list of casualties and on the third line I saw the name: *07/06/1971, F/75th (Ranger), SP4 Eric J. Wallace, Wichita, KS (A Shau/Thua Thien). KIA.*

The grief was not the first thing that came, that was the exhaustion; I had never been so worn out before. The grief didn't come later that night either, I waited for it and it didn't come, the sun set and Lentz sat in the bunker playing the Doors on the company's tape deck, but it's not like you think, there wasn't anything mystical about that moment, no psychedelic purple smoke or dancing, it was no movie, no napalm exploding in the treetops; it was just yet another night. He sat by himself, motionless in front of the spinning tape reels, we heard the music rolling out over the area and Bastogne had suddenly become a lonely place, pitiful almost. I didn't talk to anyone about what had happened, I didn't want to, what good would it have done, other than to give them an even stronger sense that someone was out to get us and that they were closing in; I kept it to myself and waited for the grief to finally come; it didn't. The fatigue, on the other hand, grew stronger and I slept worse, until I had to go see the camp doctors and get some pills. They let me sleep, but it was restless, in my dreams I was surrounded by rats and they filled my hotel room in Sydney, I stood by the open window shoveling them out, but they kept crawling away from the shovel the whole time, clinging to the curtains and running along the baseboards, thousands of them, until the whole ceiling was covered with a pulsing, brown mass in constant motion; and someone knocked on the door, it was Agatha and I let her in. *Have you heard about Eric?* I said. *Yes. Are you devestated? It's hard to say. I seem to have some problems with the ceiling,* I said apologetically and pointed. She followed my hand. *That doesn't matter,* she said. *We can still be happy.*

In the daytime, when nothing was going on and the rain wouldn't let up, the thoughts would come. Should I write to her, to Agatha, a letter, tell her how

sorry I was about what had happened; should I visit her as soon as I got out of here, go to Perth and convey my condolences in person, I could do that, a trip like that wouldn't be out of the question. And yet. What did I want, what did I hope to get out of something like that? I had a crush on her, I think I loved her, without knowing her, without having any reason whatsoever to believe it was reciprocated. I reviewed our days in Sydney searching for hints or codes, small signs, a gesture or movement, anything I might fantasize about the significance of, it was a sordid undertaking; I felt ashamed and longed for her at the same time. One minute a trip like that to go to her seemed like something I had to do, on some level I was convinced that she was waiting for me, too, and that this was the only way to make any sense of the death; the next minute the whole thing was impossible, something repugnant I hated myself for even considering. I vacillated back and forth a hundred times a day, it was intolerable and the only way to make time pass; it took up all my attention. During the periods when I was convinced that there had been a seed of something between us, a wild joy would come over me, I persistently fantasized about going to Australia, showing up unannounced at her place and explaining the situation, saying that I had been thinking of her, for months, of being hugged and ushered into her apartment as we cried and kissed each other, I could spend whole days thinking that way, I maintained the howitzers and thought about that, I carried out artillery missions and though about her and about Eric; I didn't have any friends anymore, I could get myself a girlfriend. I was almost never present in the moment. I carried out my duties mechanically and absent-mindedly and felt as lighthearted as a sixteen-year-old. I could smell the scent of her and of the streets we would walk down; there was so much I wanted to tell her. And then this other thing, the darkness, came rolling in over me with a fearsome strength that took my breath away and everything felt arduous, insurmountable, I was surrounded by a yawning black hole that grew relentlessly, with the patently, vividly clear awareness that I wasn't going to have anywhere to go the day I was discharged, nowhere to head, I was now dreading this time, which previously I had been looking forward to with a kind of anticipatory euphoria and which until now had been so unspeakably far off: The moment when I stepped off the plane at home and was back in America for good.

I did not go to her.

I have regretted that, many, many times. There are points in this life, they blink at night like the red lights atop tall buildings in aircraft landing approaches over cities, small instants when you can change everything. But we tell ourselves that it's already too late, that it's too improbable now, too long ago, it's too risky and impossible. People say, *obviously I would have loved to* and conclude with *of course it's too late*. I should have gone, while I could.

And the window closed. September became October and I entered a new phase where I pushed Agatha and Australia aside and counted down the days until it was over, every night I made a new notch in the pole next to my hammock, and the war was imploding everywhere. There were stories about privates with peace signs on their t-shirts and officers, murdered in their sleep by disillusioned soldiers who tossed grenades under their beds; at Firebase Pace the soldiers refused to go out on suicidal night patrols around the beleaguered base and held press conferences about the situation; it was called a mutiny, but it was little other than good common sense and well-honed skepticism, mixed with consideration for the guy next to you in a senseless war that was over for everyone, with the exception of those who were still sitting tight in country and waiting for Nixon's signature to be sent home. In the end, they were pulled out, I heard, evacuated by helicopters, they left the howitzers there, I don't think they wanted to be on the ground a second longer than absolutely necessary. We took mortar fire sometimes in the evenings now, brief, imprecise attacks, and on the mornings after when companies went out to look for tracks, the enemy had long since vanished. They had moved on by then to the next station to flash the lights and say it was time for everyone to go now.

We were ready to go. God in hell were we ready to get out that place.

And the way I remember that last day, it came suddenly, it came two weeks early: I was given three hours to pack, say goodbye to battery B and show up on the helipad for transport to Da Nang, and I ran through Bastogne for one last chat with Mire, with Lentz who was still grieving the loss of Morrison, and with Williamson, Jimenez, McLaughlin and all of the guys I'd been scared with, happy with for brief moments, the guys I had eaten with and been bored with, waited with and stared out into the night with, all the guys who hadn't asked to come here, but were here anyway, the guys I had sat up with and thought up ways to kill rats with, discussed tigers and women and music and weapons and cars and

whatever else could pass the time and distract our attention away from the knowledge that our chances of being attacked were steadily increasing with each minute we sat here. And I remember the helicopter taking off from Bastogne for the last time, and how I sat in the doorway and looked down at that cheerless place were many of them still had months to go, almost a year in the worst cases, unless different orders arrived in the meantime, and the base looked like a wound in the countryside, dirty and dusty and teeming with bacteria—it was easy to see why nature had been fighting us since our arrival. And I remember the flight from Da Nang, we sat crammed together in the rows of seats and the plane rose from the runway, gained elevation and started banking to the left as the pilot came over the loudspeaker and offered us a chance to fly north along the coast for a while to give us one last glimpse of Vietnam. We didn't want to see anymore of it, we never ever wanted to see that place again. He was met with yelling, cussing, and finally applause as his voice came over the system with the words: *Alright, folks, we're heading for America.*

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 3

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

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

LAUREL CANYON

(BLACK ON MAROON)

2009 - 2010

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

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

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

In New York, time stands still. Max is running, Owen is acting more fatherly than ever; taking him for dinners and walks, keeping him distracted (but never offering to talk about what's troubling him). He cuts out articles he finds interesting and leaves them for Max to read, one catching Max's eye: it's on an art exhibition with one deeply controversial work: *The smoking gun* by Agota Miškini. The work is being displayed in a room by itself, and to enter, one has to sign a number of papers acknowledging that one is about to enter a *sharp situation*, in the presence of weapons, and that one does so at one's own risk. One then enters a room which is completely dark, except from a barely lit table with a handgun. And that's it. Apparently, people lose track of time in that room, many break down and cry. One person directed the gun at his/her head. It was filled with blank cartridges, and supposedly this person then experienced someone walking out of the darkness, giving him/her a hug. Then the lights were turned on, revealing writing on the

walls: *Everything will be all right* or was it, *Everything will be different?* He couldn't remember.

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

Owen spends five days in bed, coughing; Max works a few hours a day on *Mill Stone*, reflecting on his mum and Wohlman: "With his new, deteriorating self he

showed me the last thing he could teach me, which I hated him for: that there are no such thing heroes; there are simply people who struggle and do their best."

Chapter 3

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

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

(EXCERPT FROM ABOVE CHAPTER 3)

(…)

"I just want to know where we stand."

"Is that right?"

"Is that asking too much? You've been here a long time."

She sat down in the chair next to the bed, lit a cigarette. I so wanted to touch her, hold her tight, lie down right up against her and have everything be like it was before. She was miles away and there was no doubt who had the upper hand. I hated that I was lying in bed, like a damned patient. But the worst part was that she was sitting so close to me. I could smell her, see all the details of her face, her hair, her eyes, her body and her clothes, everything that over the years had become automatic for me, things I hadn't noticed for a long time, she was clearer than ever now, high resolution and real and that only made it all the clearer how much was at stake and what I was at risk of losing. I loved her more than ever, unsure whether this was the time to tell her that. Those slender fingers of hers, the Canadian accent, especially when she said *Toronto* and it sounded like *Toronno* or *about* and it sounded like *abeut*, and the way she laughed and brought her hand to her stomach with a characteristic crack of her wrist, if

what I had said was unusually funny, and how she often said *hmm* and then was quiet for several seconds before the next sentence left her lips, the books she read and the music she listened to and the t-shirt she should wear all the time; I loved her because she smacked her lips when she ate and never noticed when she had a bit of food stuck between her front teeth but also wasn't offended when I pointed it out to her; I loved her because she had a terrible sense of direction and because she was rarely able to catch even the most basic song lyrics and misconstrued entire songs, albums, bands; I loved her for her unusual talent at doing math in her head, for how she couldn't keep track of what things cost when she was shopping and also never remembered to look down at the little terminal when she was entering her PIN number and how she was consequently completely in the dark about the prices of even the most basic grocery items; I loved her for not caring if her socks were the same color and yet still insisting that her shoes be high quality; I loved her because she slept in the ancient and once red but now indeterminately colored, oversized tank top that she, without any irony or sarcasm, just kindhearted intentions, had bought Owen for his birthday one year, but which for understandable reasons he had never worn, and her genuine surprise that he didn't, without her feeling hurt or in any way rejected or thinking the thought that it had been a lousy present, but instead she just started wearing it herself, a tank top that said *I'm not a dirty old man, I'm a sexy bastard*, and which she kept (she said) because of the incomparable quality of the cotton and if there were a scale for cotton softness it would have scored off the charts, and which she tucked into the bottom of the laundry basket on her way down to or back up from the laundry room to keep outsiders from catching a glimpse of it. Or Owen, because that would just have been weird. A garment in the category of clothing that only two types of people could get away with wearing: those, on the one hand, with sufficient self-confidence to know, to appreciate even, that they are so beautiful that nearly everyone will interpret the slogan as clearly sarcastic, a joke, and on the other hand: those with enough self-awareness to know that other people don't consider them attractive, not by any measure, but sooner ugly, people suffering from esthetic periodontal disease, the facially knock-kneed, people not only with intestinal blockages but also body blockages, people with symmetrical leprosy, people with joy in their jejunum and their lovability in an ostomy bag on their belly, those with pus where their smiles

should have been, inconsolably diminished individuals, the psoriatically friendly, tracheotomy-affirming people and those who just like marching band music, incurably friendless folks who lack alarm clocks, men and women constrained by God or unhappily categorized as abstract, experimental or as *found objects*, the ones you cancel the party because of if the alternative is to invite them, the visually stunted, chronically unattractive types and the desirably crippled, the gracefully challenged, the charismatically inflamed cases, those with a wow factor that's too low and an idiot reading that's too high, the disproportional, the big headed but, alas, so short-limbed characters, those who radiate gout, the ones with tinnitus of the soul, the terminally distasteful, those with constipation of the appearance, those with only a repugnant reflection, the not very flattering flatulants, the immediately allergy-provoking personalities, the inedible figures, the unfortunate lamentables, those representatives of humanity who spoil easily, those orphaned in the name of decency, those beyond tolerable, the abominable and appalling and the spectacularly repulsive, the butt ugly and the flat out fucking frightful; in other words, people who would wear the garment in another more heart-on-your-sleeve and resigned, non-tongue-in-cheek manner, as if to say: Who the fuck cares what I *look* like?; I loved her when she laughed so hard she got hiccups and when she was careless in the kitchen and measured her ingredients by eye and burned things in the oven so that we had to go out to eat instead; I loved her for the genuine enthusiasm and curiosity she brought to her work and because she was authentically surprised and proud when she accomplished what she had planned to or something even better, and how she could sit for hours in front of her paintings and admire them, not because she was behind them, but because she was able to contemplate them unrelated to and detached from herself; because she rarely wore makeup and only needed a minute to throw on something she had lying around and how she would fearlessly go outside with wet hair and not catch a cold from it, even if I was walking with her, bundled in my heavy winter jacket, scarf, hat and lined boots and still wound up spending half a week in bed with sniffles and feverish visions and fear that I would come down with Bell's palsy if I went out into the wind before I had fully recovered; I loved her because she didn't believe that drafts of cold air were perilous; I loved her because she preferred to ask what time it was rather than check her own phone, and pretty much never had any idea what time

it was, and if she had to guess she would often be off by an hour or more, and yet she had never missed a flight in her life; for how her face crumpled when she cried and looked like it might have to be physically reconstructed from the ground up; I loved her because she pretty much didn't care about shaving her legs or armpits in months with an R in them and if she did address the situation she preferred an all-out approach rather than weekly maintenance; how she sometimes still looked like Olive Oyl and/or fall-1970 Shelley Duvall; I loved her for the way you couldn't talk to her when she was reading a book or newspaper, for hours (this was also a source of irritation); for the way she always swayed from side to side when she stood in line, as if she needed to show that she found waiting even more hellish than everyone else who was in the same situation; for her amazing French and for how she leaned toward the TV screen if she was watching something exciting and nodded or shook her head when she was following a debate program depending on whether or not she agreed with the arguments; I loved her because she was smarter than me, much, much smarter, but also more naïve; for how she had sworn on multiple occasions that she would never wear overalls but then on this one occasion, which lasted for more than four days that summer we painted her parents' house in Toronto, for practical reasons and to promote peace in the household, she considered herself forced to wear overalls, and then her days were divided up with 10% of her time going to painting and the remaining 90% devoted to protracted bellyaching at the diabolical wretchedness of overalls; for the fact that she never tied her bathrobe properly, letting it flop open around her so that this or that part of her was visible and I said *you don't really need a bathrobe, what you're looking for is more of a cape* and she said *I like to air dry my breasts* and I said *you're not breastfeeding* and she said *not yet* and we never talked about having kids.

(...)

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS/Chapter 3 continued:

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

When he reaches Mordecai's house the next day, having borrowed Marcie's car, he finds it empty. Mordecai's in Hungary, his portly neighbour informs Max. He's landed a main role in a film with a proper budget, one that he, as he told Max on the phone some time back, hopes might be the *Apocalypse Now* of their time. But he's supposed to shoot in Berlin, and not until September. On the phone from Budapest he

sounds scared and unfocused, he's scared to stay and scared to go, he can't grasp the new character he's there to develop. Max makes him promise to leave his hotel room, to travel. In return Mordecai asks Max to bring Mischa home with him. "Call me whenever you feel like it," Max says, but Mordecai doesn't call.

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

Chapter 5

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

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

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

T hey have good and bad periods, Owen, Max, and Mischa. The two latter go to Toronto for her exhibition, Gabe's there and he compliments Max on the good *Mill Stone* reviews ("No one saw it, though," Max replies), and mentions that he visited Mischa in California. Mischa has made no mention of Gabe's visit to Max.

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

VESTERHEIM

(OLEANNA MALAISE)

Fall 2010 - Fall 2011

(EXCERPT)

1

October 2010

Here's a day. Look at it. Here is a day that won't happen again. One day less, yet another day. Here is the time. This is the way to Iowa. He drives. His nephew would prefer that he didn't, his nephew sits in the passenger seat and pretty much every mile he glances quickly over at Owen to make sure that he's, you know, in control. Just because a person is sick, fatally ill, people also automatically assume your memory isn't very good, that you're inattentive, hard of hearing and not fully responsible. They're worried that you'll waltz out into the street and get killed and they're scared that you'll wear yourself out. Always asking if you might like to rest for a bit. Then the admonishments about the same thing, that you ought to take it easy, gather your strength. As if there were still something to gather your strength for, something you needed to be in shape for, fit for. As if it mattered at all if you died on a Tuesday instead of a Friday. As if you could regret it after the fact. He really would have liked to have lived longer, he would have liked to have lived to a much, much older age, eighty or maybe ninety, ninety-four. A hundred would have been the best, he would have liked to sit in a chair in the afternoon sun under a lap blanket and do nothing other than put in and take out his dentures simply being on his way to turning 101. No one would have been able to criticize him then. If anything, people would have hailed his ability to still take out his dentures and put them back in

without assistance. And give a heartfelt, toothless smile to whomever. He would have like to be one of those people who drifted off which watching sports on TV. He wasn't going to be healthy again. He's 66; he's sick. He's going to die, by Christmas or spring, this is his last illness. Not even seventy. That's not so old. People think he's no longer totally with it. His clothes don't fit. He hasn't weighed this little since 1970, when he looks at himself in the mirror in the morning, he looks quite odd, a twenty-six-year-old with the skin of a sixty-six-year-old, a man in a trench coat of his own skin, which can't be taken off, not even at night. His clothes, his pants are too loose and have to be cinched on with a belt, his shirts hang off him; he doesn't want to get new clothes. He hates going clothes shopping, he has bought as much as he can by mail order for as long as he can remember, for the last ten to twelve years his nephew's girlfriend did most of his shopping for him, she knew what he liked, what suited him. He liked that she shopped for him, he liked her. Her name was Mischa. Now she's gone. That's not the only reason he doesn't want to get new clothes, because that would also remove her completely from his life, more importantly his clothes are the only thing that reminds him of himself. When he catches a glimpse of his own reflection, naked, as he steps out of the shower, the sight makes him shudder, he hurries to get dressed to become himself, or at least someone who mimics himself. In addition to the weight loss, the cough bothers him, that's how it started and it's still there, a cough that rips at his bronchial tubes, which makes people worry about him. And the constipation, he's constipated almost all the time. If he manages to get anything out at all, it's accompanied by blood, blood in the toilet bowl; he has to flush several times to get rid of it and make sure the next person who comes into the bathroom won't notice and ask him about it. And he sweats at night, night sweats, wakes up freezing cold and drenched and disoriented and has to get up and change his t-shirt, sometimes the sheets as well, he keeps a stack of t-shirts by the bed. She used to do the laundry for him, too, Mischa did. Now he only washes his clothes when he absolutely has to; he doesn't want to ask his nephew for help, right, why should he? He's sick, he's going to die, but he still has arms screwed onto his body. And his stomach, sometimes he has really awful stomach pains, often in the morning and early in the afternoon, it's usually a little better in the evening. Hurts less. He said no to any more rounds of chemotherapy. *No more*,

he said. If he thinks too hard about the chair he used to sit in while he received the treatments or smells the scent of the room the chair was in, he throws up. The cancer is spreading. A whole fauna of terms and Latin words has been used to explain to him what's going on, what has already happened and especially what is going to happen to him, in him. He hasn't bothered to remember any of these words. Via disseminated ambushes and periods of retrograde movement and regrouping, the cancer cells have established broad front lines, the cells are expanding their territory, spreading along an Oregon Trail inside him. Migration. *Manifest Destiny*. One day they'll make it to the coast. He can still hear his first doctor's voice asking if Owen has any opinion on whether he might have been exposed to Agent Orange during his time in Vietnam. The doctor says he read about Operation Ranch Hand and there's talk of a class action lawsuit against the government. Millions of Vietnamese people are suffering from diseases presumptively associated with exposure to the chemicals, vast amounts of agricultural acreage was destroyed, children are still being born with serious deformities. The doctor says that more than seventy million tons of Agent Orange was dumped over Southern Vietnam. Owen says that as far as he knows all this happened before his time: Bastogne was already stripped of vegetation by the time he got there, a dust-covered mound of clay, but there had been three orange barrels stored in the camp, unopened and waiting to be picked up by someone who never came. He says he passed them every day, several times a day, everyone did, without giving a thought to the idea that they might be a health hazard. As far as he knows, they were never touched or moved. "The other obvious candidate," the doctor says, "is the dust and asbestos and who knows what all else you inhaled during the days and weeks you spent at Ground Zero. And then we also can't escape the third and most likely candidate: rotten luck. Things like this just happen. The natural order or even worse: We don't know why. Far less spectacular, I'm afraid. Hard to sue about." He doesn't say: hard to survive. There have been several doctors since then, a veritable parade, specialists and big bills. To the last doctor he says: "Tell me, all vague answers aside, if we set aside the assertion that there's no way to rule out a miracle and all the rationalizations in the world about how there's always something you can do, how far pain management has come these days and so forth and it doesn't necessarily need to be the way I think it's going to be, or that I can keep things

going for six more months, a year, two years: Am I going to die from this?" The last doctor responds: "Yes, you are." After that the conversation becomes muddled. He walks home through the city and death is no longer an abstraction. It's in his pockets, in his shoes, inside his mouth, he can feel it the whole time, not like anything heavy or oppressive but sharp and angular. Death has become physical and it's not that that scares him. It disappoints him. He really would have liked to have lived longer. People treat him as if he might fall apart anytime he mentions the C-word and he can't stand to listen to jazz anymore either. His albums collect dust on the shelves in his living room, in his bedroom, the thought of complex music and improvisation makes him queasy, he hasn't touched the piano since he came back from the first doctor. If he listens to music, it has to be simple, preferably no piano at all, preferably just an acoustic guitar, he can tolerate that, his own recordings are out of the question. To his surprise and excitement, he has started to like Townes Van Zandt and the earliest albums by Kris Kristofferson, Mischa gave him those when she left, she said she didn't have room for them, but that isn't true, she had room for them; he got them. These are the albums he plays when his nephew isn't around, he knows that Max doesn't like her records being played when he can hear them. It's the simplicity of the music that Owen likes. So, why Iowa? He wants to get out of town, travel, it might be his last chance to do so, to stroll out of his apartment and decide for himself where exactly he wants to go. He should have done so much more traveling, it has always bothered him that he hasn't ever felt any desire to go anywhere, just to stay home, he has met pretty much every single excursion with fierce reluctance, even if it was only for a night or two. Surely the fear in the back of his mind that the place he was leaving wouldn't be there when he came back. Now he sees that it doesn't matter if he keeps an eye on what's his or not, he's going to lose it anyway; he'll have to move out of the Apthorp building, it's become too expensive to live there, there's such a lack of maintenance now that the last holdouts will be forced to let go of their units and their square feet. The only thing he can hope for, is that he dies before he has to hand in his keys. The only thing he has disliked more than traveling has been moving. But this is the way to Iowa. There's still a long way to go. Two days, at least. He drives, three hours at a stretch and then a break, a snack. Then another three hours. They've talked about going there for years, for ten years at least, to

Decorah, Iowa, to visit Vesterheim, the most extensive Norwegian American museum in the world. Owen had been there before, more than thirty years ago, when he came from California and heard about the place while he was in Des Moines, drove up there and found a cut-out of Norway painted in a rosemaling style and preserved in shrink wrap, museum exhibit spaces packed to the rafters with items, furniture and the sorts of applied arts his parents and grandparents had hurried to rid themselves of to make room for modern things, and out behind the building: Norwegian carpenters in full swing assembling a 100% Norwegian farmhouse from the 1860s, dismantled down to the smallest piece of wood from a farm in Valdres and shipped across the ocean. He had stood with his arms crossed in the scorching sun and watched them work, and it gave him a certain pleasure to see that, both being personally free of all that Norwegian stuff, but also knowing that it was being looked after, that someone else had assumed responsibility for it; he had no longer needed to worry about it, he could be who he wanted to be. He had been Owen, and there was no need for him to become Ove again. Now it was different, he wished he could die as himself, as Ove. He wished he were home. But here he is: Dayton, Ohio; Normal, Illinois, highways and small towns, gray autumnal fields under an immense sky; rain, windshield wipers, cafes and gas stations. The car radio is always on, helping them when they can't think of anything more to say. They sleep in separate rooms in the motels they stay at along the way, nothing else is ever discussed. But when they part ways for the night after dinner and discussing the next day's route, as they each stand by their doors and let themselves into their respective rooms, his fear of being alone sets in. He doesn't mention this to his nephew, but sits on his bed and listens to him moving around on the other side of the wall, with one hand ready the whole time to knock a couple of times to get his nephew's attention, swallow his shame and tell it like it is, that he's scared to be alone, that he would sleep much better if he knew there was someone else in the room. This is something new in him, this uneasiness at the thought of having to be by himself, he who at one time had been forced to go through several rounds (many, many rounds) with himself before inviting his nephew and his nephew's girlfriend to live with him in a way that was credible. Mostly he had done it because it seemed like a good deed. And after that because Andy had thought it would be good for him. And finally because he

didn't want to be alone. Over time, he had grown used to them, fond of them. In the end he didn't want to be without any of them, they had become his closest friends, the most important people in his life. And now that he's sick, he's not sure he'll be able to cope for a full 24 hours without anyone around. When he wakes up at night and hears his nephew getting up to use the bathroom, he's convinced each time that he also hears the sound of car keys being picked up and he pictures Max leaving him behind, having had more than enough of the dependency and clinginess that his uncle exudes. When they meet for breakfast, on the other hand, they enjoy each other's company the way they always have, and the thought seems absurd; he convinces himself that the next night will be easier—as he walks to the car, new hours behind the wheel, offramp from I-52, into the woods and past Luther College and downhill, over the river, this is Decorah, population 8,127, with one main street. His nephew drives through town and parks behind the Winneshiek Hotel. It's late. They eat pizza at a place around the corner, walk back to the hotel, their rooms aren't next to each other, he won't hear it if Max gets up to use the bathroom or can't sleep. But each time he himself has to get up, he casts a glance out the window at the parking lot. The car is still there in the morning. In Decorah. The town is small. They stand in the middle of the street and can see where it ends, where it begins. Fading Norwegian flags outside some of the souvenir shops, the façade of one of them is decorated with the outline of a Viking ship; they go in and find homey knit sweaters, knit caps, lace doilies and Norwegian books, imported foodstuffs: chocolate, sour cream, geitost cheese. Dried fish. Norwegian folksongs pour out of treble speakers and the clerk is excited when Owen and Max nod in the affirmative to the question of whether they're Norwegian, but the level of interest immediately plummets when it comes out that they have lived in New York for most of their lives, apparently that doesn't really count. Then they're just like themselves. And they're pretty much on their own at Vesterheim, only a couple of German tourists who took a wrong turn, moseying around with them in the quiet museum, they nod at each other in embarrassment each time their paths cross as they walk around studying beautiful, handmade objects, tools, rosemaling furniture and examples of buildings built with cogged joinery techniques, posters describing the incredible history of Norwegian emigration and the Norwegian piety that was part and

parcel of this. There's an impressive collective of steamer chests, traditional *bunad* outfits and everyday clothes from a time none of them remembers. It's tiring to look at.

He rests when he thinks no one will notice, as soon as he enters a new room, he checks for available stools or chairs. "Are you doing OK?" Max asks. "Yeah, of course," Owen replies getting up. He points to a 25-foot sailboat placed in the middle of the room. The *Tradewind*. "This is how they crossed the Atlantic. Two brothers, in 1933, to reach the World's Fair in Chicago. It's really impressive. But they were already a hundred years too late to catch up with the first immigrants. Can you imagine, Max: No Empire State Building, no Times Square. No skyscrapers. No Statue of Liberty welcoming you as you sail in, but they came anyways. Quakers, Haugeans, dissidents. They came from Stavanger, the very first of the immigrants from Norway, on October 9th, 1825, after more than three months at sea in the sloop *Restauration*. Cleng Peerson led them, fifty-two people in total. New York City only had a population of 150,000 at the time, apparently there was a commotion on the wharf on the Hudson River as the exotic Norwegians stepped ashore from their modest sailing ship, wearing clothes made of homespun which did not resemble the fashionable outfits folks in New York were wearing back then. They didn't speak the language, didn't know exactly where they were going to settle or what awaited them and how hard the work would be. They came ashore and the *Restauration* was seized by the customs authorities, because the ship was too small for what it was being used for, there were too many passengers aboard, the skipper didn't have his papers in order; they were fined one hundred and fifty dollars, every single passenger, an astronomical sum, a cataclysmic figure. If they sold both the ship and the Swedish iron they were carrying, they would still only be halfway there, and that money had been intended for other purposes—the continuation of their journey, to buy land and equipment and supplies to see them sufficiently provisioned for that first winter. The ship was impounded, they risked being sent home again. But Cleng Peerson gathered influential Quaker friends in the city. Money was collected, food and shelter given to the unfortunate Norwegians who had suffered the ocean crossing, can you imagine what it was like for them, Max, those first nights, as they tried to sleep, on the other side of the world, to the sounds of a city that was bigger than anything they'd ever seen and that was

growing around them at immense speed? Ultimately they were permitted to move on, the passengers. Formalities were seen to, papers were handed over and lawyers completed their arguments. The immigrants had come in good faith, it was declared, their knowledge of English was minimal, they only wanted to become farmers and plow fresh ground before winter came and settled heavily over the countryside farther inland. In the end they were permitted to go. Without the money for their ship and cargo, heading northwest toward Lake Ontario, where the winter was already looming in the overnight frost, and they waited in Kendall Township, and then came the snow and the hopeless conditions. They were poor and unable to communicate, sick and disconsolate, with a vast forest in front of them that they didn't have the tools to deal with and they couldn't borrow tools from the neighboring farms—they, too, were occupied by homesteaders who sorely needed their own equipment. Oh, how they wished to be back home, Max. I think they dreamed about it at night, every single night. But it was out of the question, they didn't have any money for the trip home nor did they have a home to go back to. So they did what they could. They endured. Children were born. A couple got married. And when summer came, nothing had improved. The ground grew swampy, the immigrants from Norway's Rogaland county were hounded by mosquitos and contracted malaria; they died, many of them died. They must have thought God himself was punishing them for what they'd done. But they went west, Max, the next ones to come and the ones after that. West to Wisconsin and Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota, North and South Dakota. Quite a few went to Canada as well. Quebec. They came and they came and they came, over a period of a hundred and fifty years they came, like the Italians and the Irish, to Poles and the Ukrainians and all the other nationalities that left everything they knew and toiled in poverty to gain a foothold in this new country; eight hundred thousand Norwegians, some of them went all the way to the Pacific coast, to Washington and California. Close to thirty percent of Norway's population went. No other country besides Ireland waved goodbye to a larger percentage of its population. We're not alone. We have five million behind us in this country, there are more of us here than in Norway now." "But we don't know any of them," his nephew says. "No," Owen replies, "we don't." In the evening they eat dinner together at the hotel. Neither of them talks about the museum or the exhibit they saw. Not

a word about the experience they came here to share. What had he pictured would happen? Maybe that seeing these artifacts would bring them immense joy, maybe he had hoped that Vesterheim would anchor them again. But to what, a country? Which country? It's not unlikely that they both think the same way: that the objects they gazed at and dutifully leaned down to read the explanatory tests about don't have anything to do with them at all. They don't belong to them, they belong to another time and another people, not the country they left. All of this was already old when they left, had become history long ago. More than a celebration of the Norwegians who left Norway to seek happiness in America, the museum bears witness to how unhappy they were to have left. All the things these immigrants dragged across the ocean with them, tons of furniture, tools, books, instruments, artwork, everything they dedicated so much energy to preserving or constructing around them according to the old ways, to make the new country look as much as possible like the old one. They didn't embrace America; they moved here and clung to their own, stuck with their own, kept up their language with an iron fist and protected their own traditions; they missed home. They wrote home and talked about how nice it was here. They wanted to be Norwegians; they didn't want to be Norwegians in Norway. And when these nervous creatures noticed how their new country had allowed its newfound nationalism to flourish, rendering their language suspect, they brought their words inside, held them gently between their folded hands, sang them behind closed doors, hid them inside their secretary desks and under their pillows and forgot them there, until it was no longer possible to find them again. Until they had to look the recipe up in a cookbook if they wanted to learn to make lutefisk again, and buy phrase books for the annual Nordic Fest celebrations and suffer tendonitis to knit the Norwegian star pattern the right way. They became republicans and democrats, developing into a new species, far more successful and capable of surviving than what he himself or his nephew had accomplished, a species of well-balanced hybrids who could warmly and effortlessly discuss *my heritage* and were at home wherever. They had become *Americans*.

(END OF EXCERPT)

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 2

Spring 2011. He sits in the kitchen a lot, by the open windows. His nephew has moved his favorite chair in here for him. The nephew is working on his new project, Owen spends his days alone, observing how odd it is to witness the world keeping on as usual, as he himself is getting closer to the end. When Max returns from work they're both exhausted. Over dinner they ask each other how they are, replying that they're fine. Neither of them are fine. He hides away the newspaper in which Mischa is interviewed about her new exhibition, *Grey on Gray*. As the title suggests, the pictures are all in grey tones. "My days are no longer Rothko days," Mischa says in the interview. One of the last days *Weyland-Yutani* is playing in New York, Owen manages to take a taxi to see Mischa's exhibition. It's gray. And beautiful. For the first time she's made something he truly loves. He sends her a text, only writing *Thanks. Owen.* She replies two days later: *Thanks. Mischa.*

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

Chapter 3

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

If he rings his bell to talk to someone he has to wait for half an hour, when he simply wants to chat they get cross, telling him that they wish they had time for chats, but

they've got plenty of patients waiting. He wishes he had time, he doesn't say so. They've got way more time than him.

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

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

Now.

[IV]

SANDY

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

Fall 2012

SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

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

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

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

Max leaves the building and at first he feels calm. Mordecai is still alive to him; Max even has their theater tickets for Monday and Tuesday. First he thinks, even though they were both in the same city when Mordecai died, there was nothing he could have done. Then he experiences it all at once; guilt, self-reproach, uncontrollable anger, and panic. And sorrow, the worst part, when it finally hits Max that Mordecai is gone. And what *gone* means. *Never coming back*. The understanding of the word *never*, the reach of it. He pictures Mordecai in his last hours, tidying everything up, leaving hand written notes if he leaves any, smoking and then hanging himself. No drama.

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

Chapter 2

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

Chapter 3

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

Dressed in black Max and his mum approach Garden City in her little Honda, and Max can't stop rubbing his chin, as if his face will collapse if he stops. On the radio they talk of Sandy, *this is no joke, folks. It's category three.* At the funeral Max puts on the kippa handed to him at the door. Here's Mordecai's parents, Mr. Weintraub waxy and grey faced, Mrs. Weintraub almost smiling due to the large amount of valium she's had to get through the day; here's family and friends; a girl who would've cried more if her sister had been crying less; one who'll take his own life the following week and one who went over budget on her outfit, but sees it as an investment (there will be more funerals);

here's a boy just starting to grasp the meaning of the word *gone* and understand that it will one day apply to them all, including his parents and himself; here's a man reflecting on how people who die at their own choice all seem weightless, no matter how big they were when they lived; here's Wohlman, trying not to look at Max's mum; here's Alison, now a mother of four; here's Stanley; here's a room no one wants to be in and it smells like citrus and antiseptic hand soap and the person in the coffin is too young to be there. Here's Mordecai. The rabbi has a kind face but never knew the man he's talking about, he sings Kaddish and it's beautiful, those in the crowd who know when to say their amens, do so.

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

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

Chapter 4

"But look at his face," Max's mum says. She's right: Mayor Bloomberg looks properly worried as he brings the latest news of hurricane Sandy, headed towards NYC. They're in Max's mum's house in Howard Beach, in zone B, and she really thinks they should leave.

They've put boxes of things up on the first floor, they've positioned the sand bags that she's kept in her garage since hurricane Irene. The truth is, Max is looking forward to the storm, but as his mum keeps worrying he offers to call the Sherry-Netherland; the hotel in which he lived for seven months, after moving out of the Apthorp and after Owens death; the hotel in which he refined his insomnia. He's disappointed when she accepts.

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

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

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

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

From York College in Jamaica, Queens he gets to call his mum from a pay phone, his cell phone drowned. She cries as he tells her that the house is gone, it takes time

before she believes that he's all right. As soon as the bridges are open, he heads by a shared taxi towards the Sherry- Netherland, to find the hotel seemingly untouched by the storm – simply with a yellow sign warning him of wet floors.

Chapter 5

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

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

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

Then they run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHAN HARSTAD (b. 1979 in Stavanger, Norway) offers a wholly original voice and is one of the most acclaimed Norwegian writers. He debuted in 2001 with the prose collection *Herfra blir du bare eldre* [*From Here You Only Get Older*]. The following year he published a collection of critically acclaimed and interconnected short stories titled *Ambulanse* [*Ambulance*], one of which was published in a Words Without Borders anthology from Anchor Books. His work has also been published in McSweeney's Quarterly. In 2005 his novel *Buzz Aldrin, hvor ble det av deg i alt mylderet?* [Published in the US by Seven Stories Press as *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion?*]. The novel was also adapted into a Norwegian TV miniseries. In 2007, Harstad published the novel *Hässelby*, a lynchian novel set in Stockholm and Paris and in 2008 he published his first and only YA novel, the sci-fi/horror story *Darlah – 172 timer på månen* [Published in the US by Little, Brown as *172 Hours on The Moon*]. For this novel he received the Brage Award, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Norway and previously won by Per Petterson. In 2018 he published the novel *Ferskenen* [*The Red Handler*], consisting of fifteen both extremely short and banal crime novels, starring a detective called The Red Handler, named so for always catching criminals red handed, thus avoiding the plot development and the whodunnit-phase to go on for hundreds of pages. The novels are supposedly written by former avant-garde author Frode Brandeggen who spent the 20 years following his failed literary debut searching for literature's lowest common denominator in hope of gaining both financial success and respect. The second part of the book contains roughly 250 endnotes, of varying length, enthusiastically analyzing the novels and declaring each and one of them as work of pure genius, as well as giving background on Brandeggens life, written by an 84 year

old German annotator who not only knew Brandeggen personally but sometimes also deviates from his role as professional annotator to reflect on his own life.

He has also written four plays, including *Osv.* [*Etc.*], a 500 page play on the wars in Bosnia and Chechnya and the genocide in Rwanda. In 2009 he was employed as the first ever in house playwright at the National Theatre in Oslo. Harstad has also published a non-fiction book, «Blissard», a well received and award-winning monography about the Norwegian rock band Motorpsycho. He is the recipient of several literary awards, including The Norwegian Youth's Critics Prize, The Brage Award, The Ibsen Award, The Hunger Award and The European Literature Award. Rights to his books have been sold to more than 25 countries. Harstad lives in Oslo, Norway.

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

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

(list not
complete)

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

Children's Book Festival, Bath,
England

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

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

Praise for Johan Harstad's other works

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

(Novel, 2005)

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

-N+1 Book Review (US)

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

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

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

- Fædrelandsvennen

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

- Moss Avis

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

- Tønsbergs blad

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

- Adresseavisen

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

- Aftenposten

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

- Het Parool (The Nethe rlands)

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

- Kirkus Reviews Starred review (US)

"A moon voyage of a novel."

- Dagb la det

"Exquisite novel writing."

- Klassekampen

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

- Dagens Næringsliv

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

- Pu blishers W eekly (US)

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

- The Australian (Australia)

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

- Jy lland-posten (Den m ark)

"A tremendous debut novel about life in second place. (...) It's frankly awesome how vital and precise Johan Harstad is writing on every single page, and maybe Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All

The Confusion? is the great contemporary novel we occasionally long for. (...) A great writing talent which will take him very far. Maybe all the way to the moon."

- Berlingske tidende (Denmark)

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

- La Repubblica (Italy)

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

- Libèration (France)

"With one word: Perfekt.

- Het Financieele Dagblad (The Netherlands)

"A significant and poetic debut novel."

- Hamburger Morgenpost (Germany)

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

- Bücherwelt, NDR (Germany)

HÄSSELBY

(Novel, 2007)

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

- Aftenposten

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

- Dagsavisen

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

- Dagens Næringsliv

"Funny, scary and strange."

- Adresseavisen

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

- Stavanger Aftenblad

"A protest novel well worth reading."

- Fædrelandsvennen

172 HOURS ON THE MOON

(YA Novel, 2008)

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

- *Booklist (US)*

"Scandinavian thriller meets sci-fi horror movie."

- *Voya (US)*

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

- *Kirkus Reviews (US)*

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

- *Romantic times (US)*

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

- *Publishers Weekly (US)*

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

- *SLJ (US)*

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

- *Library Media Connection (US)*

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

- *Stavanger Aftenblad*

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

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

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

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

ETC.

(play, 2010)

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

- Dagbladet

"Disturbing, important document."

- Aftenposten

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

- Moss Avis

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

- Norwegian Broadcasting Company, NRK

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

- Dagens Næringsliv

AMBULANCE

(short stories, 2002)

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

- Aftenposten

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

- Stavanger Aftenblad

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

- Dagsavisen

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

- Dagbladet

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

- VG

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

- Bergens Tidende

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

- Fædrelandsvennen

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

- Sandefjords Blad

FROM HERE YOU ONLY GET OLDER

(prose, 2001)

"An obvious talent."

- Aftenposten

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

- Stavanger Aftenblad

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

- Dagsavisen

NORWEGIAN HARDCOVER EDITION (2015)

DUTCH EDITION (2017)

DANISH EDITION (2018)

GERMAN EDITION (2019)