

Mathilde Walter Clark

Lone Star
novel

Translated from the Danish by Martin Aitken

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Memory Book

It is, as she said, difficult to describe someone since memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary as glimpses one has at night through lighted windows.
Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Can a person grieve over someone still alive?
Linn Ullmann, *De urolige*

My dad is the astronaut who returns home at the end of Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He sees himself sitting up in a big bed, one minute he's a child, the next an old man. His face behind the visor of his space helmet says: *What happened to all that time?*

My dad saw the movie together with my mother before I was born, in the movie theatre on Lindell Boulevard. It was when they were living in St. Louis, and even though he was only in his early thirties at the time he knew right away that the figure he saw on the screen was *him*, that he was all three of them, the child, the old man, the astronaut, and that the scene would haunt him for the rest of his life. Even before Kubrick made his movie, my dad had seen the same images in his mind. They held a dreadful realisation, which was that we are powerless against time. No amount of scientific discovery, not even the sum of all the information in the world can change that. Not even if he and all the other physicists climbed onto the shoulders of all the physicists who had gone before them would they be able to do a thing about it.

Time is the great mystery, he said to me once, maybe the only mystery. If only we could understand time, we could understand it all.

I was only a teenager, unable to feel it yet. But it would come, he promised. *2001* is really the story of life, he said. If I stepped backwards and narrowed my eyes, I might sense them: eons of time, washing over us.

The last time I saw my dad was when I visited him in the house his wife had bought on a whim in Belgium. It was in August last year in a small town without anything in particular to recommend it, no places of interest, nothing to look at, nowhere to go.

My dad's wife had turned several of the rooms into bathrooms, and the living room made me think of the kind of museums where they rope off the furniture. As in St. Louis, she had furnished the place in such a way that there was nowhere to sit down together, the only thing close was the nook in the sunroom where we had our meals and where three low wicker chairs stood around a high glass-topped table with a thick basketwork base that meant you couldn't get your legs in properly.

Artificial flowers, drape curtains that spilled onto the floor. A fridge with food items past their use-by dates. Everywhere the same sickly sweet, dusty air I remember from the house in St. Louis.

After they picked me up from the railway station and we arrived at the house, my dad asked if I wanted to go for a walk with him and their little white Maltese dog, Molly. We had not seen each other for a year, but his wife immediately got her coat to go with us. We walked down the street towards the canal, and as we passed an area of shrubs and trees enclosed by a low wall, my dad's wife looked at me and announced in her heavy Dutch accent that it was the cemetery. And then, as if it were some peculiar custom she had just discovered to be practised by the locals in this Belgian backwater, she told me that people came there every day to visit their dead relatives.

They come and they park *arll ofer* the street. She gesticulated to indicate the street as she spoke.

To visit dead people! And they bring *flowers* too.

To the dead people!

Can you believe that?

And then, as if on further reflection, she told me I could go there myself and visit her grave after she died.

That, more than anything, unsettled me. What did she imagine? That she would be buried here, far from my dad and their children and grandchildren in St. Louis, in a town where she knew no one? And did she think I would come and visit her grave? Did she think it was *she* I had come to see here?

At any rate, in the week I was there it was hard to find a moment alone with my dad. Every morning she would ask restlessly: What do you *want* to do today? And neither of us had the guts to say we just wanted to spend some time on our own together. To sit and dally at the computer, maybe find a second-hand bookshop with some muggy boxes we could rummage in. But instead she arranged excursions, the purpose of which evaded us. She dragged us around the streets of outlying villages and asked us what we wanted to see now that we were here. Neither of us knew what to say, having no inclination whatsoever to trudge about in such dull and empty places, it was she who had taken us there, we had simply followed.

You mean, we came all this way for *nurthink*?
She was seething. We had painted ourselves into a corner.
So now you just *vant* to go *beck*?
If you want, my dad replied nervously.
No matter what we did, we painted ourselves into corners.

The rest of the time we spent at the computer in his room, a converted garage where he had his bed and his desk. We visited dead relatives on Google. My dad had reached the age where the past, even the past he had never personally known, had come alive. In recent years he had taken an interest in genealogy.

We went on Google Maps and found Ruby Ranch, not far from the place in Texas where my dad grew up. It was there, on Ruby Ranch, that he and my mother once visited a wealthy relative. My mother has told me about it many times, how my dad's Uncle Cecil had sat at the end of the dining table, the Texas patriarch, a wrathful, inebriated highway king used to having his own way, how everyone else had sat there silent and submissive, his wife and children, servants cowering in the background. Outside the windows his property stretched out into infinity, visitors had to be picked up in a jeep to even get to the house from the entrance gate. He insisted my mother drink whisky with her meal, and my mother refused. She was pregnant with me. His hysteria spiralled. At one point he was so desperate he took out his wallet and offered her money. From where my mother was seated she could see the servants, a black married couple, the man a kind of butler, his wife the cook, standing watching from the kitchen, their faces twisted with shame at the way the master of the house was carrying on just so he could have things his way. But my mother won. It was not a question of money, not even a question of having it her way, but of keeping sound judgement in the face of madness.

Later, they would refer to it as "the Tennessee Williams night". Now, many years on, the son, my dad's deceased cousin, turned his part of the estate into something they call the Ruby Ranch Neighborhood, an entire residential area of smaller properties on private roads. We Google-mapped about there for a while. The roads are named after the family: Walter Circle, Humphrey's Drive, Clark Cove ...

I looked at my dad's hands at the keyboard. It's not just that I've been waiting for something from those hands all my life, waiting or hoping, there's something else too. It's as if they hold some kind of an answer. The way they move, the pronounced joints. I've always spent time looking at my dad's hands. They were busy digging in the past, but it seemed to me there was still a lot of life hidden in those hands, many stories still to be told, and I hoped that some of them involved me.

One evening, when all three of us were seated around the glass-topped table in the sunroom, conducting the nervy kind of dinner conversation that occurs when the field of discussion is littered with all manner of mines and traps, my dad's wife found out that

my stepfather back home in Denmark was ill. I could not have envisaged what this information would prompt her to exclaim: 'Then your *murthur* and *farthur* can get back together!

I was so astounded that I was unable to speak. My dad said nothing either. She continued her meal regardless of the state of shock into which my dad and I had been thrown. A more reasonable reaction would have been to address the sad reality my mother and stepfather now found themselves in. But her thoughts jumped ahead in time, leap-frogging the death she imagined to be the natural outcome. And they went further still, into a fantasy in which my dad, in the forty-odd years in which he had been married to her, had merely been waiting for the chance to re-marry my mother. And that my mother likewise had been waiting and would now soon be ready. That the continents would thereby glue together and everything that once was would now be again, cemented together and intact, and in the midst of it all lay I, the happiest pea in the pod.

Neither of us mentioned it afterwards.

We said our goodbyes the evening before I went home. My dad and his wife are late sleepers, and my train left before they were in the habit of waking. I got up in good time, my dad's wife had forbidden me to use the hot water, but I took a hot shower anyway, in one of the many bathrooms, the same one my dad used. I had no idea if I would ever return to the house, or when I would see my dad again.

My dad had ordered a taxi from a firm they had used before. It was a dismal morning, foggy and cold. I dragged my little wheelie case out into it, and the driver took me to the station without a word.

Eight months later, in April, my stepfather died at Frederiksberg Hospital. He had been sitting in his chair and had suddenly felt ill, and a few hours later he could no longer get out of bed on his own. It was a Friday and my mother did not know if they could get through the weekend on their own, so she had him admitted to the medical ward in the belief that things would be all right again by Monday. The next afternoon, the Saturday, a Swedish doctor informed my mother and me that he would not be coming home again. We sat on a pair of swivel chairs in what had recently been a ward and was now a makeshift office. They were going to take him off his drip, the doctor said. Otherwise they would just be *dragging it out*. “Otherwise” being IV therapy.

The drip was dismantled and he stayed in room seven. My mother sat by his bed, the days and nights accumulating in her face. And yet it came as a shock. We had seen the fear in his eyes, and still it was a shock when room seven went quiet:

We are sitting on either side of his bed and can no longer hear him breathing.

The last five days and nights have been as one, a prolonged nightmare. Two weeks ago, two weeks before he was admitted, we had lunch together in one of the small garden restaurants in Frederiksberg, celebrating his birthday early. He got to his feet and showed off his new trousers, front and back, new thick-ribbed corduroy trousers.

A week later he bought steak from Lund’s the butchers. We spoke on the phone, it was the day he turned sixty-three. He told me the steaks, two whopping great *tornadoes*, were so impressive that the butcher had held them up for the other customers to see before he wrapped them up.

Then he was admitted to the hospital. I had brought yellow tulips, they had been standing in a bucket at a flower seller’s on Kongens Nytorv, and since he has always loved yellow flowers I bought a bunch and carried them down with me into the metro.

Five days later and he is lying underneath them.

One of the nurses says, about the flowers: They were so fresh. She stands with us for a moment. Then she looks at me and says: You look like your dad.

That same night I wake up with my heart racing. I have the feeling someone is standing on my chest. It is not my own fear of death that wakes me, not a realisation that I too am to die one day, that I am *the next in line* or anything like what I have heard people talk about in similar situations.

I have only one thought in my head: My dad can die.

I assume he is back in St. Louis, but actually I have no idea where he is. It is not unusual for there to be months between our emails. I lie and wonder if he might be dead. I have not heard from him since February.

It has never before occurred to me that my dad can die. Not in any way other than the abstract possibility. As in, we must all of us die one day. Something very remote, in a far-off future, and therefore of concern to another person than me. But now it’s here. Corporeal and unavoidable. As in, one day you’re standing at the butcher’s, the next you’re lying under a bunch of yellow tulips.

The following nights the same thing happens, exactly the same. I wake up with difficulty breathing, in a cold sweat, after which I lie awake for a long time and think about the telephone. The way a father's death always involves a telephone. Someone calls, a nurse for instance, and says: Your mother thinks you should come. The importance of that phone call cannot be overestimated. In the case of my stepfather I got there in time to be at his bedside, in time to hear him stop breathing. But even if I had not, the phone call is crucial.

I would even go so far as to say that the phone call is necessary to what happens next. Maybe that is why all the books that have been written about losing a father begin with that phone call. It divides life up into a *before* and an *after*. It holds a message of obvious importance. But more than that. The phone call says: You belong. It says that there is someone at the other end, someone who acknowledges that your father's death is a matter for your concern. It says: You are not alone.

Because what is the alternative? The alternative is not being told. Your father dies somewhere, someone makes sure he gets buried. That was that. You don't know, maybe you don't find out for a long time, and then only by chance: He is dead.

Without the phone call there is no story.

Without the phone call there is only unimportance.

Your father is dead, but no one thought it concerned you.

In my nightmarish nightly scenario, the message comes in the form of an auto-reply from his university email account. To whom it may concern. A cold fact, not addressed to me specifically, but to the world in general. He has died on his continent without me knowing on mine. There is no longer anyone at the other end. It is as if he never lived.

In the courtyard outside our kitchen window there stands a cherry tree. I have been watching it, it is the season in which, briefly, it transforms, revealing itself in its true nature. Its branches are heavy with buds. Often, I am away in April or May, but this morning they unfold as I watch, dreamlike. White blossom, thick with the spring.

The tree is not a metaphor for life going on. Life does not go on, life becomes something else, and the tree is just a tree. It emerges as if from another world, a moment, a week, three weeks. And then it is gone.

It's all about being there when it happens.

I send my dad an email: Is there a plan? Who is going to call if anything happens to him?

He writes back: Don't worry, nothing will happen to me. He is busy at the university and despite his seventy-seven years he feels fit and full of energy.

He is not going to die. That is the message. No plan is needed.

But if something *does* happen to me, he writes, Sabrina will surely contact you.

Sabrina, the youngest of my three sisters. I know she lives somewhere in St. Louis, but I don't know her address, and as far as I'm aware, she doesn't know mine.

It's six years since I saw her last. I stopped off in St. Louis, driving into the city with my boyfriend and staying a night at a hotel where they had a stuffed bear in the lobby. She was a housewife, mother of two, husband working for Whole Foods in another state. He wasn't home. That was normal, she said, her husband worked his butt off out of state and she stayed home and looked after the kids.

I remember going to a supermarket to buy something, not a Whole Foods but the Kroger we used to go to when we were kids. I have no idea how many hours we spent in its aisles back then, her mother pushing the heavy shopping cart, but now here was my sister in front of me, a handbag over her arm, clutching a fat purse and asking: Do you want anything? Her gesture, a sweeping hand: take your pick. Afterwards, I couldn't let go of the picture of her in my mind the way I remembered her when she was ten and my dad could make the tips of his fingers meet around her waist as easy as anything. She reminded me then of a trembling bird, a sparrow, and now here she was dragging me along behind her through the supermarket like I was a child.

Little Sabrina had grown up. But would the thought occur to her to go home to my dad and search through his papers for my phone number? If anything did happen to him? Would she even remember I existed?

I don't think she would.

I get Sabrina's email address from my dad. I write to her and ask if we can make the necessary arrangements. I wait, but no reply comes. Nothing, not even an auto-reply. I write to Carissa, the eldest, the one I was close to as a child.

She writes back: Don't worry, we won't forget you, Mathilde.

Just a hasty note in passing. No *Dear*, no *Love*. But more importantly, no: Yes, of course, here is my number. Let's test if this works.

Just those seven windswept words.

Don't worry, we won't forget you, Mathilde.

Nothing else.

Since I was in my twenties I have known that one day I would have to write about my dad. Maybe I have known longer than that, maybe I have known since the first time I visited him and his family in St. Louis. But I only realised I knew after reading Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*. That book begins with just such a phone call as the one I now worry about not receiving.

Paul Auster is up country with his wife and their little son. It's early one Sunday morning and the phone rings, and as always with that kind of call he knows instantly that something is wrong. His father has died, without warning, just like that.

As soon as Auster puts the phone down he knows he will need to write about his father. It is as if his father has never existed, an extreme example of "the distant father", an invisible man, an enigma.

Auster feels a very powerful sense of urgency about this. Not writing about it will make it all vanish, the memories, the traces, the possibility of finding out who exactly his father was.

If I do not act quickly, he writes, his entire life will vanish along with him.

The distant father. In my own father's case, the English is very precise. Not only is he a distant father in the sense of not being present, he is also a distant father in the sense of being far away. A bit like looking the wrong way down a telescope and perhaps picking out a figure in the distance. A tiny figure with his head projecting forward turtle-like from his shoulders and one hand buried in a jangling pocket. Kind, well-meaning and with no sense whatsoever of the real world. *If something does happen, surely Sabrina will contact you.*

The father as a distant planet.

If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him.

I am reminded of that sentence during one of my sleepless nights. Again, I have woken up with a feeling of having come up against something dreadful in a dream, something to which I cannot return. Afterwards I lie awake for hours, still dreaming. I drift through a labyrinth of corridors, inflict myself on them, chase down figures clad in white, fleeting, fleeing. At some point, death occurs behind what for me is an impenetrable wall.

I realise that during the course of these recurring nocturnal circulations a mythical confusion occurs. By some breakdown of logic, *father* has taken the place of *stepfather*. I am trying to recover my father from Frederiksberg Hospital. I am trying to save one from the fate of another.

But it doesn't help. Every night they die, my fathers, without me being able to do a thing about it. It feels like running through water, like reading a book through a nylon stocking.

A heavy sense of time running out. I think of my dad's hands at the keyboard of the computer in his room in Belgium.

If I do not act quickly ...

One of the scenes in *The Invention of Solitude*, still vivid to me, is about clearing out his father's house.

"There is nothing more terrible," Auster discovers, "than having to face the objects of a dead man." The house had become too much for him. It was a big house, the same one Auster grew up in. The horror of going through the brimming drawers and discovering stray packets of condoms among the underwear and socks, or a dozen empty tubes of hair colouring hidden away in a leather travelling case in a bathroom cupboard.

Paul Auster clears out the house in the hope that his father will reveal himself to him in the traces he has left behind. But his father's objects provide no deeper understanding. On the contrary, they merely reinforce the sense of impenetrable mystery, of something irremediable and meaningless. The house contains all the signs of unmoored existence. His father's inscrutable life has been conducted independently of his objects. They reveal nothing.

The single worst moment for Auster is walking over the front lawn in pouring rain with an armful of his father's ties to dump in the back of a charity shop truck. By then he has given away most of the contents and has called the truck to come for what is left. And then there he is, with his father's ties, and all of a sudden he can remember each and every one. The patterns, the colours, the shapes of them all are as clear in his memory as his father's own face. Tears well in his eyes as he tosses them into the truck.

The worst moment is also the most tender, and the most necessary.

In the same instant he lets go of his father's ties, he understands that his father is dead.

It was the clearing-out scene that affected me the most. I have since discovered that just such a clearing-out scene comes in every book I have read about fathers dying. Clearing out a house (in whatever form) belongs to the dramaturgy of a father's death in much the same way as the phone call. In Linn Ullman's book *De urolige*, written in the Norwegian, each of the father's nine children is allowed to choose one of his things to keep, the rest of the house being left intact with all its objects, exactly as it stood, like a gigantic archive, an open memory.

In the Haitian writer Dany Laferrière's book *The Enigma of the Return*, Laferrière is given the key to a safe-deposit box on his father's death. It turns out that the box cannot be opened without the code his father took with him to the grave. That says it all. When fathers die, the code goes with them, resigning us to guesswork about what is in the box. But he is given the key. And I hold on to that. His father left him a key, the way Auster's father left him a house. By the end of his book, Auster has taken possession of some of the objects that were left, he wears his father's sweater and drives his father's car. Switches on his father's lamp. He concludes that they have become objects like any others, and that his father is still as inaccessible as ever. I doubt that it will ever matter, he says.

But a key, a house, is still a start. Some patterned neckties. Everything that lies embedded in them and which has no language. Without the objects, no memory, and without memory, no reconciliation. The connection between the ties and his father's face, the tenderness of the moment he tosses them away. The fact that he can even toss those ties, the extravagance of grief that lies in that movement of the hand.

Now he leaves his own traces. They started some time long before. His father's path merges seamlessly into his own, and in that way, for all his father's shortcomings, he *is* or *becomes* incontestably his father's son.

The matter of course that is entering his father's house and clearing out. The right to do that, of free and unhindered access. That was what I held on to, that having a house to clear out is a start.

That the horror of clearing out a house can never surpass the horror of not having the right to enter it.

I am to inherit my dad's old comic books, the superhero and science-fiction comics he collected as a child. I suppose they still occupy the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard in the house my siblings grew up in, which they never referred to as anything else but "my mother's house". The same house that has stood empty since she bought the one in Belgium, still for sale after five or maybe seven years.

My dad showed me them when I was thirteen. I was sitting on my own watching TV in the room they called the solarium, an enormous conservatory with a marble floor and colonial style windows from floor to ceiling (I have no recollection of where everyone else was, it was one of those rare quiet moments alone), and then my dad appeared and said: I want to show you something.

I stood up and went with him out into what we called the butler's pantry, a long and narrow and very high-ceilinged annexe to the kitchen, with marble counters and glass-fronted mahogany cupboards along the walls. The fronts of the cupboards on the top row were wood and my dad pointed up at one of them. There, packed away in boxes, were his comic books.

I want you to remember this, he said. He reached up and opened the cupboard so I could see the boxes and what they contained. Things get so easily lost around this house, he said.

That was all he said. I made no comment. We both knew what it meant, what he was trying to say. It meant that someday he would be dead. It meant it was up to me. That terrified me. What did he imagine? Did he think that I, a thirteen-year-old girl, could fly in from Denmark and walk into his house, their house, his wife's house, and announce that my inheritance was in the cupboard up there?

When he pointed to the cupboard, he was pointing to something else without knowing. Objects cannot be taken for granted. There will be no tossing of ties into trucks. My dad is mine while he is here. There are only so and so many moments. And then none.

Writing about dead fathers is a luxury reserved for sons and daughters with a right to walk into the houses those fathers leave behind.

In my notebook, I have written the word *paper-thin*. Paper-thin what? Paper-thin memory. Paper-thin image. My paper-thin idea of what it all means. What people in general mean when they say *father*. Paper-thin airmail paper that crackles in the hand, folded twice, lengthwise. My ten-day-delayed image of my dad. I will write it down. I will make it paper. I will make it an object. I will build a house of it, a house of memory, a house of reflection, a house I can walk into some time in the future, and that house will be my ties.

His childhood, or my impression of his childhood, is an idyllic concentration of the collective memory of 1940s America. It looks like Woody Allen's *Radio Days*. Apart from the fact that it doesn't take place in a Jewish family, or in New York, but in a white Anglo-Saxon family in the South, a family who had already lived in the same small town in Texas for generations. Radio is part of that, a spine running through it. I imagine a boy lying on a carpeted floor in short trousers, listening to programmes about heroes with names like Captain Midnight and The Shadow.

And I imagine him too cutting the top off cardboard cereal packets to send off for some small plastic item which in some way connects to those radio programmes. My dad, little Johnny, standing by the mailbox waiting for his decoder badge that lights up in the dark. Hair combed and parted, short trousers, bare feet. His mother kept a meticulous record of his achievements in a Baby Book. At the age of six, he proposed marriage to a girl named Patty Pope. He wore no shoes in school. He had a dog called Poochie Scabbie. When I hear about his childhood, I think: Was the world really that innocent?

The way I think of it, my father's mother is the family's invigorative focal point, at once bossy and warm-hearted, and with the wry humour I came to experience many years later in the kitchen of her small white wooden house on West San Antonio Street. She was the daughter of the town's saddlemaker, August Walter. He ran his business from a premises on the town square which, the way my dad described it, looked like something I knew from *The Little House on the Prairie*, a store with a wooden floor covered in wood shavings, which besides saddles and harnesses also sold gunpowder and pistols and fishing rods, and other things necessary to life in those parts. A hardware store with a comforting smell of tarred rope and leather.

August Walter was the only one of my dad's grandparents not to have grown up in Lockhart. According to what my dad has told me, August's parents ran away to America from Austria when they were still young in order to get married (his family were poor, hers were wealthy). That would make August a first-generation American, but there are indications that the young elopers were actually his grandparents. At any rate, his parents lived a day's journey by wagon from Austin, where they secured him an apprenticeship as a saddlemaker when he turned thirteen, so he was able to take care of himself from an early age. When his apprenticeship was completed, he found the premises on the square in Lockhart and set up his saddlemaking business there. He died many years before I was born, so obviously I never knew him, and yet he has always stood out in my mind, because I knew something about him that lifted him up from the ranks of ordinary mortals, which was that he once made a white saddle for Buffalo Bill.

Think of that, a white saddle for Buffalo Bill.

If I had a penny for all the times I have uttered that sentence to people, I would be wealthy.

As a young man, August Walter was small and dapper, later he gained more stature, but no one was ever in the slightest doubt that he was his family's supreme authority. Once a week he brought a bag of delights home to his wife, Pearl, whom he spoiled as much as he spoiled his five children. Everyone wanted Poppa's favour. August Walter was never August Walter to anyone in the family, to them he was Poppa, the same way his wife was always Momma, not only to their children, but later their grandchildren too. And to my dad, his own mother was just "Gussie". Or rather not *just*, for Gussie was never *just* anything. Other kids only have a mother, my dad once said when he was still a small boy, but we have a Gussie! My grandmother's unusual moniker was attributed to her being meant to have been a boy. In Texas, people attach as much importance to having boy children as they do elsewhere in the world, if not more, and after two girls Poppa decided it was high time for a boy, and his name was going to be Gus. So when the child turned out to be a girl, there was only one thing for it, and that was to call her Gussie.

Maybe it was apparent from an early age that there was a lot more toughness in my grandmother than so many boys put together, but whatever the reason, it was Gussie Poppa chose to take with him when his parents lay at death's door. That was in 1910, my grandmother was five years old, and the trip south to the town where her father's parents lived was a long one. Poppa had been given two sons in the meantime, but he took only one of his children with him, and that one was Gussie, his third daughter. Gussie herself remembered nothing from the journey, and little at all of her grandparents, only two very old people lying in a bed, two crackling ancients who stared at her and spoke to her father in German. What made the biggest impression on her was that Poppa had chosen her. Of all his children, *I* was the one he picked, she said.

I was eleven years old when I first met Gussie. Like Poppa, my grandfather had already been dead a long time before I was born, and unlike the others my mind holds no image of him. No matter who I ask, they tell me the same thing, that he was a kind and quiet man, decent and loyal, adjectives that in their different ways seem to testify to a good and stable marriage, happy even, albeit perhaps not the stuff of novels. The pictures I have seen of him are all in black and white and tiny, no bigger than a matchbox, with narrow white borders. One shows him as a young man leaning up against the railing of a porch in sunshine, his figure no larger than a paper clip, his face indistinguishable from that of his brother Hugh, who is standing next to him and with whom my grandmother had dallied a bit before Preston. Not that it had any bearing on anything, *dating* was a rather innocent pastime for young Americans of the 1920s and 1930s, so when Hugh and my grandmother had been out together a few times and acknowledged that a spark was missing, Hugh suggested to his brother that he ask her out instead. She's smart, he told him, and good fun. Preston heeded the advice, and after that, as she later wrote to my father, they were *hooked*.

My grandmother had already had lots of boyfriends. She kept them in a box. They lie there still, envelopes in chronological order, each with a photograph stuck to the back. Beneath the photos, she has written their names in the elegant handwriting I know

so well from her letters, George Schlotter, Floyd Langford, Dendy O'Neal, and one referred to only as "Mrs Harris' son" (in brackets afterwards are the words "next door"), besides, most notably, a Murray Denman, his hair parted neatly down the middle, hands buried in pockets, his photograph bearing the designation "Main Boy Friend".

She left their letters to my dad, who has passed them on to me.

In the note that came with them she has written:

John, somehow I want someone to hold on to this part of my life. It was fulfilling and interesting. I was happy. But real lasting love came to me in 1929 – when Preston came along. We "hooked" from the first!

Love, Gussie

Gussie, who was a schoolteacher and taught fourth grade, taught my father the alphabet, and Preston, who was a cashier in the local bank, taught him numbers. The story of how they found out he could read is one I have from my mother, who in turn has it from Gussie. It says that when he was three years old he had been sitting in the kitchen turning the pages of a National Geographic. Gussie took it that he was looking at the pictures, until he looked up and asked her a question relating to the text of one of the articles. He was three.

When I asked him about it one time, whether it was possible that he had taught himself to read, he replied: Certainly not. He had no recollection of learning to read, nor of that day in the kitchen, only that he must have learned the alphabet from his mother and that his desire to crack the code, as he calls it, and be admitted into the secret world of the reader must have driven him to discover how to combine the letters of the alphabet into words and sentences. In other words, what we normally mean by teaching yourself to read.

Arithmetic was much the same story. His father had taught him to count, and something of how numbers could combine, so when occasionally he stayed for dinner at the homes of other children, and their fathers tested their older brothers and sisters in arithmetic, it was little Johnny, who had not yet started school, who sat and chirped the answers as they sat at the table.

I stayed clear of dating, he said once, during college and graduate school. Even if it was tempting, he knew that girls would only distract and frustrate him, and he had sworn he would earn his PhD in seven years.

When he started college at the age of seventeen, he had already jumped a year ahead in high school. He was actually annoyed at himself for having wasted a whole summer after graduation, when he could have taken three or four courses instead. He kept on jumping ahead, zig-zagging his way through the American colleges, Texas University in Austin, Princeton in New Jersey, eventually completing his doctorate seven years later at Washington University in St. Louis with a dissertation he wrote in a month. Maybe he sensed even then Kubrick's astronaut snapping at his heels. He would sit in his office until the small hours. There was a couch on which, to the consternation of the

janitor, he would catch a couple of hours' sleep before getting up and going back to work again. The janitor was convinced he was homeless and tried his best not to make a noise with his broom, but my father sensed nothing, or almost nothing, being so completely absorbed in his dissertation, *The Theory of Strongly Interacting Particles*. It contained a model for calculating complex quantum systems. When it was finished, he had saved five years. He was twenty-four years old. He rested a moment on the couch.

But that's too many pictures already, too much knowledge. For now, my dad is a shape moving in the dark, a word, *Daddy*, and the sound of my mother's voice. He is made of paper twice folded and pushed through the letter box in oblong envelopes edged with red and blue stripes. Although I have never met him, at least not as far as I remember, I do have a strong feeling that he is important, perhaps one of the most important people in my life. The mere fact that everyone somehow knows of his existence, that he is out there somewhere, even though only my mother and my maternal grandmother and my godfather have actually ever seen him, is sufficient to indicate that this is the case. I realise he is the person the others refer to when they ask about "my dad". My information about him is sparse, though saturated with adventure. He lives in America, he is a nuclear physicist, and since he works at an American university he is by the very nature of things unable to be with my mother and me.

His significance can to a large extent be gauged from the care the envelopes require, and the ritual that emerges around them. They are not torn open in haste, to be read while leaning back against the kitchen counter like other letters, but slit open with a special knife and then read out loud in one of the two small sand-coloured wool sofas.

My mother would unfold the paper, which was the colour of full-fat milk and so thick it seemed almost like fleece, and if you held it up to the window the watermark shone, the university coat of arms in a circle the size of a cherry plum, and then she would read out loud, in stops and starts, going back through the sentences, then eventually reading the whole letter from the beginning in its entirety, as fluent as a piece of music, and I snuggled up to her with my obscure and very own idea about the person concealed behind those spoken words.

The very special thing was the heart drawn by hand at the bottom of the page. The way it was drawn gave a sense of the three-dimensional, of the heart indeed being an organ of flesh and blood, and that the arrow, Cupid's dart, penetrated deep and irrevocably into its soft, plump cushion.

Clean bedclothes, regular bedtimes, fresh air. Milk at every meal, three glasses full, not to be spilt. Each morning the world awakened anew and I was rolled up in the duvet and taken to the high-chair to consume a piece of bread and cheese and half a kiwi or a boiled egg. It was a world populated by women, my mother and my maternal grandmother and my godmother, as well as my grandmother's other friends from the home economics school who would come together and offer each other bitter-tasting chocolates from fine, gold-lined boxes while talking about those who were not there.

At nursery school, which was full of women who for reasons unknown to me had wrapped colourful rags around their heads, I heard about someone they called God, and since whoever that was had according to them created the world, I naturally assumed that person to be a *she*.

When my mother came back from America with a baby under her arm and as much as could fit into a bag, she moved back in with her mother and father. She took a typewriting course and learned shorthand, and took a job as a secretary in the city. *With*

me under her arm and as much as could fit into a bag, were wordings I would use if ever I had to describe how my mother had got on a plane and come home from America when I was hardly a year old. She found a small apartment not far from her parents, and went to and from work every day by train. As if by magic, she was able to make a new day appear out of her sleeve every morning.

Whenever my grandmother and my mother spoke about my dad, my grandmother would say: *He's always had such kind eyes*. Later, after my grandmother died, my godmother appropriated her words: *John's always had such kind eyes*.

Another characterisation was this: *John's as good as the day is long*.

A third: *There's not a bad thought in him*.

A fourth: *The absent-minded professor*.

These were words uttered in chorus when the envelope with the monthly cheque inside either came far too late or did not come at all. He was forgetful, with no sense of time, and my mother had to remind him. But it was not for want of good intent. I understood that he was not present on the planet in the same way as other people.

Each day we snipped a centimetre off a tape measure that hung from the fridge door. When *Daddy* comes, my mother would say, and whatever came after those words had wings. *Daddy's coming soon. Only two more day till Daddy comes ...*

In an essay about her father, Siri Hustvedt writes about how she and her sisters would wait every day for their father to come home, and the intense happiness that accompanied the sound of the door opening, when they would run towards him “as if he was a returning hero”, shrieking, “Daddy's home!”

I felt an excited shudder of recognition when I first read that passage, even though the situation she describes is not one that I ever knew. My dad never came home to us after work like that to let himself in through our door, and yet something inside me still shrieked *Daddy's home!* along with Siri Hustvedt and her sisters when I read those lines. All these women, a whole house full, and then the father comes home with the scent of the big wide world on his collar, guarantor of there being a life outside the home. Is it then a circumstance of life that all little girls, regardless of whether they have a father or not, lie ears to the floorboards, listening for his footsteps? I think so. Perhaps the scene has been performed and performed again over such great spans of time that it has taken residence within us, taken on a life of its own, and taken over, not knowing, or perhaps not caring, whether there even *is* a father. Perhaps the father is a mythological imperative in any girl's life. And while the original footsteps fade away, making it impossible to say what is myth and what is nature, if there ever *was* a first time a father's footsteps sounded, or if little girls have simply waited always, we wait. The same way a bird finds its way to Africa without having flown the route before, we wait.

He has since told me about how I stood holding my mother's hand in something like a sailor suit, waiting for him in arrivals, tense with excitement. I can work out it must have

been the summer I turned three, because we moved from the place we were living, some white brick-shaped buildings across the road from the Technology Park in Virum before my birthday. I remember nothing from the airport, nor from the journey home, but I do remember the moment we opened the door of our apartment and I looked at the hall. I remember every detail. It was the same as I had seen every day, our two-bedroom apartment, my mother's and my home, the hall with the grass-green carpet and the three dome-shaped lamps, the short passage leading into the living room, I had seen it all many times before, and yet at that moment I saw it for the first time. The sand-coloured sofas, the dining table, the leather couch my mother used for her bed at nights. My eyes gathered all of it up like pebbles picked from a beach.

The image of the daughters and the returning father turned on its head: I came home, because he was with us.

I saw my home, the two-room world in which my mother and I lived, because my father saw it.

I showed it to him by *seeing* it.

Even today I have the feeling that we can go into a room together, he and I, and look at the people and the situations and the objects in it with a quite fundamental open-mindedness, the kind that exists at the moment of waking, the moment before you realise who you are and the world pulls itself together into something recognisable. A feeling of being able to make myself, or us both, into liquid. Of our *becoming eyes*.

It has something to do with his quiet manner. Conversely, his field of research, theoretical physics, is filled with the most colourful characters. The times I have been to conferences with him have been like excursions with the gallery of characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. A busload of oddballs with the profoundest understanding of matters of which the rest of us have only the very dimmest notions, and yet with their shoelaces left undone. Once, one of my father's colleagues quite inadvertently made a lady faint in a supermarket just by turning around. The sight of him was enough. My dad, though, is not the kind to make others faint. He doesn't take up space, is never obtrusive. Not even when anyone else would find it irresistible, like at my birthday parties where someone will always be eager to impress him with homespun theories of quantum physics, or will venture to put forward popular-science explanations of wormholes and what-have-you, inspired by YouTube clips featuring Stephen Hawking. Not even then will he succumb to the temptation of correcting them, entertaining with shaggy-dog stories from the world of science, or in any other way make himself out to be *clever*.

Instead he remains quietly on the periphery, a perfect witness, mild, non-judgmental, impartial. There he will stand, in all humility, jangling the keys in his pocket. Sipping his whisky on the rocks, clearing his throat, on the edgeland and yet at the centre, for without him in any way inviting it, everyone in his vicinity will strive to make an impression on him. Not only me, but everyone, his colleagues, my sisters' men, strangers meeting him for the first time. Without him wanting it to be so, or doing

anything to make it happen, the whole world and all its wonderful chaos will gravitate towards him, fawning, showing off, hoping for his acknowledgement.

Niels Bohr's grandchild: Right, John? What do you think, John? Remember, John?

And my dad agreeing, the lightness of his chuckle, friendly and warm: Certainly! Right!

And then when I am with him, like that day we came home from the airport when I was barely three years old, my eyes become his. Or: I take possession of the world by seeing it for him. He sees what I see. I *see* the world in front of him.

I tell myself it has always been that way. I tell myself we have always shared a particular *wordless understanding*. It is not something I have talked about with him. I tell myself he feels the same, and that that is exactly what is meant by wordless understanding: It exists without words.

In the middle of the room that was normally our living room, removal boxes were stacked up into a big brown cube. The two small sofas with their sand-coloured wool cushions, the dining table, the chairs, my mother's couch. In the boxes were the lamps from the hall, and all our other belongings too.

My room was the last to be packed and the first to be unpacked in the new place. There was a sloping lawn and the room had a different shape, squarer, but everything was put exactly the same as before, with only minor displacements due to the room's dimensions, but the desk was there, and the red boxes with the wheels on the bottom, and the bed was made up with the green stripy cover that had once been my maternal grandfather's, and before I knew it the world had turned a quarter revolution and it was evening, and I was put to bed in my own bed in a new place, where there would be new friends to play with, in a new nursery school.

And still later there would be new new places with new trees in which I could climb, and new schools, and new letter boxes through which striped envelopes would fall. A year and a half would pass, or perhaps two or four, and then my mother would look at me with eyes that said it was time to fetch the removal boxes up from the basement again.

I learned to deal with it and could assemble them in less than a minute, bending the side flaps down and knocking them into place with a hollow bat of my hand, and later, when they were empty again, unfolding them and stacking them next each other, big brown squares leaned against the wall, always with the flap down in the same top corner to stabilise the stack. We became proficient, my mother and I, we were good at moving, never putting so much into a box that we would be unable to pick it up and carry it ourselves. And to the work of packing belonged the very particular job of sifting and sorting, we *took stock* and made decisions about what was to *go with us*. But of course, the letters were exempted from such decision-making, they had their own box to themselves in the basement, carried with us conscientiously every time we moved. *Daddy's letters*.

I don't know where we got the kite from or how this whole kite-launch came about, but suddenly, like in dreams, we are involved in the project of putting the kite in the sky. We are on the grass in front of the next apartment we lived in, my mother and I, it faced this huge, sloping lawn, and there is my dad, we are running, his pockets are jangling, the winds takes hold and the kite is snatched upwards. Into the air. His hands are busy, he gives the kite more line, adjusting all the time in accordance with the wind. The kite hovers. And then it drops, abruptly like a bird of prey, towards the grass, as if it saw something there. My dad runs towards it, with me on his heels.

The line has snapped or is tangled up, something, at least, is wrong, because he rummages in his pocket, which is heavy with all manner of objects, until finding a red penknife with a little white cross in a circle. I remember clearly the way he unfolds the blade with his fingers, his long fingers with their pronounced knuckles and joints, and cuts away the tangle, joining the rest of the line swiftly with a knot. I admire the penknife in his hands. It is something I have not seen before. A knife pulled from the jangling pocket of a pair of cigar-brown trousers. Pleated men's trousers, perhaps corduroy, a pocket with a knife in it. Standing there on the grass with a dad, my dad, with *Daddy*, his jangling pockets, his penknife and his hands. His hands are an incomparable discovery, the way they work, dealing with the line, fixing the kite: they are incredible, a miracle. They made him real to me, and proved he existed.

Otherwise it was hard to form a clear picture, to bring him into focus between his annual visits. Mostly when I thought about him I would see him as if through a rainy window pane. A distant figure, an outline, a feeling. In the summer, a week that coincided with his attachment to the Niels Bohr Institute, he appeared from out of the dimness with his little suitcase and checked in to the Hotel Østerport, a tall, dark man from the other side of the Atlantic, slender, with an eagle-like nose and dark brown, almost black, wavy hair, thick black-rimmed glasses. His hands and his jangling pocket. The brown laced shoes, rubber-soled. Hair washed and combed back, parted at the side, the smell of Old Spice. His clearing of the throat and tendency to get himself into a fluster. Transparency sheets and his worrying about them, the ever-irreplaceable transparency sheets that so often got left on trains in Eastern Europe on his way to some important conference. Johnny Walker, water and ice. His way of conversing, standing in our kitchen, hand in pocket, jangling, while my mother made dinner. His way of eating, with the fork in his right hand, knife resting unused on the edge of his plate. His small, astonished laughter. His willingness to acknowledge. The words *right* and *certainly*.

But mostly his hands and the way they fumble with a camera or reach for his breast pocket for something to write with. The checked shirts, whose breast pockets were crammed with writing implements, felt pens, markers for his transparency sheets, and the particular yellow propelling pencil whose thick leads emerged by twisting it in the middle. It was as if his breast pocket and all its writing implements, especially the propelling pencil, were a part of his very self, belonging to him as the hammer belonged

to Thor, the trident to Neptune. Whenever something needed to be written down (which was often), he reached for his breast pocket, his fingers finding the propelling pencil as if they had eyes. In the same pocket, a thick, transient wad of folded-up papers, an improvised notebook. If he needed to write down a message, an address or a phone number, he would take off his glasses, snatching them from his face almost, and go through the wad, wildly concentrated and with eyes wide open and peering, as if he were examining each piece of paper through a magnifying glass or a keyhole to see if there might be some small corner of white still available, and then he would twist the propelling pencil to bring out the lead and jot down the message in handwriting so meticulous it very nearly resembled text on a printed page, handwriting I knew so well from his letters ...

The world we shared comprised overwhelmingly paper and words, airmail envelopes with letters inside, his handwriting, the smell of stationary. Hallmark cards on Valentine's Day, postcards from places with names like Pisa, Paris, Palo Alto, Taxco, Turin, Trieste, Cologne – this is sounding like a poem – Caracas, Cape Town, Bogota, Buenos Aires, Mar del Plata, Varenna, Geneva, postcards with rounded corners or serrated edges, and twice a year the pale blue cheques from the bank in Lockhart with the printed message “Happy Birthday!” or “Merry Christmas!”

In that world, objects became infused with meaning, physical objects like the presents he sent, or more especially those he brought with him when he came on his visits.

This morning when I woke up I decided to make a list of them. It contains twelve items. Twelve objects given to me by my father. I remember the circumstances in which each was given, though the objects themselves are for the most part gone, broken or passed on, a couple of children's books, toys by Fischer Price, some games, a pocket transistor made of plastic, that sort of thing.

But I still have the butterfly broche.

It came in the post in a small cardboard box lined with cotton wool that made the envelope bulge with promise. I opened it in my room, we had moved again, this time to a detached single-storey house in a Copenhagen suburb, and there, inside the box, nestled in the cotton wool, was a silver butterfly with a turquoise eye on each wing. My mother translated the accompanying card which said he had bought the broche for me on a trip to Mexico.

The butterfly effect, the phenomenon whereby a butterfly, by flapping its wings in Mexico, for instance, can send a hurricane through an ordinary Danish residential area. Not that I ever wore the broche, it simply never occurred to me to use it as an *ornament*, something to display to others. It was not at all like Paul Auster with his father's watch or sweater, the broche did not enter into the sum of things, did not become an object like other objects. It was not an object of that sort, more a kind of religious relic, a precious fragment of some greater and not entirely fathomable connection, like a meteorite falling from the sky and telling us we are not alone, that *something is out there*.

The object as reference: the night sky is not a picture, what twinkles in the distance *exists*.

When we saw each other it was at home, in the changing homes in which my mother and I lived, or else around and about in Copenhagen, at the Niels Bohr Institute, Hotel Østerport, various restaurants, the Tivoli Gardens. It was a rule that on his annual visit he would take us to dinner at the upstairs Chinese restaurant on the corner of Gammel Torv and Strøget, where most of the customers were tourists.

The restaurant is still there, and when occasionally I happen to stand at the pedestrian crossing on the square waiting for the light to change, my eyes will look up to the restaurant's name in green and red neon lettering, *Restaurant Shanghai*, though to my mother and I it was never known as anything but *the Chinese restaurant*.

When I got older, I formed the impression that my mother found it a rather miserly choice, considering that my dad hardly needed to consider the cost this one time a year, but she never once criticised the arrangement or made my dad look cheap in my eyes. On the contrary. Going into the city to meet my dad at the Chinese restaurant was always an occasion, a wild adventure as if to some foreign land, where all the dishes were displayed behind glass and Chinese waiters in stumpy pants and quilted jackets went among the noisy tables collecting the used plates in grey plastic bowls with handles on them.

I always had the same thing, a spring roll served on a thick plate of unbreakable china, slit down the middle by my mother and drizzled with soya sauce.

At the other side of the table, my dad sat with his dark, wavy hair and his horn-rimmed glasses, in his brown, pale yellow or beige polo neck sweater, clearing his throat. When we had finished the meal, he would get the camera out. It was protected by a caramel-coloured leather case which, when it was undone, dangled underneath. Taking a picture required some considerable preparation. Glasses off, he would first peer through the viewfinder with one eye, inevitably discovering that the lens cap was still on. After that, he would need to measure the light with a separate meter the size of a box of matches.

As he prepared, I would watch him. His face, his kind brown eyes glancing across at me. As the years passed, the horn-rimmed glasses would be replaced by metal-rimmed glasses, but his gaze remained the same, mild and affectionate. The way he flustered the longer it took (time, forever passing), his fingers that busied so much that often they would twist the wrong knobs, as if they feared the motif would vanish if they failed to act with the utmost urgency.

It feels strange to be writing some of these things down, and part of the reason for that is the word "dad" itself. For most people, certainly those with a father who speaks the same language as them, the word has two aspects, one universal (everyone has a dad) and one personal (my dad, or "Dad"). But to me the word is entirely abstract, a title, as magistrate or vice-consul are titles, a word without semblance of personal significance or

association. Would it help to use my private name for him, my mother's and mine, and call him *Daddy* on paper? It is a long time since I have called him that, or even spoken the name out loud. At one point, I stopped referring to him in that way when I was with my friends. I had reached an age when I could no longer allow myself such solipsism, sensing it came across as rather comical, like when the sons of the Danish queen publicly referred to their French father Prince Henrik as *Papa* – as if *their* Papa was the world's Papa too. So with my friends he gradually became “my dad”, though I would always take great care never to call him that if my mother could hear me, for I knew she would see right through me. By placing the innocent pronoun in front of the universal noun, I achieved an effect that was by no means innocent at all. *Dad* referred to the set of all fathers, a *dad* was a person who knew the name of the school you went to, who mowed the lawn and taught you to ride a bike, a person you had seen put on his raincoat or set the table or shave in the mornings, and at once I made all of that *mine*. Simply by translating *Daddy* into “my dad” I had succeeded in smuggling in a semantic parcel that told of stabilisers being mounted on bikes and later taken off again, card games played on rainy days stuck in weekend cabins, Christmas trees danced around together. It felt like a shady black-market exchange whereby I had secured myself a more valuable currency, bartered my way into a community to which by rights I did not belong.

I knew I was cheating, that it was a lie, but if “my dad” allowed me access into a more conventional discourse with fewer questions of the kind I had no answers to, then lying just a teeny bit was permitted, so I reasoned, or hoped, because what other options did the language give me?

What other options does it give me now? Writing things down, employing language, is a never-ending negotiation between what everyone has in common and what belongs only to me. That's the way it has to be.

And yet I sense the liar inside me, niggling every time I utter the words “my dad”.

Not until after my eleventh birthday, after six months of English at school, did we speak the same language, though certainly we conversed before that. Had I not stood holding his hand on Copenhagen's long pedestrian thoroughfare, Strøget, in front of a shop window close to Kongens Nytorv? We were on our own, which was unusual (normally my mother would be there to translate), and were looking at the window display, electronic gadgets perhaps, or cameras and photographic equipment, and I had a very clear recollection that we were talking about the items on display, and quite without difficulty.

That very distinct moment in front of the shop window in my memory bears all the marks of having been cherished and nurtured and recounted many times, cultivated even. Told on any given occasion in a voice to suggest that the whole idea of a common language as a necessary basis for conversation was idiotic and utterly superfluous, far too narrow a way of looking at communication, too crude to be taken seriously.

Thereby I would seek to muzzle anyone who might venture to delve. My little example showed that we had communicated so seamlessly with each other that neither of us had need of anything more.

A few years ago I asked him what it had been like for him, our speaking different languages. It seemed like he had never given it a thought.

I spoke a little bit of Danish back then, he said.

Seeing the look on my face, he added: Enough to talk to small children.

He puts his arms around me and gives me a kiss with the words, *I love you, Sweetie Pie*. He says the same thing every time we part, even if we are going to be seeing each other the next day. But inevitably the day comes when we part for longer than that, when we say goodbye at the airport and will not be seeing each other tomorrow. After that we will be apart indefinitely. The words come quietly and with emphasis, as if he is speaking them as much for his own sake as for mine. *I love you, Sweetie Pie*. As if he wants to say: There are so few opportunities, so now it must be said.

Then he walks away with his little suitcase in his hand, into the throng of other people with other suitcases. He goes up the escalator, then vanishes from sight, into the fleecy writing paper with the university watermark.

I cry my eyes out. I have no idea when I will see him again. It feels as if he dies every time.

A writer friend of mine once said that we are never free until our parents are dead. Only when they are gone, she reasoned, can we write without holding back for fear of hurting and put things into words the way we see them.

But in that sense, my dad has always been dead. Right from the start I have been free to say and write what I want. When it concerns him, my language is at once frightful and lonely, but also secret and comforting. It is a black box, a confessional without a priest. No one is listening on the other side of the grille.

Because now there is only this: to ensure that he is committed to paper, to make him tangible, to bring him out of the darkness. No consideration needs to be shown. This is my revenge on the Atlantic: that I am free of it. I remain on my own shore, there is nothing and no one I need to get to on the other side, a disconsolate triumph.

Separation was painful and hard to understand. It knotted my stomach, a heavy and at the same time hollow feeling. It felt like a black hole that could explain all my despondency. Sometimes it was like it came from outside, pressing almost unbearably on the solar plexus, the same feeling as when you tell a lie or steal something, a tunnel-like, bottomless feeling. A nameless ache, as if one were being sucked through a funnel to a place completely without shape or outline. My mother took me to see Dr Gamborg. We sat there all three of us at a desktop that was fastened to the wall, and Dr Gamborg put the cold mouth of his stethoscope to my chest. I breathed deeply, he shone his penlight into my eyes, held my tongue down with a wooden tongue depressor and peered down my throat.

There's nothing wrong with you, he said.

There was a certain clarification, a certain relief.

I think she just misses her Daddy, my mother said. I sat down in the waiting room, and my mother and Dr Gamborg had what she later referred to as *a good chat*.

I knew hardly anything about my dad. It did not occur to me that he lived in a house and slept in a bed under some other ceiling, nor did it occur to me to ask if he was married and had children. When he went away, he simply vanished into a dark void, stepping out with his small suitcase into the infinity that lay behind the watermark of his fleecy writing paper. I knew he was a nuclear physicist and that it had to do with something both infinitely great and infinitely small. With his rare intelligence and the breast pocket of his shirt crammed with writing implements, he stuck out so brilliantly from the ranks of the ordinary that I imagined him to be some sort of astronaut. When he was not coming in through doors with me or looking at electronic gadgets in shop windows, it meant he was travelling in space. There he floated, and there he floats still in a way, out on his own in the great darkness of the firmament, not in an astronaut suit, but in a checked shirt and pleated trousers, brown laced shoes with rubber soles, in the edgelands of what it is possible for a human being to know, hunched over the riddle of the universe, glasses in hand, in a place beyond waves and particles.

Without looking, and with the same sureness as putting your finger to your nose with your eyes closed, he reaches into his breast pocket and amongst all that resides there and makes it sag with weight, he picks out his propelling pencil. The eraser on the end is grey and smoothed like a pebble. Putting the point to the paper he begins to produce his tiny, meticulous symbols and characters from out of the darkness, figures, lines, formulas. At any given moment he exists only seconds away from a phone call from Stockholm. He is humble and self-effacing, with no time to waste. The darkness that surrounds him stretches out so infinitely, his shirt is dusted with chalk, his coffee cold, and the feet in his shoes have no socks on.

He looks up in the darkness – or else looks out into it, it makes no difference here, where darkness is all around. What does he see? I have the feeling that the door is out there somewhere, or in there somewhere, the door I so fiercely want to go through. I so

wish I could go through it with him and see what he sees, the way I once saw the hall in our apartment.

On writing courses all over the world they warn against the word *suddenly*. Stay away from exclamation marks, be sparing with adverbs, and for goodness sake never say that something happens *suddenly*. Does anything happen at all that does not happen suddenly? A plate drops to the floor, a gun goes off. Someone gets an idea, gets to their feet, lightning strikes. It is a basic circumstance of the world that nothing is static. In life's eternal flux, *suddenly* points right back at the writer. *Suddenly* breaks an illusion, making the writer appear comical. Suddenly the sun goes down behind the ancient mountains. Suddenly the sky is full of stars. Suddenly the writer is standing there with blood-red hands.

I am eight or nine years old and seated in a drinking establishment in the old part of the city, Hviids Vinstue, perhaps, or Skindbuksen, between my mother and father at a table by the window. My dad is showing us photographs, my mother translates. In the photo we are looking at now there is a baby, my dad's new son. What has happened since last time we saw each other, I realise, is that I now have a brother. The information is dizzying, a huge surprise, a wish come true in the most unexpected way. Like so many other only children I have dreamt of having a brother or a sister, so this is a bit like winning the lottery, only without being able to cash in the prize. A baby brother! He was born in April and now it is summer, and there, at that dark-stained table, next to a beer mat on which stands a celebratory glass of Jolly-Cola, he is born again. I have seen a number of babies and have reached the conclusion that basically they all look the same, small bodies, big heads, as thin-haired as old men, and yet I sense that somehow I would be able to *recognise* him, that there is something about him that would make him pop out of his two-dimensional surroundings and make it clear that he is *my* baby brother.

I study the photos one by one, several show a tall, thin woman with a blond hairdo of the kind you see in old movies. She is holding the baby, and there are some other people too, some dark-haired girls who capture my interest, taking turns to hold the baby too. At school, I am surrounded by blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian children who, if they happen to be in that kind of mood, will refer to me, the only dark-haired child there, as a *mongrel*, and this is the first time I see children who exactly like me are as thin as a pipe-cleaner, with long, smooth, dark-brown, almost black hair. Not only do they look like me, they look like me to such an extent that I am confused.

Who are those girls?

I cannot remember the reply, only that I had to ask. My mother translates. They are my sisters. Technically my *half*-sisters. The tall lady with the hairdo, I am to understand, is their mother, my dad's wife.

So, besides the baby brother bestowed on me only seconds before, I now have three younger sisters too, the oldest of them, the one who looks like my twin, only slightly more than two years younger. We are nearly the same age! I follow her through the photographs, passing in and out of them through their shiny surfaces, two places at once, here and there, growing new faces. My dad grows too, suddenly he extends back in

time. He has a past. In the time it takes to place a pile of photographs on a table, my dad has got married and had four children.

The word *half*-sibling. A dreadful word.

They're not *half*, I hiss when my friends at school want to know what it means, they're *whole*.

I had never met them, but there could be no doubt that they were indeed whole. I had seen the photos.

That afternoon at Skindbuksen, or wherever it was, it was decided that I was to spend a summer holiday with them in St. Louis. My mother did not want to send me over there before I could speak the language. She wanted me to be able to tell someone if I was upset or wanted a glass of milk. Children needed three glasses of milk a day, especially her child, who would seize the slightest opportunity to wangle her way out.

Two or three years passed during which I kept the memory of the children I had seen in the photos intact. After I had been learning English for a year at school, my mother took a big brown artificial leather suitcase from the loft and tied a broad pink ribbon of silk around the handle, the same ribbon I had worn in my plait in the school play. So you can tell your suitcase apart from all the others, she said.

It was packed with white bermuda shorts and striped polo shirts my mother had ironed and folded. She tried to stay calm, but the only time I had ever been anywhere on my own was with the scouts to Bornholm, and on that occasion there had been adults there to look after us. Before taking me to the airport she took a picture of me in the drive, I am standing next to the suitcase, smiling expectantly in shorts and tennis shoes, my black hair in plaits, but the picture is slightly blurred.

At last I was on my way across the great ocean in my little cereal packet! That was how I thought of it, a tiny mouse furiously paddling towards America's shore in a packet of Ota Solgryn oatmeal. I had to change flights at Heathrow and JFK. Each time I sat in a new plane, the Danish voices became fewer and farther between. On the final leg, the language existed only in my thoughts. I was far into the country, high up in the sky. The plane with its dimmed interior, the Midwest twang of the hostesses over the loudspeakers. And then the city appeared below, a carpet of twinkling lights, St. Louis, my dad's city, which so far I had only studied on maps. A dot, a belly button in America's middle. Now it was there, below me and alive, its lights concentrating inwards from dark and distant hinterland towards the brilliant centre. Small shoebox houses, postage stamp fields, cars moving like toys on the roads. Car parks, illuminated swimming pools, tall buildings, a glittering splendour in the dark. Somewhere down there, among those criss-crossing roads, was my dad's university, the street where he lived with my siblings and their mother, down there in that organic pile, he was waiting with all the richness of his life around him ...

My dad's wife looked like one of those instructional drawings of the human physiognomy you find in old textbooks. She was waiting beside him in the arrivals hall, tall and thin, white arms protruding from a sleeveless dress, revealing every muscle that clung to her slender bones. She could have been drawn by one of those Austrians, Gustav Klimt or Egon Schiele. She made me want to draw too, her jaw sharp and angular as the rest of her, her buttery yellow hair so meticulously piled up on her head that not a single strand strayed from its place.

It was two o'clock in the morning and she walked ahead of us through the airport building, talking in an accent that matched her outline, and which to begin with was hard for me to understand. Alongside me, my dad lugged the artificial leather suitcase (a baggage trolley cost a quarter) and pointed up at the roof, where I now saw a single-engine plane of the kind with only enough room for one person.

That's the Spirit of St. Louis, he said, it was the plane in which Charles Lindberg had crossed the Atlantic non-stop, and for a moment I felt a bit like Charles Lindberg myself, quite as exhausted and as wide awake as he must have been when he landed in Paris.

My dad's wife drove the car, a great barge of a vehicle that sailed us out into the night, past giant billboards on spindly legs welcoming us to Marlboro Country. Street lighting that swayed lazily above the roads, casting its pale light as if from a feverish dream. A woman in one advertisement, with a long, thin cigarette between her lips, said: *You've come a long way, baby*. They spoke to me too from the front seat, my dad and his wife. I had to concentrate, it was difficult for me to pick out what they were saying, difficult to understand. What? They repeated. I leaned forward between the seats. *What?*

The heat in St. Louis, even in the night, was thick and moist and smelled like soil. It struck me as I got out of the car, fat, organic air, an enormous body pressing against me. The sound of crickets, and insects winking in the night like microscopic lanterns. In front of me, swathed in the darkness, was their huge house. My dad was already lugging my suitcase towards it, a house the size of a Danish museum building.

Is it all yours?

He laughed, the kind of chuckle that always comes out when someone says something surprising or funny.

Even the garage was enormous. Besides the beige Oldsmobile we had arrived in, there were two more cars, a blue Ford and a smaller vehicle under dusty wraps. As we made our way to the back door, crossing a small cement-covered yard in which I noticed a basketball hoop and stand, I thought about how many removal boxes it would take to fill such a house. Hundreds and thousands, I imagined. Or letters. Millions upon millions. It would take ten thousand lives to write them all.

The first time I spoke to my father in English was not the kind of revolutionary turnaround or breakthrough that one might imagine. As in, *Oh, now I understand the*

language of the birds, or seeing colours for the first time, or hurling away one's crutches outside the medicine man's tent to dance a euphoric jig in the mud. It was more like the opposite, a disconcerting demonstration of the delicate conditions in which language often must work. We stood in the kitchen, leaned against the tall counter, each with a chinking glass of something cold. My dad had spoken English all his life, it sounded a lot different from the way my English teacher Kirsten spoke, and his wife's Dutch accent required me to listen even more keenly.

She chewed gum and smoked cigarettes, and drank her whisky with water and ice. Her voice was deep, her face covered in a daub of cosmetic cream that made her shine in the fluorescent ceiling lights. She spoke to me like I was an adult. It was an intoxicating feeling, the scene on its own, standing in one's father's kitchen at three in the morning, conversing with him and his wife after a long transatlantic journey. Everything I wanted to say, but couldn't, tormented me. It felt like I had been given a teaspoon to extract a ton of diamonds from deep inside a mountain. Every time I managed to bring something out into the light, it turned out to be coal.

My dad carried the suitcase up to the second floor where my siblings had their rooms. My room was a mirror image of the eldest's, a door in each led out into a bathroom in the middle. The doors of all the rooms were open, we went from one to another, looking in on my sleeping siblings, my dad's wife still holding her whisky glass, switching on the lights so I could see them. There was the eldest, Carissa, the one who looked like me. *Jurst incredible, jurst like twins*, my dad's wife said. In another room was the next eldest, Jessica, and in another the two youngest, Sabrina and Eugene, who had crawled into the same bed and lay tangled up in each other, my baby brother with his sheet bunched up in the clammy night, curled up in a little yellow T-shirt and a pair of beige-coloured shorts. Like the others, he seemed to be sleeping in the clothes he had been wearing during the day, something I had never realised was possible until then. I gazed at him and felt immensely enriched. So small he was, three or four years old, curls of hair stuck to his moist forehead in sleep, and then his contented face, completely open and pervaded by innocence.

Like in the other rooms, the floor of my own room was covered by a thick wall-to-wall carpet, and on top of the carpet were rugs of the kind that are meant to look like genuine oriental rugs that have been knotted by hand. The colour scheme was shades of beige, and apart from my bed the room comprised a pair of chairs and a small decorative table set back against one of the walls, with a vase on it containing a bunch of artificial flowers. For the likely reason that children and servants had not been considered as important as architecture at the time the house was built, it was impossible to look out of any window on the second floor without first climbing onto a chair, and it felt like the light, which came in only after filtering through the many tall trees that lined the street outside, and which slanted in through the small panes beneath the ceiling when the day began, had only the vaguest connection with the world outside.

The first thing I thought about when I woke up the next morning was seeing my sister, the one whose face had been with me ever since my dad had shown me the photos that day in Copenhagen. I had been imagining this moment ever since. I jumped out of bed and there, in the door opening that led from the bathroom into her room, my own sleepy face appeared in front of me, slightly displaced, but with the same familiar, inquisitive look as when you look in a mirror. A few seconds passed before I realised that I was not looking at myself, but at my almost twin sister, Carissa. We stood for a moment, staring at each other, the same and yet different, blinking in disbelief. I have forgotten what we said, but I only slept in my own room that first night. From then on, we stuck together. After that, my room was basically only a place to keep my suitcase. I did not turn around, but followed her into her room and became a part of the mirrored world that opened out to me as I went. Life in the house, life with my sisters and brother and their mother, boundaries and dimensions and contours constantly in flux, the way they are in feverish dreams.

(...)

Travel Book

I think that in my memory I have often done my father an injustice.
Ingmar Bergman, *The Magic Lantern*

In later years it occasionally happened that I awoke at night, and the stars stood out so real and proceeded so meaningfully that I could not understand how one brought oneself to miss so much world.
Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

Take me to Texas
Where my daddy worked
Where his blood and sweat and tears are still in that red dirt.
Brandy Lynn Clark/Shane I. McAnally

When I was little, like most children I loved to look at maps of distant destinations whose lands and customs I endeavoured to imagine. But most of all I loved to look at the map of the USA, whose belly button was St. Louis, the place where my dad lived.

Behind the door of my study there hangs a large map of Texas. When the door is closed and I am at my desk working, my eyes will occasionally wander to the map. Like clouds, most countries look like something other than what they are, Italy is a boot, Denmark a runny-nosed man, but Texas is unmistakably Texas-shaped. Texas looks like nothing else but Texas.

The map has hung there for so long now that I barely think about it. Seen from the desk, Texas' cities and the roads that connect them are little more than a scribble. Most of the towns and cities are in the eastern part of the state, and the three largest, San Antonio, Austin and Dallas, can be reminiscent, with their outer rings of infrastructure, of the tall white flat-topped flowers you see by the roadsides in summer, with Interstate 35 a thick stalk holding up the flower heads.

If I am to locate the city where my dad was born, I must get to my feet and cross the room. It is but one of many dots east of I-35 on the stretch between Austin and San Antonio. I know it is there. But you need a magnifying glass to read its name: Lockhart.

But of course, there are smaller places than Lockhart, so small that not even a big map like mine is big enough for them to be represented. When my dad and I visited his mother in 1997, they took me to a place out on one of the local roads east of Lockhart that was so small and insignificant I was unable to find it even on Google Maps. Its name was Clark's Chapel, but all that was left was a cemetery with a handful of graves in it. There was a particular grave there that my dad and grandmother wanted to show me, the cemetery's most prominent, two mounds of cement next to each other, each with a headstone, at the foot of a tall cedar tree.

The way I remember it, my dad and grandmother stood for a long time looking at those graves. It was a very hot day, I was wearing flip-flops, the dry grass stabbed at my feet and was alive with grasshoppers. The scorching sun beat down on my head, making me dizzy and compelling me to seek the shade of the cedar tree every few minutes. I stood there beneath the tree and watched the horizon shimmer the way it did in movies set on African plains, while my dad tried to make me understand who it was whose remains had lain under the two mounds of cement since sometime in the 1800s, referring to them as "the Ur- Clarks", the first of the Clark family to settle in Lockhart, where five generations would grow up and live.

But none of it really stuck at the time. I failed to comprehend exactly what it was we were doing there or why it was important, the only thing I could think about was how unpleasant it was to stand there in the prickly, humming heat and stare at those old headstones.

My dad knows I am trying to write about him and about the America that used to be so far from me. As Christmas nears, I write to him and tell him I need his help to get going

with it. I want to spend some time in Texas and wonder if he would like to join me, at least some of the time.

He writes back: I would love to make a trip to Texas with you. In fact, he is wild about my idea of writing a Texas book. I've thought of writing something myself, he says, and I am thrilled that you are interested in doing it.

He already has an idea as to when we can meet: his window is the end of April, after the semester close in St. Louis, before he goes to Belgium in May.

Eleven weeks before the window, at the beginning of January, I am skiing down a mountain in the Italian Alps. I see a snowboarder on his backside further down the slope. I am zigzagging at speed, there is no alternative but to go past him. He sits planted in the snow in the middle of the piste and looks like he is going to be there a while yet, a stupid place to stop, I think to myself, but never mind, and prepare to curve past him. And then, at that very moment, he gets to his feet and, without looking, sets directly into my path. He is only metres in front of me, there is no way I can stop, nothing I can do but brace for the collision before the tips of my skis smash into the point of his snowboard.

I somersault, Donald Duck-like, down the slope. My left ski fails to detach. When eventually I come to a halt, I lie there dazed. The snowboarder, a Russian, sits scowling at me. Then, exactly as before, he gets up and sets off down the slope again without looking. I, on the other hand, am unable to rise. Testingly, I bend and stretch my leg. My boyfriend helps me to my feet, hauls me upright, and gingerly we head for the foot of the slope.

I have always heard said that a person is never in doubt if they have suffered a bone fracture. I am in doubt, so I reason that my leg can't be broken. Most probably I've twisted something. I even manage to take the lift up and ski back down again before the pain puts a stop to any more exertions for the rest of the day.

I leave my boyfriend and take a bus back to the hotel, limping up the icy road with my rented skis in afternoon sunshine. Lying in bed at the hotel, I google around to find out what to do about my knee. If it swells like a balloon, it says somewhere, seek immediate medical care. I look at my knee. Sure, it is swollen, but like a balloon? A balloon is big, and my knee is not that big.

By evening I am unable to walk. I use a chair for a walking frame to get to the bathroom. The next morning, we take a taxi to the local A&E, though the place is less than 500 metres from the hotel. It feels like stepping into a scene in a Broadway musical, a small clinic manned by four or five doctors in pale green medical suits. They put me in a wheelchair and roll me about the shiny linoleum floor of the pristine white room. X-rays are taken, it's like a dance, I am lifted and placed on a gurney, three doctors stand and study the screen, two doctors bend over me and say: Something in your knee is broken. They point at the X-rays. Here. Your leg needs to be in a cast. The whole leg? But I'm going to Texas, I tell them. You're not going to Texas, they tell me. Your leg needs to be in a cast. From the groin down. With the edge of his hand, the doctor indicates exactly where the cast will start. There is no getting around the fact that I need an operation, they say, but the operation will be done in my homeland. For the time being, they are going to give me what they call an open cast. Your knee is like a balloon, they say, and drain a litre of blood off it.

The scene continues, they roll the gurney into another room where the cast man is already waiting with long strips of plaster gauze draped over his wrist, all very elegant,

alluring almost. He swivels around, the strips trail momentarily in the air like the ribbons of girl gymnasts at the Olympic Games, and a young doctor says: lift your backside. He puts a pair of white elastic pants on me.

Stylish, I say. Prada, he says with a wink. He hands me a pair of grass-green crutches with the clinic's logo on them. They look sporty. They look like ski poles.

I am transported home on a medical flight and admitted to the Rigshospitalet. My room is on the thirteenth floor. I lie there and watch a seagull as it sits on the railing outside the window looking in at me. The city is dressed in snow. I lie and wait for my operation. After three days, a doctor comes in, a surgeon, and says he would advise against surgery, but that it's up to me. If it was my knee I wouldn't, he says. I decide against it and am put back in a cast, this time a closed one, from the groin down.

The house we live in is a tall, narrow townhouse with one room on each floor. Before they let me go home, they send me up and down the hospital stairs on crutches to practise. People hurry past me. I clutch the banister with one hand, crutch in the other, and heave myself upwards. Not bad, says the physio. A nurse hands me my belongings in a carrier bag, they need my bed and have already made it ready for someone new. I take the lift down.

For six weeks, I lie in my room on the second floor of the house. Six weeks that vanish into oblivion. My memory is a black hole. If I cannot move, I cannot think. All sense of time dissolves, the days are the same. Up and down, up and down to the bathroom. Making tea on the floor below and carrying the cup back upstairs with me takes an hour. By the time I get there, the tea is tepid. I drink it anyway. And then I need the bathroom. Such are my days.

I lie and think about Texas. I think about my dad's window. They said that when the cast comes off my leg will be thin. You need to be prepared, it will be like learning to walk again, they told me. The surgeon said it could take two years before I didn't have to think about it anymore. Two years. It seems so very abstract. I try to feel my leg inside the cast. I try to flex my muscles. Is it thin? I don't think so. I imagine biking home from the hospital when the cast comes off.

We are in mid-March when the cast is finally removed. The cast man splits it open like a hot-dog bun with a tiny circular saw. My leg is unrecognisable, thin and white as a piece of chalk, and oddly hirsute. Is it really mine? It makes me embarrassed. It looks like a dream Kafka might have had, I feel an immediate urge to cover it up, and lift it off the gurney to put my trousers on, but the leg is as stiff as it was when the cast was still on. It is impossible to bend. Impossible in every respect. It feels like someone else's. When eventually I manage to wriggle into my trousers, the cast man hands me my green crutches and says: You know how to use them.

I am put through a regimen reminiscent of what you see in movies when the hero is told he or she will never walk again. Three mornings a week, before the birds are up, I am collected by a handicap transport along with others in the same predicament whose casts have been removed from broken legs or feet in the City of Copenhagen. We are driven to a place of exercise bikes and apparatus to help us walk again. Squares of carpet, for instance. Seated on chairs to form a circle, we “polish the floor for the ambassador”, pretending that the mottled standard-issue linoleum floor is herringbone parquet we polish for some ambassador by drawing our squares of carpet back and forth with the feet of our damaged limbs.

My schedule says three months of rehab, but my dad’s window is only a month away. After two weeks of floor polishing and other exercises I have managed to dispense with one crutch. Cautiously I ask the physio about interrupting my programme so I can travel to Texas. I have no wish to inflict permanent damage on my leg. But my dad’s window is now. It’s hard to explain, I tell the physio. It’s to do with his wife and his work. It’s those days, those exact days – or else maybe I’ll never see him again.

Let’s see how you get on, she says.

The week after, I dispense with the other crutch and have become a highly proficient polisher of the ambassador’s floor. I ask again if, with her approval, I might go ahead and book a flight.

She pauses to think. As long as you don’t do anything mad, she says after a moment.

I tell her I will be visiting cemeteries with my old dad. He’s seventy-nine, I tell her.

It sounds restful enough, she says. But only if you buy one of those folding walking sticks and promise to have it with you at all times in your bag. You can give it to your dad when you go home again.

The distances. I always forget that America is no place for pedestrians. Most of it was built long after people stopped using their legs to get from A to B.

Because of the uncertainty regarding my injury, I bought my ticket rather late. The price of a more direct connection turned out to be too inhibitive and I had to make do with a time-consuming route that went through LA. I allowed myself the luxury of booking a night at an airport hotel, so-called for a reason, or so I thought. Looking at it from home on Google Maps, it looked like the hotel was within walking distance of one of the arrival hall's two arms, which opened Christ-like towards the city, but the arm I have chosen turns out to end abruptly at an unrelenting freeway. As the sky is coloured first lilac and then red, I drag my wheelie case behind me along the verge as if walking a reluctant, box-shaped dog, until eventually the sun sinks away and everything is plunged into darkness.

It is ten o'clock by the time I reach the motel, only to discover that I have got my dates mixed up. The motel man looks up from his computer and tells me my room will be ready in the morning, but that he can offer me a double now, the only one left. A double room at triple cost.

It has a view of the pool, he says through the opening in the glass, as if to entice me.

I manage to get three hours of sleep in a huge bed with the luxurious view of a swimming pool full of dead leaves, before a shuttle service picks me up and drives me back to the airport.

My thin leg is already whacked by the time the plane touches down, a Wednesday morning in April, at the airport outside Austin. The man behind the counter of the car rental firm wants to give me a different car from the one I have ordered. You need a bigger car, he says, and looks at me through drop-shaped glasses.

Why?

To be safe out there. On the highways.

You mean I'm not safe in the one I've ordered?

Everybody here has big cars, he says. It just makes them feel safer that way.

I think I'll stay with the compact model, I tell him. I'm from Europe.

Oh, he says, disappointed, then hands me the keys to a four-door Hyundai with automatic transmission.

I have never owned a car. In fact, it is eight years since I even drove one, but somehow among the tangle of roads and slip-roads I succeed in finding route 183, which takes me south to Lockhart.

The road into my father's hometown is identical to the roads leading in to all other American cities. A billboard forest emblazoned with primary-colour adverts for gas stations, repair shops, fast-food chains, money lenders. I have the feeling of driving into a plastic toy town made by some restless giant. It looks like everything could be pulled

down at a moment's notice and assembled again somewhere else. Exxon, Expert Tire. Cash America Pawn. Everything is generic.

What on the Internet looked like a cosy inn a short stroll from the downtown area, reveals itself to be a tatty motel further along the approach road. A brown brick building blackened by soot, it comes into view immediately after an orange sign that says "Whataburger". The guy who looks like he is the owner, an Indian greying at the temples, comes out of his little booth through a glass door to receive me with an unassuming dignity that would suggest that this miserable peat-coloured hovel could be the Taj Mahal. The filthy motel sign, the noise from route 183, is all an illusion. I've booked you the best room, he says, and shows me to one where only the windows stand between me and the traffic.

I ask if he might have a room at the back instead.

This one has a King Size bed, he says. His voice is mild and patient, he has nothing but time. Endless days and nights in this sad outpost must have made him immune, he sees only the size of the bed and its practical proximity to US 183. You won't like it as much as this one, he says of the other room he can offer.

Nevertheless, he takes me around to the other side of the building to look. He shows me a room at the end of the walkway, looking out on some scorched grass and a low, grey building that looks like a prefab. Sapling trees poke up from the grass. Some pick-up trucks are parked on the gravel, and there is a sign: Chisholm Trail BBQ. It's perfect, I tell him.

On my way from the airport I stopped by a shopping mall and bought a pay-as-you-go SIM for my phone. Now I am wandering about the dusty road behind the motel with my phone held aloft as if I were trying to invoke the ancient gods. I might as well be. Back in my room I use the motel's landline to call the phone companies my grandmother once bought shares in. An hour or two goes by while I consult various operators. Eventually I get hold of someone who can tell me why the SIM I just purchased at no small expense doesn't work. He asks me where I am. I tell him I'm in Lockhart. How do you spell that, he wants to know. I spell it for him. Where is that? Thirty miles south of Austin, on the road to San Antonio.

A silence ensues. I assume him to be searching his systems for Lockhart. There are rustling sounds at the other end. He tells me Lockhart doesn't exist. What do you mean, doesn't exist? I look out of the window. It seems real enough. Google tells me its population is 13,232. Well, ma'am, the place you are at is not recognised as a place by our system, he says. The network will work in other places, but not in "Lockhart". He speaks the name as carefully as if he were handling a boiling hot egg. Sorry for your inconvenience.

The air is a low rumble, as if I lay in the belly of a whale. But apart from the traffic on the other side, the place is almost quiet. The door out onto the walkway is slightly ajar, and the sound of crickets and birds fills the room, a chirping carpet of sound. I flop back onto the bed, feeling a strange sense of relief at being in a place that does not exist. I watch the sky turn red through the crack of the door. Everything I imagined recedes into background, until only my senses remain. I allow my thoughts to wander. Here I will do nothing but see, listen and feel, and note down my impressions before they vanish into the ether.

Questions follow me into sleep, brought with me from home. Will the soil take me as its own, will the wild sky take me as its child? In sleep, I barely register the slamming of car doors or someone moving about in the next room. By the time I wake up they are gone again. I sleep heaviest in strange beds.

I venture behind the wheel of the white Hyundai and drive into downtown along the quiet back road. An ordinary road with knotted live oaks and flat lawns in front of wooden houses painted pale yellow, bright green, milk white, rust red. Each house has a covered porch where those who lived there would once have sat in rocking chairs, sipped cooling ice tea and perhaps passed time the Grandma Clark way, sewing a quilt, but which now, with the advent of air condition, have become a place for cardboard boxes and withered leaves. The spindly frame of a children's swing, like a rusty insect on a lawn. A rowing boat under a blue tarp. Sleepy front gardens. Beware of the dog.

A cluster of towers comes into view behind the trees. The square in Lockhart has always looked like something out of a western, not an open place like any town square back home, but a quadrangle edged by storefronts with generous awnings and in the middle, like some fairy-tale castle, the county courthouse. When I was little I imagined such a square to contain all that a heart could desire. A person could go to church on its north side, get drunk on its south side, and when they had run out of money on the east side, they could rob my grandfather's bank on the west.

I park under a tree and an oddly flattened figure follows me out into the sun. Is it really me? I stand for some time and study the short-legged human shape with its mane of hair. My shadow seems sharper here on this foreign sidewalk.

The day is already scorching. Not a leaf moves, not a living soul. Apart from me and my shadow there is nobody around. I feel like the guy in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramó* who travels to his ancestral town in search of his father and finds it to be populated by ghosts.

The sun follows my orbit around the courthouse, the light so bright I must narrow my eyes to see: a barber shop, closed; a pastel-coloured drugstore which besides medicine also sells handbags and shawls; three rusting horses galloping across a turquoise storefront beneath a sign saying *Ranch Style*.

But there must be something living here, inside the stores if nowhere else. The store from which my grandfather sold his saddles and gunpowder and fishing rods has been taken over by an insurance broker. I shield my eyes from the sun. Through the window, I see not the modern office with its thick carpeting and wilting potted plants, but a high-ceilinged room with pillars of dark wood and sawdust strewn over the floor. Behind the counter stands a man wearing a leather apron. I grasp the door handle, at long last to greet Poppa, hoping that he will show me the white saddle he once made for Buffalo Bill. But the door is locked.

In the store next door, his son, my dad's Uncle Gene, had a barber shop. I peer in, but find no one peering back. Besides their hair, women didn't interest him.

And there, on the west side of the square, exactly opposite the courthouse entrance, is my grandfather's bank, First Lockhart National Bank, familiar to me from my dad's pale blue cheques, it too closed. The original building was pulled down in the 1960s and replaced by a more modern structure in brown marble with white columns. I

put my ear to the smooth, thick wall, but it is too smooth, too thick, and my grandfather was so quiet ...

In one of the streets behind the square, two armchairs backed up against a wall stare out at the road. On one corner is a closed repair shop, on the other a faded mural advertising Vogel's Frigidair. Rust and wind. Behind a dusty window a white Hammond organ has been put on display, a sign saying: *Available for event leasing*. Rows of empty chairs extend back into the room.

A sign tells me that the library, a churchlike building in red brick with a dome in the middle next to Poppa's store, is the oldest operating library in the State of Texas. Its founder, a community physician who donated the building to the city, shares his name with my brother, Eugene Clark. I seek company among the books. The reading room is cool and dim, the sun falling inside in sections of colour through a mosaic in the domed roof, shafts of dreamy light. In one corner, a spiral stair leads up onto a balcony. Dust descends inordinately slowly through the air. A sickly-sweet smell of old books. I gather an armful on Texan local history and sit down at a long mahogany table. Across from me sits a girl of about fourteen years old with a headful of braided hair and a pair of purple headphones on, absorbed behind a laptop, the only person here besides me and the librarian.

I skim through a book claiming there to be fossilised dinosaur tracks out by the Paluxy River, a claim supported by a photograph of a farmer selling dino footprints held together with barrel hoops.

In the next book, a picture of a boy in a soapbox cart pulled by two turkeys.

The girl at the laptop, probably chatting with someone, seems to have a cold. Every time she sniffs, the vaulted room amplifies the sound into tremendous, echoing music. A Gregorian sniff, a sniff concerto. With her headphones on she has no joy of her performance, but notices me smiling and smiles back. I gesture to her. Allergy? She pulls the phones away from her ears and nods. I whisper and say that if I had some tissues she could have one. No need to bother, she says. A waste of time, it comes right back. She puts the phones back on and sniffs again.

I get up and go back to the ghosts on the square.

It feels hard to concentrate on dinosaur tracks, a soapbox cart and descending dust while the living sit and sniff back their snot.

Inside the courthouse, seated behind a metal desk, I find a portly, elderly security guard in a light brown shirt, the butt of a pistol visible in his belt holster. Discovering that I am Gussie's grandchild, he throws up his arms in joy. Miss Walter! She was good people! Like most people here, my grandmother taught him in fourth grade. He has lived in Lockhart all his life. His thin grey hair is combed across his scalp. Formerly in the air force, he is retired now and tells me he can just as well sit here and guard the courthouse as guard his home. By rights the public are not admitted to the courtroom upstairs, but for Miss Walter's grandchild he gladly makes an exception. Step right in, he says as we stand in the doorway and peer inside. My grandmother used to give him a lift to school. She kept a jam jar in her cupboard, full of nickels and dimes. If someone needed money for school milk they could go to the cupboard and borrow some. She was good people, he says again, as I go back into the sun.

Connecting with a place is difficult with four wheels underneath you, so I leave the car on the square and walk. I am the only person on the sidewalk on the way out to my grandmother's house. Enormous trees with dark green foliage look like they have been offering shade here for at least a hundred years. The biggest of the houses are those closest to the square. They resemble old steamships moored at quaysides, their sweeping, white-columned porches with wicker furniture make me think of chinking ice tea sipped copiously through the years.

The time I visited my grandmother, she insisted on driving me into town and back. A walk of a couple of kilometres, even in spring, was considered to be madness. I suspected her of being motivated by other, less altruistic considerations than saving her grandchild from heatstroke. She had just bought a new car from the Ford dealership, whose blue, red and silver-coloured triangular pennants still wave between the lampposts in this street, I see now, and which apparently is owned by some other descendant of the Ur- Clarks, a second cousin of my father's twice removed, and his sons.

Gussie was ninety-two years old and wanted to show off her new Ford. It was only slightly faster than walking. We crawled along at fifteen miles an hour, windows down, my grandmother with the stem of her glasses between her teeth, the lens parts dangling beneath her chin. You may have noticed I'm wearin' my glasses in a strange way, she said with a mischievous gleam in her eye. The doctor who had approved the renewal of her driving licence had done so only on condition that she never drove without her glasses. It says in the driver's licence I have to wear 'em, she said, glasses in mouth. But I can't see a hoot with 'em on. So this is how I wear 'em, in case anybody asks.

Gradually the big houses are superseded by medium-sized ones. An elderly lady has filled up her lawn with jumble sale items the way Gussie sometimes used to do. Wicker baskets, a lawn mower, a faded cooler box. Three women, backsides in the air, rummage through a wooden chest. I find a small rectangular casket made of glass for a dollar. Can you guess what it was used for? the lady asks. I stare at the item. Business cards? Cigarettes! We laugh. No one offers their guests cigarettes any more.

Down a side street are some lots with portable sheds on them, littered with junk. On one, an uprooted sign in the tall grass says: *City of Lockhart NOTICE: Offensive conditions of the Code of Ordinances for the City of Lockhart*. Underneath, a cross has been put for "Bush on premises".

Further along are some storehouses and wooden huts with peeling paint, sealed off with a rusty padlock. A sign: Wilson & Riggin Lumber Co. Finding beauty in the decay, I start to photograph, until a voice shouts out behind me: Are you from the insurance company? No. Well, photos are prohibited!

I wonder how long they had been watching me on their surveillance cameras.

Back on the sidewalk I eventually come to the last house on the street, one of the smallest, but neat and respectable. An oblong of narrow horizontal boards painted yellow by the new owners. 930 W. San Antonio Street. I cannot think of that address without seeing my grandmother's handwriting, her perfect, teacherly cursive slanting across the surface of a long, white envelope.

I go around the back in the hope of finding Preston's pecan tree, but the only thing left of what used to be my grandmother's pride is a rotten stump. Just as I am leaving, a small pick-up turns into the drive and pulls up. The man who gets out does not seem to mind me being on his property. I tell him I know his house. Without hesitation, he invites me in. It's a little messy, I hope you don't mind. A moment later I find myself standing in my grandmother's kitchen, which now belongs to Leo and Desiree. It still has the same cupboards, the same pistachio green walls. Clothes are dumped everywhere. Inflated balloons from a recent party. A banner on the wall says *Feliz Cumpleaños!* The door that led into the dining room has been replaced by a velvet curtain, and the dining room is now a bedroom. Dark curtains are drawn in front of the windows. Where the TV is, Gussie once kept the stones she guarded with such zeal anyone would have thought they were a collection of twenty-four carat gold nuggets. Seen through the filter of time, the things we choose to accord meaning in life can seem so comical, so touchingly desperate. How insignificant our endeavours to ward off time and the inevitability of death.

The couple's nephew sleeps in what was my dad's and Peggy's room, their son in my grandmother's. We stand in the doorway. It's cooler in the back, says Leo, moving a pink laundry basket off the bed and putting it down on the floor. It reminds me that my grandmother always gave that same reason for keeping to the bedroom and kitchen. Between the doors of the wardrobe where Gussie kept her clothes is a children's drawing of a skull in bold colours. The eyes are marked as small yellow circles and seem to be staring at something far away, something very distant, perhaps not even visible.

I don't know if you believe those kind of things, says Leo. But my wife tells me she sometimes feels the presence of an old lady in this room.

I tell him it was about the only room my grandmother used, apart from the kitchen.

He glances at his watch. His wife should be home soon. If I care to wait ten minutes she could tell me about the presence she sometimes feels. The narrow band of light between the curtains tells me the afternoon is coming to an end. For some reason, I choose to decline Leo's offer. I have to be getting on, I tell him. I am not sure what I am most afraid of. Finding out that my grandmother is still there in her bedroom, confused by the balloons, unable to find her glasses – or that she is not.

Outside, Leo points to the stump. There was an old tree there, he says. We did what we could to save it, but after a drought it just gave up. We gave it water, but it wasn't enough. It dried out, he says. And that was it.

They had a man come out and remove it, but the roots were so long that the whole property would have to be dug up. So they made do with chopping it down and leaving the stump behind. I hurry to say my goodbyes, nervous about Desiree coming home. It pains me that I can no longer hear my grandmother's voice.

The father has come up in my dad. Since I was sixteen I have travelled the world on my own, but only now that I have arrived in his hometown does he realise what this entails. This morning there is an email. He will not be here for another ten days, and in the meantime he is worried about me driving about Texas on my own with such limited experience as a driver. Minor roads are one thing, interstates another. It's every man for himself here, he writes. Or, he corrects himself, every person to every person's self (this PC is getting ridiculous).

The matter is not improved by my occasionally having to find my way to a particular address at the same time as concentrating on driving the vehicle. So he has bought a GPS for me to use, and has even taken the trouble to explain to me that a GPS is a device that knows the way to any address and can give me instructions as to how to get there.

He is having this GPS sent to Doug Field, who was grandmother's investment advisor, now managing my dad's pension scheme. Doug's office, my dad writes, is around the corner from the square, right opposite the place with the knives hanging from chains on the walls where we had barbecue, Kreuz' was the name of the place back then, but now it's called Smitty's.

Doug Field is as big as a telephone box. He comes forward to greet me as I step through the glass door of his office. You must be Mathilde, he says. Your dad called – something about a package? We shake hands, mine completely engulfed by the fleshy muff that is his.

Your grandmother was really somethin' else, he says. She had a whole lot of personality.

When Doug Field came to the town as a young investment advisor in the local Edward Jones branch in the early 1980s, my grandmother, a retired schoolteacher, owned 300,000 dollars' worth of shares purchased from money she earned selling cookies and investing her profits.

She was proud of her success in the market, but would not allow her money to change her ways. People in the town had no idea about the fortune she was quietly accumulating out of her kitchen after she retired from school.

She wouldn't really talk about people, he says. But she would say this: All these people think I'm just a crazy ol' woman over here, cookin', fixin', sellin' these cookies. Little do they know what I've done.

I tell Doug Field of my own surprise the time I drove with her down to Preston's old bank on the square. She parked the car at the staff entrance around the back, the way she was obviously used to, and took the elevator up to the bank director with a box full of lemon cookies. She had not made an appointment, and yet he received her with open arms as if she were his own mother, a permanent guest of honour. Immediately we were ushered into his office and sat down in plush armchairs. He had all the time in the world. Only when he started showing me pictures of his unmarried sons did I realise more fully that my grandmother's finances might be healthier than I had imagined.

Doug Fields laughs. They used to hold their meetings in my grandmother's house, money matters were dealt with in the dining room, and afterwards they would go out into the kitchen for coffee and cookies. I loved her, he says. And we were buddies.

The secretary, who has been standing beside us listening, goes out and comes back in with the package from my dad.

Have you had yourself some of that barbecue yet? Doug Field nods in the direction of the red-brick building across the street.

I've become a vegetarian since I was here last, I tell him. With that, everything goes quiet. It leaves me standing there, a trembling reed in the reception area, European, city dweller, vegetable eater. I could just as well have said I was a Satanist. Here, vegetarianism is not just un-American, it is decidedly anti-Texas. It goes against everything Lockhart stands for.

After a long moment, the secretary accommodates me and says she is sure you can get coleslaw over there. Coleslaw and crackers. But I think that's about it. She turns to Doug Field and says: You would die if you didn't get your meat.

That's for sure, he says, his face glistening. I would just *die*.

There can be all sorts of reasons not to eat meat, reasons concerning animal welfare, health, regard for the environment, and so on, but ever since I was a child I have simply not cared for the sensation of chewing meat, invariably it felt like I was chewing muscle, and I always found it so hard to swallow. As time progressed, meat-eating became a habit in much the same way as paying your bills or wearing a woolly hat when the wind blows, things which in themselves are no particular joy, but which have to be done. It was not until I reached my late twenties that I realised I did not have to eat meat. Nobody was forcing me. So I stopped.

It was not that I was unable to eat it, but I have been a vegetarian for so long now that putting my teeth into a piece of meat would be unthinkable. The thought of doing so makes me feel sick. But I said nothing of this to Doug Field and his secretary. Just because a person is a non-believer is no reason to piss on somebody else's god.

Lunchtime is approaching, and the gravel parking area outside Kreuz is filling up. I unbox the GPS and fix it to the windscreen with the suction cup. *Turn left*, it tells me in a female voice that sounds like Stephen Hawking. A pick-up pulls in next to me, a guy in a cowboy hat jumps out and strides towards the restaurant and its smoking chimney. I watch him vanish through the swing doors in his lumberjack shirt.

The smoke coils up into the air – the same as it does at Black's Barbecue, the new Kreuz under the bridge on the approach, the Chisholm Trail BBQ next door to my motel. It hangs over downtown Lockhart, a smell of campfire and grilled meat. As with anyone else, it goes straight into my limbic system, not just because it awakens the primitive human in me, but because it reminds me of my grandmother.

My family has always eaten at Kreuz Market, "the place with the knives", founded by Mr Kreuz in 1900. Two years before that, my great-grandfather had set up his saddle shop in the corresponding premises on the next street. If you place a ruler between the buildings on a map, you can see they are only thirty metres apart at the most. Poppa and Mr Kreuz were good friends. I like to think they had a lot in common, both sons of German immigrants, both freemasons, and maybe, like my great-grandfather, Mr Kreuz was a volunteer fireman too. At any rate, they bought houses for their families right next to each other. Since then, generations of Walters have frequented his restaurant.

I would pronounce the name Kreuz the way it is pronounced in German, but my father and my grandmother have always called it *Krites*.

Barbecued meat was an expansion of the normal meat-market repertoire, Mr Kreuz' way of prolonging the life of the best cuts left unsold during the day, but it soon outstripped the shop's raw meat in popularity. The customers could simply not wait until they got home, but pulled out their pocket knives in the shop and devoured the cooked meat where they stood, straight from the paper. Forks were unnecessary, knives and fingers were quite sufficient.

I would not hazard a guess as to what kind of clientele frequented the place when it first opened, whether it was a mixture of men and women, whites and Mexicans, or

whether black people were also among its customers. I assume those who ate there were all white, and perhaps mostly men. In the century that has passed since Kreuz opened its doors, the place has undoubtedly changed as much as society itself, and it strikes me that an important story could be told about American history if it were set in just such a barbeque restaurant in the southern states.

White people of my grandmother's generation would no longer dream of eating in the shop, but took the food home with them instead, respectably wrapped up. They fried their ring sausage on their own stoves, ate their brisket in their own kitchens. In my father's generation, eating at Kreuz became more acceptable for white people. My dad took my mother there in 1967, she was wearing her yellow summer dress and was the only woman there, as well as the only white person besides my dad. She has never forgotten the knives that hung there on their chains, or the Mexicans on their lunch breaks from the repair shops, sitting in their oil-smeared overalls, eating the greasy hot cuts straight out of the paper with knives that were chained to the walls.

When I visited my grandmother in 1998 there were still a few knives hanging from the wall, but their chains had all but rusted away. I have no knowledge of when black folks began to eat there too. By then, eating took place in a bright, high-ceilinged room connected to the old meat market by a glass door, and diners, black, white and Mexican, now sat democratically side by side at long bench tables. The knives were plastic, and the salt and pepper were mixed together in small cardboard trays on the tables.

The year after I visited my grandmother, the owner died, and Kreuz Market came to the whole nation's attention when the two sons and the daughter were unable to agree on how the inheritance was to be managed. It was a disagreement that turned into what Texas Monthly would call "the most famous family feud in Texas barbecue".

Their father had left the business, and thereby the right to use the name *Kreuz Market*, to the two brothers, whereas the sister inherited the premises. The sons wanted to carry out certain modernisations to the building, which the sister believed would ruin what made the place special. They clashed as to how Kreuz Market should be continued, and the conflict came to a head when the brothers discontinued the lease on their sister's premises.

Instead, they put up a new, modern building down by the bridge on the city's approach road, and with a sense for mythology that seems to me to be typical of Texas, they took down the old enamel sign from the building where Kreuz Market had existed for ninety-nine years, gathered the embers from "the original fire" and took them with them, for although the building by the bridge was new, "the fire", as they said, had to be the same one "as had burned for a hundred years". It was a great public spectacle, the brothers, carrying the glowing coals, leading a procession of the regular customers who had sided with them to the new site by the bridge where they duly hung up the old sign. On the former premises, their sister put up a new sign that said "Smitty's Market" and let the fire burn in the same place in the corner as it had always burned, and that was that. Lockhart now had two barbecue restaurants instead of one. That same year, on 26

May 1999, the legislative assembly in Austin declared Lockhart to be the “Barbecue Capital of Texas”. Just in case anyone should be in doubt as to how seriously they take their meat in Texas.

Such disputes about the succession to property are not without entertainment value, but the regular customers who like my dad’s family had felt a special attachment to Kreuz now argued fiercely about where to eat their barbecue. Under the old sign on the new building? Or under the new sign on the old building? What was most important, the place or the name? Where did “the original fire” burn? Which place was the *real* Kreuz Market?

In that discussion, whose essential aspects are both ancient and philosophical, concerning identity and belonging, my own story flickers. It is the paradox of Theseus’s ship. If gradually you replace a ship’s components until nothing of what is left, not a nut, not a bolt, not a bucket, not a thread of the sail is the same as before, is it still the same ship? For fun, let’s say that this process takes place over seven years, the same length of time they say it takes the cells that make up the human organism to renew themselves. But we could also imagine the components being replaced not over time, but all at once. And that we also move the ship, having it sail across the Atlantic instead of the Mediterranean. Is it then the same ship or a new one? I think about that a lot.

The Indian gentleman at the motel reception gives me a coupon each morning for the diner next door, exchangeable for greasy but good breakfast tacos served in a plastic food basket lined with wax paper. Outside the diner, which is surrounded by a low white fence with a creaking gate, the regular customers sit and suck the life out of their cigarettes. They fall silent as I come through the gate. Pursed lips, cowboy hats, heads turned. Hello, Honey. They can tell I am not from around here.

The girl in the brown apron asks if I want “tea” again. Yesterday, when ordering tea with my breakfast, she was confused when I asked for “a cup of tea”. The norm here is cold tea, sweetened or unsweetened, served with a straw in a frosted plastic beaker. You want it hot? Yes, please. She came back in with some boiled water and a dusty sachet containing something that coloured the water purple. The milk came separately, cold, in a big mug.

Today I ask only for boiled water. Charge me for tea, I tell her, but I’ve brought my own. I pat my polythene bag with its tea infuser and tea from Perch’s in Copenhagen.

After she brings the water, she lingers at the table to see what I do.

She says: I want to know how tea works.

I sound like a poem. Tea is leaves, I say, like tobacco. People who drink tea like tea as much as people who drink coffee like coffee. I think about having the words printed, a little verse emblazoned on T-shirts, tote bags, mugs, a line of tea-lovers’ merchandise, then submerge the infuser crammed with tea leaves into the water, sensing like a drug addict serenity spread within me as the water begins to cloud. When you are away, habit becomes your home, perhaps even your religion. The TV on the wall behind the girl forecasts 26 Celsius.

At the next table is a man in a shiny, worn-out denim jacket, long, jet-black hair parted down the middle. He looks like an American Indian. He seems absorbed by my mad experiment. You are not from here, he points out. He wants to know where I am from. I say: In a way, I’m from here. I put the sentence out in front of me like a blind man prodding with his cane on an unfamiliar sidewalk. His eyes tell me I need to explain. Solemnly I say that my great-great-great grandparents and everyone who came after them are laid to rest in the soil beneath us. Apart, that is, from my dad and me. Back then, the town was nothing but a few planks laid across some mud, I say. And now here I am, drinking my own tea with a Hyundai rental car waiting outside.

The man writes his name in my notebook. Her-nan-dez. He hands it back to me with thumb prints all over the page. He has lived and worked in Lockhart for twenty-five years. Originally, I’m from San Antonio, he says. He pronounces it *Santonio*, the way people do there, and starts telling me about the canals and the fiesta, his mother and grandmother, as if the place existed only in some distant dream rather than just an hour’s drive from here. I get the feeling that it is not so much the city he misses, but the time that has passed since he left it. Once again: time. We can never go back to who we

used to know, or who we used to be. Of all forms of exile, the one from childhood is the most impossible.

The motel man wants to know what my breakfast was like. Good, I tell him. The place was lively. And the food? He wants my honest opinion. The diner belongs to his sister, and she wants to know how she might improve things. Maybe they could widen their range of teas, I tell him. He tells me he considers tea to be far too serious a matter to be left to others. I make my own tea in the morning, he says. I will make a cup for you as well. You like it with milk and spices, like we drink it in India? Shall we say 7.30?

The next morning at a quarter past seven, the chunky beige plastic apparatus beside my bed starts to chime. In my ear is the voice of the Indian motel owner. Good morning, ma'am. Your tea is ready.

I put some clothes on and go out onto the walkway. The horizon is red, and the air smells already of charcoal and fire. Lockhart is waking up. My way around the building to reception takes me past a room whose windows are covered up with tin foil. This is where the motel owner lives with his wife, who I have yet to see.

As soon as the motel owner sees me he ducks behind a curtain into the tin-foil room out back and returns with a steaming mug of spicy tea. I take it with both hands, a little piece of his homeland in a delicate china mug decorated with a red-breasted songbird, a robin perhaps, a metal lid keeping its contents warm.

I remain standing with the mug in my hands. He tells me his name is Deepak. There is a quiet melancholy in his voice, which pads softly through everything he says. He came here from Delhi to become a lawyer, but failed his big exam, the bar exam, the one they fail in movies. Now he stands at life's opposite end, watching strangers pass through his reception. His dream has changed. Now he has plans to sell the motel and find a small farm with his wife.

What about your children, don't they want to take over?

His reply is prompt: I wouldn't want that for them. It's 24/7.

For twenty years, he and his wife have split the days and nights between them. She sleeps in the daytime behind the tin foil, their paths cross twice a day in reception. His dream is modest: He wants them to spend the rest of their time together, sharing the same hours.

Don't get me wrong, he says. Fate has been good to me. His children have done well. One is a doctor, the other a lawyer. Both are looking at the kind of lives he wanted himself. Now all he hopes for is that everything will come to an end while the going is good.

Everything?

The family line. I tell my children *not* to get children, he says. This surprises me. I tell him that where I come from it is quite normal for people to ask others why they *don't* have children. As if children were something one gets the way one gets an accountant or a fridge or an education, an item on a shopping list, rather than the resolution of a great

many complicated circumstances. Like forest fires and freckles, I say. It is unusual to find someone who asks the opposite: Why have children?

But if life has been a success? he says. The way he sees things, his children are riding the gilded waves of evolution. For them the challenge consists not in making life better, but in not spoiling it.

But what would their having children spoil?

It's a gamble. You never know which children you get, he says. Or: They would have *American* children. American children have no attention span, they have abbreviations, ADHD, that sort of thing. Not being able to sit still on a chair, not being able to concentrate, or look a grown-up in the eye when they're talking to them. Better not to have children.

American children. The pain of immigration in a nutshell. You swap one continent for another, and your children become strangers.

I must widen my radius. An email from my dad mentioned the people in Buda. I have no idea who they might be, only that they are some family, a female cousin apparently, and her children who are busy restoring an old mill. Looking at the map, I see that Buda is not far away, maybe half an hour in the car, and no need to take the interstate. I have no other plan than to keep my foot even on the gas pedal and get there and back unhurt. A walk through the town on my thin leg before heading home. Form an impression, widen my radius.

I put on the black elastic support I bought in Denmark, which I have been using every day, and timidly approach the car, adjusting the seat three times to find the best position to operate the pedals. I take a deep breath. Turn the ignition, release the brake and pull out towards route 183.

The roadsides are dotted with small blue flowers, the prairie is full of them and I sense what a wonderful sight it would be if only I could turn my head to look, but instead I keep my eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead. The broken yellow lines down the middle vanish beneath me, beneath me, beneath me. They are the timepiece of road travel, tick-tock, tick-tock, behind me, behind me, and stretching out into the horizon. I am on the road, driving...

On the way into Buda I stop at a green sign Her-nan-dez from the diner, his face all lit up, told me about. If you are going to Buda, you *must* go see Cabela's, he said. What's Cabela's, I asked him. Just a big store full of great stuff. You'll see the sign just by the highway. Great big green sign.

Inside, I am greeted by a man in an orange vest behind a tall counter with a sign on it: Firearms Check-In Station. But who would bring sand to the beach? Cabela's turns out to be a mammoth gun store. The walls are covered with hunting trophies, the mounted heads of deer, antelope, gazelle, more species than I even knew existed. The store itself contains rack upon rack of rifles, shotguns, pistols, new, used and antique. At the far end, they even have a shooting range where you can try them out before buying. The check-out, that looks like any supermarket's, has three dedicated lanes only for guns: Firearm check-out.

I go looking for downtown until I realise this is it. A T-junction across from the railway station, two restaurants and a junk shop with a sign outside: Antiques Mall. The most prominent building is the railway station, an old western-type structure made of wood. The trains no longer stop here, but occasionally a freight train trundles by, an endless rumbling of wagons. A short distance away, on the other side of the junction, a squat water tower like a giant insect surveys the town and its 11,416 population. This, in all its humility, is Buda.

I ask a passer-by for directions to the old mill. The definite article, as if it would be familiar. The man looks blankly back at me. The old mill? He turns around and stares out into infinity, but no, he has never heard of any old mill. Sorry, ma'am.

How naive of me to think I could just turn up and ask someone who lives here. Naive to even imagine that anyone would be bound to know my dad's people in Buda. Perhaps it is for the best. I am too shy to just show up out of the blue anyway. Better to wait for dad.

The restaurant I go over to on the corner is the only one whose door is open. A lady in a flannel shirt is busy putting chairs up on the tables. I hover in the doorway. She looks at me. She looks like someone who needs a nap, I think to myself. I probably look like someone who is hungry.

Lunch ends at one, she says, and closes the door.

My stomach rumbling, I wander around the surrounding streets, a quiet residential area of wooden houses and flat lawns with the evergreen oak that is everywhere in Texas.

A driveway full of people comes into view, people sitting eating with tablecloths on the tables. While some choose an afternoon nap, it seems others make good use of their gardens. I go over and sit down. When my dad was at school, he told me, he sometimes ate the most wonderful lunches in the living room of a Mexican family. My grandmother made 300,000 dollars baking cookies in her kitchen. Texas is full of these stories.

I catch sight of a waiter with a tray of three bright strawberry margaritas that he puts down in front of one, two, three shaven-headed men. They lift the glasses, fingers heavy with chunky silver rings, and chink them together. At another table, three ladies sit drinking ice tea out of straws that gurgle when they get to the bottom. They are immaculately dressed in short jackets, their nails long and manicured, hair blow-dried and fixed like TV anchor women, blue, purple, pink, hair-dos as big as candyfloss.

My accent arouses interest. Everywhere, I meet with the same uncomplicated friendliness. Where are you from? Whenever someone asks, I venture the same answer. From here, I say with enthusiasm. I'm from here! I am like the Americans I once met in Iowa, who in their best Midwest American tried to tell me they were Danish. We're Danish! We're Danish! Our ancestors came and settled. We have recipes at home for *ablikayyy* and *liverpostayyy*.

The lady in the junk shop seems genuinely interested. She wants to know who these relatives are to whom I so boldly refer. I mumble something about the old mill. I mention "the people in Buda". Yes, yes, but who? What are their names? There is one called Gay, I think. Oh, I know her. I've been friends with her daughter Celia for thirty years. Now, lemme call her up ...

Five minutes later I find myself standing in an open barn across the tracks from the water tower, waiting for Celia. Leaned up against the back wall is an old hand-painted wooden sign that must be sixteen metres long: Buda Mill & Grain Co. I had walked right past the place before, the words "the old mill" preventing me from noticing it. A mill. In my mind, it was a winged wooden structure on top of a green hill, or perhaps beside a gently babbling brook. But instead of some Danish postcard idyll, the mill is two huge

corn silos constructed out of metal sheeting, now rusting at the joins, and scattered around them are barns, not of wood, but of corrugated iron, with sloping roofs.

There is a raw beauty about these structures, the wind whistling through the metal. They stand on the ground, bleeding their rust, their longings, their wild dreams.

Celia reminds me inexplicably of my mother. She comes in a silver sports car, lively and intelligent, with a nervous energy that tells me she is a doer, always engaged in some *project*, always working to fix or improve things. She shows me around the buildings, the bare structures that for now are just there. So that's kind of fun, she says every time she tells me about some plan for the place, a restaurant here, a wine bar there, a microbrewery over there, a yoga studio right here, parking facility over behind those trees.

Her face is creased with smile lines, her bright blue eyes see things as yet unrealised. The people in Buda are building a whole new town here. They are working on getting the trains to stop again, and not only that: We're trying to move the station, she says with a laugh, and points towards where they want it moved to, which happens to be just across from the mill project. So that's kind of fun.

Celia is not involved in the mill herself, her civil work is in the Methodist church, but her sister and her sister's son are fully involved in the project together with their mother. Right now, her sister is in New Mexico and their mother at home in poor health.

She tells me about her grandfather, Grandpa Ruby, who bought the mill back in the day. Five minutes ago, I had no idea she even existed. Now we are on our way back to her silver sports car to go for ice-cream sodas at the old drugstore on the other side of the station. We are family now.

Ruby. Now it dawns on me who the people in Buda are. Cecilia is the grandchild of the choleric highway king who failed to get my mother to drink whisky when she was pregnant with me.

She too is gradually figuring out where I belong in the scheme of things. So what was your last name?

Clark.

Oh, Clark! Was your mom a brunette?

She used to be, yes.

I remember her, she says. She was here with your dad?

That's right.

I remember her. She was sunbathing on the Ruby ranch in a bikini. The boys just wouldn't stop talking about it.

She says no more and I decide not to mention the Tennessee Williams night. We drive over to the other side of the tracks for our ice-cream sodas.

Sometimes when I was a child I asked my dad if he believed in God. I cannot recall his replies, only that they were always balanced. God is an idea, he said. Ideas exist. Therefore, God exists. Something like that.

It took a while for me to realise that this was my dad telling me gently that he did not believe in God, at least not in the way people who believe in God normally believe in God. He was not presenting to me any proof of God's existence, but a defence of ideas. My dad believed in science and the human mind, and that they could take us places.

There are, as far as I can count, forty-three churches in Lockhart: Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Episcopalian, African Methodist Episcopalian, Church of Christ, Mission churches, Catholic churches, Baptist churches, and what have you, no fewer than eighteen variations of Christianity. All rather dizzying when, like me, you come from a country where one size fits all, where you automatically belong to the church that happens to be closest, unless you actively choose to belong to another instead, or opt out altogether.

For that reason, I simply assume that the church opposite my grandmother's house was the one the family used. I tell my dad it was locked. Another European habit, assuming that churches are open and wanting to go inside them, if only for the aesthetics.

Which is our church then, I ask him, and by *our* church I mean the church Gussie and the family belonged to, it being unthinkable in Texas that a person should not belong to a church.

First Christian Church, says my dad, on the same street, West Antonio Street, but the other end, up near the courthouse square.

And what kind of a church is that?

Oh, it's vanilla ice cream, says my dad, meaning: pretty bland.

What about the Methodist church? I'm thinking of Celia.

That's vanilla ice cream too.

Actually, they are all vanilla ice cream, he says after a moment. Except the Baptists.

What's special about the Baptists?

Basically, everything that's fun is forbidden.

But the rest is vanilla ice cream, serviceable and harmless enough, but nothing to get excited about. Certainly not the way you can get excited about science and ideas.

We sit in my room, me at the desk, my dad on the screen of my laptop with a glass of whisky in his hand. The door out onto the walkway is slightly open and I can watch the sky become splashed with colour like some exotic bird.

Before I came here we had only Skyped once, the time it came out that he is no longer allowed to visit me. Now we meet up nearly every evening over the motel's unstable Internet. He talks about the time when America became America. He tells me an ancestor of ours, Samuel Clark, my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, fought in the Revolution and took part in 1781 in the famous Siege of Yorktown in Virginia, a decisive battle that led to the British Crown finally giving up the colony. What made Samuel Clark's part in that battle all the more interesting was that he had already been badly wounded three months earlier in another battle on a plantation in Green Spring where the British had set up an ambush. The revolutionaries had no idea what lay in wait for them, they were simply on their way from A to B through a soggy area of swamp. Out of nowhere they were besieged by British cavalry. A horseman cracked Samuel's head open with a sabre, a serious injury that left his brain exposed. They managed to get him to the infirmary and patch him up. He was seventeen years old.

What they did, says my dad, is they put a *plate* there, a *silver plate*. My dad laughs out loud, a silver plate right in his skull! Being young and strong he survived!

And he lived to be ninety-two! He laughs even louder.

He has told me the story before, but this is the first time I have really listened. My receptiveness makes him all the more eager. Naturally, he never met Samuel Clark, and never met anyone who did either. On my mother's side, the collective memory stops at a wealthy merchant from northern Jutland, my grandmother's father, who it seems was something of a tyrant. Three generations would appear to be the normal scope of a family's living memory. By comparison, Samuel Clark was the grandfather of the man my dad refers to as the primeval Clark, whose grave I visited on that scorching hot day without fathoming who he was, and who no one I knew ever knew either. Grandfather to the unfathomable. The unfathomable bounced on the knee of Samuel Clark. Deep is the well of human past.

Did you know that George Washington used him as a courier?

He did?

Yes!

Incredible.

It is incredible, yes.

A courier for Washington, my dad's hero, how marvellous a coincidence is that? According to my dad, Samuel was even a favourite of Washington's. Courier was an unsung, though crucial entrustment, and, according to what has been passed on by other relatives, not without peril. Once, he was pursued by Indians when carrying one of Washington's messages. Only a ravine separated them, Samuel Clark and the Indians, he on one side, the Indians on the other. He never forgot their spine-chilling battle cries.

Did he leave anything behind in writing?

Yes, he did.

My dad has seen a first-hand account, though written many years after the event. He applied for a war-pension, you know, when he was old and wanted some support.

Do we have that?

Cora had some of it.

It vexes him that he did not take a copy of it from Cora when he had the chance. Cora Clark was the genealogist in our family, and I have heard her name spoken a thousand times. Every time I ever asked my dad or my grandmother something about the family, the answer was: Oh, Cora would know that. Or: It's in Cora's book.

I have always thought of Cora as Clark times two. Her maiden name was Clark, and then she married Preston's brother, Hugh Clark. Sharing the same surname prompted them to research their roots together, and eventually they discovered that they were indeed related, albeit only distantly. Cora collected their findings in a book, *Our Clark Family, 1740-1998*. I have never been able to get my hands on a copy. When my father's uncle died, Cora lived on in the house further down the street from my grandmother's. One would have thought they could have found some joy in each other, the widows of those two brothers, but at some point my grandmother and Cora fell out.

If I ask my dad what it was about, all he says is: Strong women. He declined to take sides, but continued to visit both Cora and Gussie when he was in town. In all his years, he has been surrounded by women with strong views about life, and occasionally about each other, and there has never been a lot he could do about it. The general opinion in the family was that one day they would make up and be friends again. Until they did, it was: Oh, Cora would know that. But they never did. Cora is dead, and who knows where Samuel Clark's account might be now.

The sky has become red as blood, the crack in the door a long, oozing scratch. The ice cubes in my dad's whisky have melted, my tea is cold. Now and then, the connection fails and the image on my screen freezes. The only part of my dad that I can see is his right shoulder, a stem of his glasses, the dresser behind him. After a minute or two the connection catches up, and in the meantime he has been talking without noticing I was gone.

He is absorbed in the object in his little Petri dish, a minuscule human being with his head bandaged up, in the midst of a great historical battle. Genealogy is a magnifying glass, Samuel Clark a tiny figure in a much, much bigger story, right there in our family.

He says only three months passed between Samuel's encounter with a British sabre at Green Spring and the Siege of Yorktown. His wounds could barely have healed. My dad says there are some old paintings of George Washington, huge panoramic pictures depicting Washington the military commander at the Siege of Yorktown. We picture him, the tri-cornered hat, the powder wig, the red coat, commanding his many men. And some of those men are wounded, says my dad excitedly, and there's this drummer boy, this drummer boy, and his head is *bandaged*.

You know, this white bandage on his head, he says, and puts his hands to his own head. I like to think that *that's* our ancestor.

My dad and I are together in the same project. Loading his stories on to me. The next time we say goodbye at an airport, he will leave me lightened of his burden, and I will travel home heavy.

Was Samuel Clark scared? What kind of things did he dream about? Who was he in love with? This tiny person in our Petri dish is full of loose ends. And yet not: Samuel Clark married his captain's daughter, a Handley. He received his war pension. He lived until he was ninety-two.

Consider the scene for a moment. Here we sit, many generations on, me in a motel room in my father's hometown, heaving a sigh of relief on a Skype connection.

Samuel Clark had a silver plate put in his head.

He survived.

He lived until he was ninety-two.

The past turns out to be full of hope.

I know the way now to Celia's house. It looks like something out of a movie, the long road snaking its way through the landscape, across Onion Creek, past the local school that bears Celia's father's name in recognition of the hectares he donated to it. And then, at a bend in the road, the house appearing, half-hidden behind tall trees at the top of a hill, a perfectly proportioned wooden house built by a wealthy physician in 1900, and at the foot of the hill a neat, shining pond that mirrors it all.

The gates are always open. I turn in and continue up the driveway, pulling up behind Celia's BMW. She emerges smiling in a crisply ironed pale-blue shirt and khaki trousers, her eyes full of plans. Just inside the door, above a dark wooden dresser, a hat rack branches across the wall like antlers. The hats look like they are worn often, Celia's faded caps, Mel's dusty cowboy hats and a broad-brimmed canvas variety, all soft from use.

Mel shows me around the house, which is tastefully and simply done out with antique furniture and hand-sewn quilts. Apart from the occasional woven rug, the original wooden flooring has been left bare, a sheen of dark varnish. Mel uses a pen laser pointer to point with, its red dot darting about over the old rafters with their original joints, the stone fireplaces, the antique wood-clad walls. On the north porch the wind is still, the side facing east is littered with withered leaves that have blown in onto the wooden planks.

The Stars and Stripes hangs down from a pole angling out upwards at forty-five degrees from one of the wooden porch columns, and on the wall behind us is a star of rusted iron. I have seen them everywhere, on the outside of houses, on fences, iron gates, wheel hubs: the symbol of Texas, the Lone Star State. Four identical rocking chairs stand in a row, all painted a light shade of grey. Celia serves chilled white wine for me and herself, bottled beer for Mel. We sit down and rock with our drinks. Far out on the horizon, a string of blinking lights slithers through the landscape.

That's I-35, says Mel.

In our family we like to look at the highway, says Celia.

Her grandfather built it, says Mel.

Every time we say goodbye we arrange to meet again. Celia and Mel are hospitable folks. Celia organises things in the background so my stay can be as fruitful as possible. The next time I visit them, Mel has been mowing the lawns, a job that takes him several afternoons after work, seated astride a tractor mower so noisy he has to wear hearing protection. As I arrive, he is handing on the rest of the job to Gonzales the handyman, , and is standing halfway down the slope in a way that seems so very Texan to me, legs firmly apart, rooting him to the ground like a pair of guy ropes.

Gonzales came with the house. He was living for free in a trailer on the property in exchange for helping the previous owner out with odd jobs at weekends, chopping down a tree, mowing the lawns, putting fencing back up that had blown down in the wind. The Mexican in the trailer was part of the deal, a condition of sale. So Celia and Mel took over the house with Gonzales.

That was thirty years ago. Since then Gonzales has got married and had four children, all of them living and growing up in the same shed. A few weeks ago, Mel bought a new and bigger trailer that they have put behind a row of trees at the northern end of the property. Celia points towards it. The old one is still chocked up at the bottom of the hill to the west, it too secluded by trees.

Mel has gone down there to talk to the guy who has come to collect it, a timber guy who helps them cut down trees in exchange for the wood and who has promised to remove the old trailer if he can have it for free. I get the feeling Texas is all about deals like that.

I go with Celia to look at Gonzales' old home. It stands on the grass with its door wide open, like the slough of some big reptile that just slunk away. We stand in the doorway and look inside at the ten, maybe twelve square metres of living space. It's quickly seen. At the back is a tiny bathroom, at the front an even tinier kitchen with drab brown fixtures, cupboards, flooring and chipboard cladding all frayed, the air close and clammy. How the place must have looked with furniture inside, beds for six people and presumably a table at which to eat, is impossible to imagine. Celia is amazed too. She stands halfway up the steps gazing in, totally hypnotised by the alien life that has been lived here on her property, less than fifty metres away from the house.

The timber guy has a gleam in his eye. I can't work him out, he looks like something out of a myth, a fairy tale figure with a dark Santa Claus kind of face, a long white beard and a black pony tail. A trickster. He looks at me with his strange eyes and says: I bet ya she won't go all the way in.

But Celia leans inside, into the unknown, her hand gripping the door frame for security. Her daring is just what the timber guy was waiting for. He points at a hole that looks like it has been gnawed in the baseboard. Look, he shouts, a rat!

Celia jumps back onto the grass.

The timber guy gleams weirdly.

Then he offers to plant some pear trees down by the pond.

Oh, I love pear trees, Celia says.

She takes me down to the pond to show me how easy it is to find fossils in the clay. They lie at the water's edge, round and white as pebbles. She bends down, picks up a handful and gives them to me, fossilised snail shells that have been there for hundreds of millions of years before being dropped into my pocket.

(...)

Translated by Martin Aitken