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Vision Without Witness

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The University of Montana

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Vision without Witness

by

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Part One

Poems
Afterlife

I. Paradise

Paris, a word without the d and e
that would make possible a scramble into die.

But inside the bulge of P, a fetus d develops
until the P grows top-heavy and flips
upside down and
around.

The s straightens, a snake in pain,
and leeches onto the i.
The a eats the r and collapses into an e,
sliding around the i to the other side.

But then the extra a in Paradise falls
from outside the fourth dimension of words,
an a that never fizzes down to z.

II. Chaos

The Milky Way stretches, a pale
shin of a fat queen fainting
into space. The Dipper falls
from her lips, she takes the necklace--
it breaks, one pearl
finds a place around the earth.

The queen rises and orders Orion
to drop his dagger
through the center of the earth.
The stars that gave him shape fall
and he no longer has to worry

[no stanza break]
whether his head is too far to the left
or to the right.
The queen falls again,
her shin splitting
and scattering, slivers of bone hissing
to ash.

When the stardust settles and all is dark,
a light will come
from its original source,
and shadows will bow as they die.

III. Detached

A bird flying
to a branch that isn't
there.
First Day in Arlington, Washington

I sit on the living room floor
miles from any acquaintance.
One leg tucked Indian style,
the other stretches forward in a narrow space
between boxes of papers and books.
As I lift and shake out wrinkled shirts
and fold them into neat piles,
the increasing space in the box
speaks with the dusty hole in my gut.

The living room came furnished
with one chair and shag rug.
I look up at the chair
cushioned and piled in navy blue.
Its back rises between me and the open window
blocking the outside view
and shoving a halo of sunlight
out around its edges.
I look down at my heel in the shag
and listen to the quiet
folding against the walls.

My eyes raise to the chair again.
I sense an arm on the armrest,
fingers curving over its front edge.
Careful eyes watch my hands
lift and shake and fold.
I wonder if the figure is robed in white
or wears out-dated Arlington clothes.
The Soul

A lifetime is the moment
when the figure in the painting
is becoming real. The frame
cracks with the weight
of the developing soul.
The body bears the transition,
splinters, and the soul is free.

The soul tries its escape
while the body lives.
Some of it must stay behind
or the body would be left a ghost.
Parts of it steal out like prisoners
lifting barbed wire.
They leave dim brain cells
for bright open fields.

Like distant familiar music
a call lures the soul away.
Perhaps it beckons from the land
beneath the Painter's feet.
Sanctuary Flights

I flew beneath the high rafters and down the aisles between the wooden pews. I thought I was the only one in the congregation not listening to the pastor. For a few moments I'd escape and then pull back between my ears. But soon I'd be flying again over the chilled wine of choir robes as they sat still in a semi-circle, hands folded in their laps.

I imagined the colors fading, the blood of the red carpet leaking out to the roots of the firs outside the stained glass windows which blocked the sky from sight.

On one flight the huge sanctuary shrank. It was too small for my arms spreading wider than the steel cross on the wall behind the pulpit. The thought of nails in hands didn't faze me but the thought of everyone's sins on one man's shoulders sent me to the carpet.
Record Race

For Dad

Eleven high school girls line up for the 1600 meter race. The starting line curves to the outside lane. The girls stretch behind it, bending their heads over straight legs to the track, lifting skinny calves to hamstrings in the air, then placing a foot close behind the line. The gun fires. The outer ten streak to the inside.

The two girls in front run side by side. Around the first curve they talk of a junior high race: "I was starting the final lap when you crossed the finish line," says the girl on the outside. They reach the backstretch. Talking speeds their adrenaline, the air light in their lungs. "The track seems a lot smaller now." The senior girl's track shoes click on the gravel. She's on the inside, says, "Yeah, I remember you. You look stronger." The evening air is warm. The sun blinds them on the far curve. The sophomore races in front to save steps, saying "Good luck. Let's go!" The gravel stretches empty ahead of her. She crosses the line with three laps to go. She can hear the girl behind, can feel the white lines rippling out to the edge of the track. She leans into the curve, stares at the hills stretching across the sky behind the high school gym. Inside her chest her heart and lungs race. Her throat burns. She takes the air

[stanza break]
like broken-record sighs. The error of the track is its oval shape. It needs to stretch in a straight line to the hills. The sun hides them from her and the race gains her back with the crowd roaring on her right. The track flees behind her. Her coach yells, "Two more laps!" The girl inside her head is closing in. She can't hear her yet. The backstretch once and once again. The approaching crunch of spikes stretches louder and faster behind her. The girl passes. The air mashes between them. Then they're both on the inside. The sophomore refuses to let her get away. The finish line's in sight. She strains to pull up beside the girl. The track slows to a stop. Pain twists her face. The race is over. The senior stretches the win by a fraction. Once across the line the sophomore blacks out—the air disappears. The track angles up to her face. Inside the stands, her coach stumbles down at a race.
Vision without Witness

We run down the halls of the white colonial mansion, Jimmy and I, the halls carpeted red, the house both home and church, home to the lady of stringy white hair and polyester-covered fat laboring up and down the winding stairs in heavy pursuit. We enter the sanctuary dining room and Jimmy sits at the round, linen-clothed table, pretending to pray to the silver candleholder so she won't recognize him. I crouch behind the high back of the last pew, watch the lady approach Jimmy from behind and grab his shoulders. "Where's Rebecca?" Standing up I lock eyes with her. I run out but she blocks me, pulling me by the arm, dragging me to the pink bathroom. She opens the door to the claw-foot tub, threatens to tie me in and drown me. I wriggle away, out the side door to quiet Walla Walla streets. Running along the stately houses and maples until I reach the fields, I stop to catch my breath in a small grove of pines lining the road. I look out across an empty grass field, wanting to risk a sprint across it to the hills rolling away, smooth brown and yellow. From down the road, a truck approaches, the color of black leather. On the side, "John" in gold letters. He opens the door and I smile at the man I had loved for three years. I don't care his face seems angry and impatient. "Get in."

[no stanza break]
We drive back toward Walla Walla
and come to a dingier, one-store town.
Past John, out his window, I see
a misty city of spires against a purple sky.
Silver glass glitters cathedral towers.
Shimmers of shacks, dented trucks
spread across the city's face
like a double exposure. "John, look."
He keeps staring straight ahead.
I open the door and roll into a ditch.
The truck continues to drive. Jimmy calls
my name from the back window.
Shock leaves too late for me
to rise and see him. I lie in the dried
mud, listening to the stir of crickets,
the shriek of crows warning the field
and the world around
that I am here without friend.
Other Hands

Fingers reach out of letters, books, willow tree branches, Seattle calls, vast views from Kootenai Canyon, the nooks of climbing walls. They pull the last threads of you from my mind, take hold of my hand and I find they never crumble. Wool coat embraces me against the cold Hellgate wind; my feet control the stumbles as I run iced roads; bicycle handlebars tempt my hands like piano keys. I lean back as I peddle and play *Alia Tarantella* for the stars, the box houses I'm riding by, until I settle to a stop at the chicken-wire gate and see the living room light is on. You wait for me.
A Strong Man Stoops

Grasshoppers wear my pulse.
The moon listens
for dying stars.
The world has gone flat. It no longer bounds

back to my hand
like the basketball
I threw over the boy who first brought out
the tough in me.

The beach fort dug with my brothers
continues to dig itself
along the shore. The logs
we dragged

to cover the gape fell
inside years ago.
The widened hole longs
to hide us again.
A Final Loop in the Desert

Elmer's been roaming the desert for forty years, thin and hunchbacked like a broken cactus needle. He walks up and down the land that's fallen like a yellow cactus on its side. All other needles are plucked, leaving holes filled in with sand.

Elmer's feet can't reach the water under the crust. Even if he stood on his head he couldn't pierce the ground. He wanders with half-open eyes, his hat and clothes sun faded. He sees his wife's shoulder protruding from the sand.

Reaching down he sees hundreds of grey sand bugs crawling on the bump. He stands and stares until the sun begins to set.

All turns red—the sky, the sand, himself inside a blood drop the night drinks. Elmer lies down, resting his head on the shoulder.

He aches for the bugs to build homes in his hair, to gather the silky strands with their tiny legs.
The Unharvested

My run takes me past suburban houses, yards and willow trees. I breathe the empty silent air. You were so light I could lift you like a small child, seventy years old, sixty-five pounds, your limbs stiff and bent in fetal shape, eyes dark and large in your tightened face. I pushed you in your wheelchair to your bed at the far end of the room, past four other beds, the yellow curtains slid back to the walls, the blankets neatly folded, the pillows bare and ready. The other residents waited in the hall, their heads drooped like unharvested wheat.

I untied your restraint and lifted you out of the wheelchair. Your knees almost reached your chin, remaining stiff as I sat you down, as if there were no mattress to rest your legs. My arm, perhaps vaguely familiar, supported your shoulder to keep you from falling back onto the vast flat plain without horizon.

I laid you down and turned you easily onto your side away from me. Looking over you I could see your stare, blank and knowing like a newborn's first gaze into a face, the face the wall against your bed, white, the smell of urine touching it, my hands behind you untaping the plastic diaper, your body rigid, screaming silently.

[stanza break]
I wanted to unbend you, sit you up,  
take your hand and walk you out  
of that shade-drawn room,  
to the fluorescent hall,  
out the glass doors and onto the sidewalk.

On Christmas I sang "Away in the Manger,"  
wiping the brown lumps from your crotch,  
your fists resting together in front of your face,  
unable to clench, knuckles longing to turn white.

Lucy's hands, I had to knot them together with socks  
and tie them to the bed rail. Her elbows flapped,  
legs kicking out at me. I called another nurse's aid  
to hold her down. Lucy looked up at the bed curtain,  
mouthing "God" over and over.

Ruth didn't move except to push up her glasses,  
but she had a voice: "Damn you you're hurting my back!  
You're hurting my leg!" I finished and her eyes lowered  
to her blankets, "I'm sorry I said those things.  
Come here and give me a kiss. There's turkey in the oven--  
Doesn't it smell good? I bought two diamond rings yesterday,  
one for my granddaughter and one for you."

The silver-haired German lady Bertha  
churned her wheelchair up and down the hall  
yelling "The doolers and the doolers!"  
racing like a wide-eyed Paul Revere.  
Later that evening she sat silently  
in her wheelchair outside her bedroom door.  
I knelt down to greet her.  
She said, "You have a little girl on your back."  
I lifted my hand to my pony tail, smiled  
and stood to wheel her into her room for bed.

[no stanza break]
"I see thousands of eyes on the wall," she said, "but I know they're not really there."
As I heaved her onto the bed and turned her on her side I asked her,
"Bertha, what are doolers?"
"My sister died when we were on the way to America," she answered, looking at the ceiling. "I was six years old. They couldn't bury her so they threw her overboard."

My knees lift me up an asphalt hill.
I can't remember your name.
I see your steel gray hair, your face without wrinkle except a few shallow ones around your eyes. I reach the top and relax into a downhill stride.
I wonder how long it's been since you were alive.

The down is longer than the uphill side, flattening out past more small houses.
The last stretch before home, my legs surge into a sprint.
The familiar white house behind the oak tree showing its branches at the corner promises a resting place.
You may not be there but you will be there. Your name starts with an A.
Two Days Before You Died

I called Marcelo, my prayer warrior friend in Louisville. Before hanging up he gently conjured Death, leading him by the hand as if he were still a child, leading him to your chair in the den where you sat, pale, your eyes open, blue and watching the child's approach, the cancer growing like weeds, choking your lungs from the outside, gestational, up in your chest where your testicles began when you were a fetus, traveled down as you developed, left a trace behind; seventy-three years later it sprouted like a dormant seed. The child could see the pain of each breath; he grew like a stem, tall and strong, his mind opening up to prayer's morning light. Marcelo let go of his hand, his words steady and strong, "Lord, we don't discount your ability to save Mr. Hoddevik. But if he must go, relieve him of his pain, let Death bring him home to you where he would so much rather be."

I found myself nodding and thanking God that you will soon die, Bestefar,* Marcelo believes when he prays.

A day later Mom called to let me know you were in the hospital. She said you called my name in your sleep. You'd seen all the grandchildren in the last week except for me. I called tonight and said I was coming

[no stanza break]

*Norwegian for grandfather
in two weeks. You could hardly talk. I tried to be myself, sound hopeful, encourage you, tell you that I'm sorry about the pain, that I met the guy I think I'm going to marry, "Oh it's good to know that," you said. You tried to say something meaningful, "The Lord brings us through these things," the wheeze of a breathing machine closer and louder than your voice. I tried and could think of nothing, slipped in a failed "Hang in there." Something is so unfinished about the hanging up. I don't want you in pain but I wish Marcelo would believe a little slower.
Part Two

Norwegian Hymns

Sections from a Novel

For Mom

The following piece contains gaps in plot and character development which will be filled with text as the novel progresses. It will become primarily the story of Ingrid—her life as a child and young adult in Norway, her emigration to America in 1948, and her life there. Ann, Ingrid's granddaughter, will be woven into the story as well.
If Ann wanted to live alone she could choose one of the eight abandoned houses and set up her home here. Mornings she could climb up the mountainside, over the stone fences, greet the cows and look down at the white beach stretching between the mountains like a wide path for the gulls and tarns and even the cows who amble all the way down to the wet sand, walking along the shore in threes or fours like quiet, peaceful families who know where they want to be and are in no hurry about it.

The sheep stay up on the grassy sand dunes along the fenced fields or on the velvet green mountainside or the rocky patches along the switchbacks to the pass where they walk the small cliff edges without testing for loose rock. Ann surprises them on her runs up to
the pass. They lift their heads and take off running an instant too slow as if they wanted to reveal their famous stupidity. Down on the slopes outside the fields they take off in a group when she approaches, their backs flopping like old bed springs being furiously jumped upon, their tails flapping limp. They let their sculptured white heads rest into grazing until she gets a little closer, and off they go again, stopping like they expect her to get a hint and turn back. Sometimes she drives them up the mountain and they gaze down at her, thinking hard, trying to figure out the single creature jogging the length of Hoddevik.

Every couple of days the Hoddevik sign at the top of the pass gives Ann a call. About a mile up the road from her great aunt's farmhouse, at the base of the pass, she can see the rectangular sign facing away from her on its two steel poles, a miniature silhouette at the top of the creek spilling down to the right of the switchbacks. From a distance the water is white but up close it reveals the rusty yellow from the heather sponge and cloudberry marshes behind the pass. She plods up, dodging cow and sheep droppings until she doesn't care anymore, her lungs heaving for air, her stomach tightening, her desire growing to lie down in the middle of the road
until she hears a car coming which could be 20 or so hours away when the post man comes again in his little white Volvo or until a sheep bounces off the mountainside onto her back. The sign draws her up and suddenly she's attached to the closest pole, her hands gripped around the cool metal, her feet angled up the rock at its base. She rests back into the air, hanging off her arms, head down and catching breath.

Ann stands and looks down onto Hoddevik. The houses line the road in scattered clumps on either side. The bigger fields stretch to the left, the right side sloping up to the north mountain. The fields end abruptly at the white sand taking in the waves. Hoddevik, enclosed by the mountains, spans its green, white and blue softened by overcast sky and distance.

Her run down feeds back the air she lost coming up. The slope carries her legs into an easy falling stride.

---***---

This might be Ann's record--five days with no human contact but Nirvana, U2, and the Indigo Girls singing from the portable tape-player in the kitchen: the TV sound off to silence the Norwegian gibberish, the Olympics on the screen, swimmers splashing a
displacement of time set to rock.

She sits on the couch turning pages of a photo album, its black pages worn at the edges, the small grey pictures set in thin metal corner pieces glued to the paper. Her grandmother and her great aunt Alvdis looked almost exactly alike, Ingrid a little shorter and her face not as long and narrow. Something about their expressions was different.

When Alvdis was here she reminded Ann of Ingrid constantly. She had the same sigh and her laugh was almost the same except it had more control. Alvdis was still fairly slender and in good health. Ingrid had grown overweight from retaining water from the eighteen pills she took everyday for the last twenty years of her life, and from having to lie down most of the day. She had a stroke when Ann was two, partially paralyzing the left side of her body. Her arm hung limp at her side and her left foot dragged when she walked. Her skin kept its smooth beauty until she died. Her spirit remained strong through the last month in the hospital with colon cancer. She teased one of the male nurses about a very available granddaughter she had. She told Ann she couldn't have the china until she was married.

Ann turns the old metal spaceheater up. The wind flicks the
electricity off for a second and back on. Rain rattles on the leaves and blows north over the mountain. To keep in the heat the kitchen and living room doors are closed, a doorframe opening between the two rooms exchanging warmth. The second kitchen and living room across the hall are closed and cold. Upstairs five hallway doors open to quiet bedrooms, four with beds sheetless and comforters stripped of their covers. The relatives left on Sunday. The house was full, one third cousin sleeping in the second living room and Alvdis, who now owns the house, sleeping on a floor mattress in the kitchen. Ann and her mother shared one of the upstairs bedrooms. Her mother flew back to Seattle a month before Ann for work. She had looked younger and happier in Norway than Ann had ever seen her.

Alvdis's son Mathias and wife Brit took Ann on daily excursions to the beach about 100 yards away or out of the village for a hike along another beach to the oldest working farm in Norway. Brit told her stories about her great-grandfather Mathias and his wife Maria. She played card games with her cousins and they had drawing sessions, the kids holding their creation up as if about to rip it laughing and running off and Ann chasing them "Nei! Det er fint!" She joined the adults for the number game rummekub and Alvdis
served food with no time to digest before the next meal—lefse, the soft flatbread folded over butter, sugar and cinnamon, cakes filled with whipping cream and chunks of fruit, rolls, boiled salmon, vinegar and cucumbers, potatoes with sweet white sauce, strawberries and cream. Katrine, Beret and Maria fought at the table over who got to sit next to Ann the American visitor who knows only a few words and communicates with funny expressions and gesticulations.

Ann is now living on leftovers and Diplom Is, Norway's number one gourmet ice cream. Even Alvdis, who when relatives aren't visiting lives at the house alone, is gone for about a week to get a cast taken off her hand. Hoddevik has no hospital, no doctor, school or church. It has one small store that closes at 4:00. There's an old schoolhouse but the few children who live here now take a bus to Leikanger, a larger town but still no hospital, eight miles to the east.

About thirty houses—several abandoned by families wishing to leave the harsh climate and sparse life for city comforts—line the narrow asphalt road between the hayfields. Alvdis's farmhouse, "Randi-stove," is the third house in from the beach. Alvdis and Ingrid married brothers, Jetmund and Johannes, who grew up at
Randi-stove. They had a double wedding near the beginning of the war. Ann's mother Målfrid was born here. After the war she and Ingrid took a boat through the Panama Canal to Ballard, Washington, where Jetmund had gone a few months earlier to find them a home and begin his job as a commercial fisherman on his brother Hans's boat.

The road through Hoddevik ends west at the molo, a cement extension of the mountain into the sea, weatherbreaker and dock for the few fishing boats not yet entombed in a boathouse all year round. When a Hoddevik storm rises up, which can happen now in August, the fishermen take the boats to the shallows and drag them up the beach into the boathouses. But this wind does not yet carry the waves over the lightpoles lining the molo; the boats, small and wooden, carrying ancient salmon reels and depth measuring equipment, bob with the water and bounce off the bumpers dangling from their neighbors' sides.
Starheim, Norway, December 19, 1920

Reverend Orheim drew the bow across the violin strings, his left hand searching for the notes of a song he had heard in his head that morning as he sat at his desk, leaning forward on his elbows, forehead resting on his folded hands, listening for God. He perfected the chorus and returned to the third verse, the lyrics incomplete. A knock on the door stopped him. His fingers remaining in position on the bow, he thrust the violin under his arm. "Who is it?" He swung open the door and frowned. "Whoever it is, you have stolen God's words from me."

"It's me. Clara. Mama had the baby. It's a girl. She wants you to come."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes. I think she's feeding her now."

"Tell her I will be there."

Clara shut the door and Mathias placed the violin under his chin, repeating the notes until the melody came without mistake. He stood in the center of his office, in front of the woodstove, his brown hair clipped close to his head, balding, his large frame clothed in a black suit and white collar. He had chosen the cornhouse for his
office, the front corner room swept clean, the corn, lamb, and fish hung to dry in the remaining rooms, leaving space for his desk, the woodstove, and a wall shelved from corner to corner. The New Testament filled one shelf in 70 books of Braille, encased in off-white folders; another shelf held the open violin case and a platter of 40 crystal glasses, dry but not yet dusty from the last time the Reverend had them filled with water, different levels for each note, and slid his fingers around the rims, playing his own and other Norwegian hymns.

The cornhouse closed itself around the Reverend's office, securing it a hearing place for God's voice. He continued to play until the lyrics returned to him, his back to the window which looked out at the stone barn and the hill behind it.

---***---

Reverend Orheim crossed the stretch of snow to the house without his cane. He moved easily through the powder, his heavy leather boots lifting the snow away from his path, clearing the drifts to the packed snow beneath. A moment before reaching the house he stretched out his hand and immediately found the side wall. He followed it to the front corner and found himself only a few feet off.
Inside the front door he unlaced and removed his boots and made his way to the bedroom.

Maria sat up in bed, holding the baby at her breast. She looked up to see her husband standing at the door.

"Mathias, come hold your daughter."

He walked slowly to the bed and sat down in the chair beside it. Maria handed him the baby. His arms stiffly holding her, he sat for a long moment, the baby quiet and diminished in his lap. He found her face with his hand and began tracing her features with his finger. The song he had been playing in the cornhouse came to him, continuing, his throat tight and lips unable to move. He reached out an arm and took Maria's hand.

She squeezed it. "We have brought a new life."

He tried to smile. "God has brought her." He cleared his throat. "I am afraid she looks like me, Maria."

"She does, Mathias. She is beautiful."

He released her hand and lifted the baby's head into the crook of his arm. Looking down where he thought her eyes might be, he said, "Welcome to this life--" He looked up, "We agreed Ingrid for a girl?"
He bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Lord, bless Ingrid. May she grow up healthy and strong for your glory. Amen.

"Remember, last time--I couldn't see Alvdis's features, but I can't even make out this one's shape." He shook his head. "I know, the Lord has shown me over and over my blindness is a blessing. I will not grieve. This child and I will not share the world of seeing;" he aimed for the baby's eyes again, "but hearing, my little friend, that world we will know."
Alvdis and Ingrid, both with long blond braids and blue eyes, Alvdis slightly taller, sat on the top stair, figuring how they could slide to the bottom, sitting down, without splintering their rears. "We could sit on our dyne," Ingrid said.

They stood and ran to their room, dragged the heavy down comforter off their bed and back down the hall to the stairs. Alvdis took one end and walked with it down ten or so stairs until it flattened out from Ingrid's hold at the top. She shoved the edge aside to walk back up the narrow steps. "Keep holding it so it doesn't slide down," she said, "I will go first."

"No, let's go at the same time," Ingrid whined.

"Okay, just a second." Alvdis grabbed hold of the rail and sat on the dyne a few steps down from Ingrid. "I got it now come sit behind me." Ingrid slid down to the step above her and grabbed her around the waist. "Ready?" Alvdis asked and before Ingrid answered she let go of the rail and they bumped rapidly down to the bottom, Ingrid screeching, Alvdis holding onto the dyne on either side of her legs.

"Let's do it again!" Ingrid yelled, standing up on the crumpled
dyne. They travelled two more times.

"We better stop this," said Alvdis as they dragged the dyne up again. "We will ruin it--Mama made it for us. What if a splinter tears it?"

"No! I want to do it again!"

They were half-way up the stairs. Ingrid grabbed the dyne, jumped on it and screamed down on her own. Alvdis ran down after her and took her by the hair. She dragged her up the stairs, pulling her by the long ropes of her braids. "I'm putting you in the bedroom!"

Ingrid cursed. Maria rushed out of her sewing room and into the upstairs hall. By the time she appeared Alvdis had let go of Ingrid's hair and stood two steps above her looking innocent. "She swore at me, Mama."

"I heard. Ingrid, come here."

With one hand on the back of her head, Ingrid climbed slowly up the stairs. Her mother didn't touch her. She turned and led her down the hall to a walk-in closet, opened the door and pointed her in, "You stay in there for a while and think about what you said."
She shut the door and Ingrid listened to her footsteps fading down the hall.

---***---

Ingrid sat on the floor against the closet's back wall. She had stood by the window in the back of the closet and looked out at the pine-covered hill, but it was dark now. She sat beneath the small wood-crossed window, the stars showing themselves above her head. From where she sat she could see the dim forms of coats and suits hanging in rows on either side of her. Those by the window hunched their silver-gray shoulders at her, their heads bending over out of her sight. The ones farther toward the door stood like men crammed in the dark, pressed so close together they could hardly breathe. Ingrid wasn't so much afraid of them as of becoming like them. She sat with her legs crossed, fear unfolding itself inside of her. She heard her family eating dinner downstairs, clanking silverware, talking in normal tones.

---***---

The long table held places for ten people, two boys and two girls on one side, four girls on the other, and Mathias and Maria at either end. Ingrid's chair hid in one corner next to Clara. "Mama, where is
Ingrid?" Clara asked.

Maria took in a quick breath, "Uffe meg! Poor little girl!" She ran upstairs and opened the closet door.

"Baby, I am so sorry. I forgot all about you." She lifted Ingrid into her arms and carried her out into the hall. She sat down with her on the top step, rocking her in her lap, wiping the tears from her quiet face.
Starheim, May, 1932

The hay field at the Orheim farm, in front of the house, flat, beneath the hill, began to slope behind the house, widening, long and downward, ending abruptly at a row of birches that lined the beach fifty yards north of the water. Birches thrived in Starheim—slender, upright versions of the willow tree; the leaves narrow, slowly darkening, readying themselves to breathe the summer air, never hot along the water, rarely hot in Starheim, sometimes reaching warm.

Ingrid and Alvdis stood at the fjord's edge, skipping rocks into the sun on the water. Across the fjord the mountains rose steeply, distant enough to appear blue instead of green, the snow patches clearly discernable. Farther south, Derby, the nearest town to Starheim, easy to reach by boat in good weather, found room on a flat niche large enough for five or six farms stretched long and narrow along the coast.

Ingrid squinted into the water, the sunlight so bright she couldn't see where the rock landed. She turned to a nearby boulder where her sweater lay tossed, put it on and sat on the rock. Alvdis skipped one more pebble. "We need to get back and help Mama with
kveld." They usually ate a late evening meal around nine o'clock, open-faced sandwiches with butter, smoked salmon, goat cheese, and gooseberry jam.

"Sit down for awhile, Alvdis. We have a half-hour yet."

Alvdis sat beside her, drew her knees to her chin, and looked out toward Derby. They sat quietly for awhile, watching the sun's red flame brighten the water as it extinguished behind the mountains.

"Alvdis, if you had a choice, would you rather be blind or deaf?"

"Deaf, for sure. Then you could still see the sunset--and all the colors, and people's faces, and you can learn how to read lips."

"Not me. I'd rather be blind."

"Why? Just because that's what Papa says."

"No, because music. And I want to hear people's voices."
Starheim, August, 1933

Reverend Orheim came in from the cornhouse and heard Maria scraping and clinking in the kitchen. He pictured her standing at the stove, her dark hair pulled back in a bun, a few strands loose on her neck, her sweater off, the tie of her apron snug to her back. He saw the woodstove’s pipe bending out of sight into the ceiling, the white pine walls and floor, the counter lined with loaves of bread under towels, chopped potatoes and carrots simmering in a black pot of stew. He took three steps into the hall, turned right into the living room and walked across it to the open kitchen doorway. "Maria, mail time?"

She jumped and tightened her grip on the lid to the pot.

"Mathias! You scared me. Yes, I do believe it is." She lifted the pot to a cooler corner of the stove, removed her apron and followed the Reverend out of the house, grabbing her sweater from its hook in the hall. He took her arm and they made their way around the large white house to the field behind it, through the long grass to the small dirt road curving along the birches to Starheim's row of mailboxes.

"Is that Leif cutting the hay?"

Maria looked back up the field to their huge yellow horse
pulling the hay-cutting machine along the hill's base. "It is so good he still helps us when he has a farm of his own to take care of," she said.

"The house is so quiet until the girls get home," Mathias said.

"They will be home from school any time."

"Svanhild should get married soon."

Maria nodded. "She is seventeen. Still plenty of time."

They reached the shade of the walkway. A breeze rustled the birches.

"These trees always remind me of our engagement prayer," said Mathias. After Maria had accepted his proposal they had sat beneath a birch tree holding hands. Neither wanted to outlive the other. They prayed they would die at the same time.

"I have been thinking about that prayer a lot lately," said Mathias.

"You're not feeling ill are you?" Maria smiled.

"No, just old."

"Your face hardly shows a wrinkle." Maria started to run her fingers over his cheek but Mathias grabbed her hand. He kissed it quickly and they continued walking.
Maria opened the mailbox and drew out two letters, one from Svanhild's friend in Oslo and one from an unfamiliar church. She tucked Svanhild's letter into her sweater and opened the other one, taking Mathias by the arm and holding the letter up with her other hand, reading it aloud as they walked back up to the house.

"'Dear Reverend Orheim, The community of Leikanger would be honored to have you speak at our church. We would also welcome your music. Word has reached us about your ministry throughout Norway, and some of our youth have heard you speak at camps. Many good words have been said about your testimony. We will gladly accommodate you in our town's inn. Please let us know when a good time would be for you to come.' Mathias. Your ministry keeps growing."

Mathias stopped walking abruptly, pulling back Maria's arm.

"Maria, I have told you over and over. Our ministry. You know I need you to stay. You keep the farm and the children. You take in travellers who need a place to rest." He started walking again.

"But isn't that a separate ministry?" asked Maria.

"You and I are one, Maria. Without you I couldn't reach outside my home."
Maria stepped quietly up the stairs to the porch, his arm heavy on her elbow.
Leikanger, October, 1933

Alvdis and Ingrid lay asleep on cots at one end of the inn's room. The room, paneled in white pine, was bare of furniture except for the cots, a bed for Reverend Orheim, a soft corner chair and a woolen space rug on the pinewood floor. Ingrid woke to the muffled sound of a violin playing. The bow barely touched the strings in short hesitating strokes. She sat up and saw her father's quilt completely covering the large lump of his body crouched beneath it. A song had come to him, maybe in a dream. From the narrow window beside her father's bed, light came dimly like the tune, Reverend Orheim's shape a still dead thing except for the unseen fingers finding the song, and the unseen arm drawing the bow.

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Alvdis handed Ingrid the glasses, shut into their case, from the seat of the buggy. She stepped down and walked up to the horse, taking the reins and tying them around a post. Reverend Orheim came around the back of the buggy, dressed in his black suit, white collar and black cap, with his walking stick and his violin in its wooden case. Alvdis returned to the buggy and took down two books of the Bible in Braille from behind the seat. They all started up the
walkway to the church, the Reverend holding onto Alvdis's arm.

Above the heavy wooden doors the steeple glared white on a royal iris sky. A cemetery to the left of the church spread in neat rows up a hill to a stone fence. The church's minister, standing near the front steps with a few members of the church, caught sight of Reverend Orheim and his daughters. He walked down the hill toward them, smiling. "Welcome to Leikanger." He took Reverend Orheim's hand. "I am Reverend Olsen. These must be your daughters?"

"Yes, Alvdis and Ingrid. We are happy to be here."

"Several of our youth have heard you speak at camps. We have all been looking forward to having you."

As a few early families trickled in, Alvdis watched their heads turn toward her father as they walked past. Boys pointed at him, saying "That's him" or "I've heard him. He plays these glasses" or "Look, he's blind."

"Here, may I take these?" The minister carefully lifted the large case from Ingrid. They followed the pastor into the church and up the aisle.

A pitcher of water sat waiting on a table in front of the altar.
Alvdis and Reverend Orheim sat down in the front row. "Go ahead, Ingrid," said Alvdis. Ingrid followed Reverend Olsen up to the table. He set the oblong platter down and lifted off its top.

"You will tune them?" he asked.

Ingrid nodded.

"Fine then. Take your time."

Ingrid lifted the water pitcher and filled the glasses to their separate levels, testing them with her finger around each rim, adding water or pouring it out until the right note was reached. She bent her head to the long transparent sounds, her hair braided into a bun, her dress patterned with small flowers down to her ankles, her frame full-grown at five-foot-one. The congregation filled the pews, glancing up at her small form behind the white cloth-covered table, sitting down and almost cringing at the notes disharmonious in their search for correct pitch, sounding their agony, preparing for melody like pain's path to joy.

Ingrid finished her work and approached the front pew. She filed past her father and Alvdis and sat down. Reverend Orheim stood up from his aisle seat and Alvdis rose beside him. They walked arm in arm to the table. Reverend Orheim touched the
glasses with his right hand, finding the far right glass to orient the
platter in his mind. Alvdis returned to her seat and the Reverend,
without a word, began his first song. His fingers glided over the
glasses as if he could see them; the notes emerged into a familiar
Norwegian hymn, strange and beautiful in its new manifestation: a
music without slack or roughness; taut, clear, and pure, the notes
echoing into each other; a communal voice; a building and fading
strength.

He finished the fourth song and stepped back from the table,
bowing his head. "Dear God," he prayed.
Starheim, June, 1935

Midnight, the sun, entering the window of the one-room seter-huset, the cabin of narrow wooden boards up beyond the hill from the house, two miles, where the cows seek grass in the summer, too late for the sisters to return home after the cows are found and milked in the small stone barn across from the cabin, the two buildings in a clearing, easily reached by the sun until two a.m., when it slides behind the hills for a few moments, returning up into a night that never was.

Alvdis leans into the fireplace, striking a match to the dead ferns curled around the kindling. She sits back and watches the brown furls crackle into black.

Ingrid opens her guitar case.

"Nåden av Gud," says Svanhild.

Their voices join the sun and the fire in their filling, the sun slanting a light beam along one wall, watching the fire consume its wood, the voices rising into the sun's falling, fading when it rises again, the fire remaining the same, as Alvdis continues feeding it branches, until she sleeps, and her sisters sleep, and the fire dies unseen by the sun washing the sky from white to blue.
Five a.m., the girls left the seter-huset for home, each with a knapsack carrying a steel container of milk on their backs.

"Kari loves Oslo," said Svanhild. "I got another letter from her yesterday. She found a job as a maid at this hotel, and she said she could probably get me a job there. We could live in the same apartment--"

"Wait til we can come too," said Ingrid.

"No, it is better for me to go first. We can't all get jobs there at once. I can make connections."

"I don't want to leave here," said Alvdis. "Ingrid, why do you want to leave?"
Oslo, November, 1940

The alarm wailed its siren across the city. Patrons of the King Olav III Hotel rushed for the stairs to the basement which served as bomb shelter for the hotel. Svanhild and Alvdís were off duty, up in their room with Ingrid, sick in bed with a fever. Both Svanhild and Alvdís worked as maids. Ingrid found a job as a waitress in a nearby restaurant. All three sisters lived on the second floor of the hotel.

"Ingrid--we have to go downstairs. The planes are coming," said Svanhild.

"I am too sick. Go ahead."

"You have to come--we'll help you down," said Alvdís.

"I can't move."

"We will carry you."

"Leave me be!"

They pulled her bed out into the hall, away from the bedroom windows.

Alvdís took her hand. "Please, Ingrid."

Svanhild grabbed Alvdís's arm and pulled her away. "It's about as safe here as in the basement."

They rushed for the stairs. Alvdís glanced back at Ingrid lying
on her back, the comforter up to her chin, her hair curled in sweat, 
her eyes closed.

Svanhild opened the door to the stairs and as they started to 
descend the lights went out. Holding the rail they hurried down in 
the darkness, the roar of planes droning louder overhead.

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The Orheim sisters stood in a corner of the lobby, debating whether 
it might be safer to escape or stay put. Alvdis stood biting her hand, 
staring at Svanhild and Ingrid. She let her hand drop. "I'll be right 
back." She rushed upstairs to their bedroom.

The hotel had suffered minor damages; two rooms uninhabitable, 
no one injured. Most everyone in the hotel crowded in the lobby, 
surrounded by dark wood walls and high ceiling, discussing their 
plans, several letting out intermittent cries of distress. Some decided 
to escape the city for the surrounding country. Others sat down in 
hopelessness, head in hands.

Alvdis fell on her knees in the middle of the bedroom floor. 
"God, we do not know what to do. Please show us." Kneeling silently 
she looked up at the nightstand. She reached over and grabbed her 
Bible. She held it in both hands, looking down at its brown leather
cover. "Show me a verse." She closed her eyes and placed her thumb on the front edge of the pages. The book opened to Acts and her eyes landed on chapter 18, verse 10: "For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." She read it again quickly and stood with the book, her thumb marking the place. She turned and ran down to the lobby.

A family carrying suitcases headed for the door. "Wait!" Alvdis shouted. Everyone stopped talking and listened as she read the verse. They remained silent several moments after she finished. Ingrid smiled from across the room and rushed over to hug her. Svanhild stood still, her mouth open. A middle-aged woman started crying. No one left the hotel that night.

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A young man stood alone in the lobby with a small suitcase and a trunk. He was tall, his hair thin and combed straight back over his head, his features handsome, eyes large and blue. Ingrid came in the lobby door from work. She saw him and walked up to him. "Was there a room for you?" she asked.

He nodded. "My brother is picking up some things at the store."
"My name is Ingrid Orheim."

"Jetmund Hoddevik."

"Where are you coming from?"

"The college. Finished with my classes yesterday. I will head back to the west coast as soon as it is safe—near Leikanger. A town called Hoddevik."

"I was raised two hours from there. Stårheim. My father preaches in Leikanger about once a year."

"Reverend Orheim. Yes, your name was familiar. I remember listening to him when I was a boy. Hoddevik has no church so we rode to Leikanger every Sunday. It was a great treat when your father came."

"How was the ride all the way to Leikanger?"

"Plenty of time for family mischief. I have eight brothers and sisters—we got in trouble a lot for not being Sunday solemn. But I think even our parents looked forward to that ride."

Alvdís and Svanhild approached from the stairs. "Hello," said Alvdís, squinting her eyes at Jetmund. "You are Johannes's brother, aren't you?"
Hoddevik, July, 1942

Alvdis ducked under the bird net; it draped over her head and down her back to the ground. The tall bush showed thousands of tiny bright pink berries, rips, many hidden behind the dark green leaves. They grew several berries to a stem. Alvdis plucked the clumps from the branches, carrying the bucket in her other hand and letting them fall into it as she went along. She and Ingrid used them to make saft, the sweet diluted juice west Norwegians drank like water.

Ingrid walked in through the doorframe opening between the kitchen and the living room, unbuttoning her blouse. Her breasts swelled with milk enough for both babies. "Are you dears hungry?"

She knelt at the playpen, letting her breasts rest over the wooden rail. Målfrid continued to cry, pulling herself up with the bars and toddling over to her mother. Ingrid guided her by the shoulder and rubbed her head as she began to nurse. Her nephew Magne had already started. The babies stood beside each other, taking in the milk.

"Isn't that good?" Ingrid said.

She heard the creak of the front door opening. Buttoning her blouse with one hand, she walked out into the hallway. "Look at that
full bucket," she said.

"At least a month's worth of saft," Alvdis said. "How are the babies?"

"Just fed."

Alvdis carried the bucket into the kitchen. She set it on the table and glanced around the doorframe into the living room. The babies sat quietly sifting through the toys. She turned back, opened a cupboard, took down two large bowls and a plate, and sat at the table.

Ingrid joined her, handing her a fork. They sat, picking clumps out of the bucket, running their forks down the stems, the berries popping into the bowls. They tossed the empty stems onto the plate between them.

"Strong winds in another hour," Alvdis said, looking out the window at the building waves.

"I hope they don't have trouble with the boat," Ingrid said.

"They have plenty of time." Alvdis held up a stem, ran her fork down it and looked up at Ingrid. "I don't know what I am going to do when you go to America. Johannes is always out with the animals or fishing. I can't imagine watching Magne out there while I
am trying to get work done. I'd be afraid he'd fall into the stream when I am not looking."

"Alvdis! You make it sound like we're going for sure. Jetmund is just talking. I wish Hans would write something terrible to him about America."

"Johannes would never leave the farm," said Alvdis. "I wouldn't dare even mention the idea. But you, Ingrid, you have this chance. It would be so good for Målfrid to have more than Hoddevik."

"This is the most beautiful place in the world."

"You think more than Stårheim?"

"More than."

"Listen to me, Ingrid. There is nothing here but the cold and hard work. Yes the mountains and the water but America has mountains and water. Remember how Hans described that mountain—Mount Rainier? And Seattle is right on the water he said. Målfrid could meet a successful American man and live in the city. You would be so proud and she would take care of you and Jetmund."

"I was so happy when we were both pregnant. They are growing up together, that is what I want. The gulls, the cows, the
waves, that is what I want. And you, I could never leave you."

Ingrid ran her fork down a clump, watching the berries fly off and land into the bowl, breaking off from their tiny connection to the stem, joining the red mass, ready to be squeezed for juice. She said without looking up, "We can't leave until after the war anyway."

Alvdis nodded and glanced out the window, her face hard and sad. "There they come. They are almost to the molo."

Ingrid stood. Alvdis almost laughed, "Ingrid, they will be fine. Sit down."

Ingrid took off her apron. "Watch the kids please Alvdis."

"Wrap up, it is cold," Alvdis said.

Ingrid hurried out to the front hall, grabbed her coat, the hanger clanging against the back wall, and lifted her arms into the sleeves as she descended the porch steps. She ran across the yard and down past the boathouses to the molo. The boat was still about a hundred yards off. She walked the concrete strip above the water, her hands in her pockets. Jetmund and Johannes each wore olive green rain parkas. Waves sprayed against the short sides of the boat. The men sat facing each other, Jetmund, his back to Ingrid, hanging onto the right edge of the boat and Johannes to the left.
They bent toward each other in earnest; Ingrid could not tell if they were arguing or laughing. Ingrid held her head up into the wind, taking its cold against her neck and its sting in her eyes. She lifted her arm high and waved, but they hadn't seen her yet. A gust of wind hit her in the side and she dropped her arm to gain her balance. The water crashed against the concrete, droplets leaping up to touch her face. She continued to the end of the molo where it turned a sharp corner toward Hoddevik and the water no longer hit it straight on. Then she heard her husband's laugh cutting through to her. He faced away from the molo, still bending toward his brother. Johannes saw her, sat up straight and waved and Jetmund turned and looked at her silently for an instant. He smiled and motioned her to go inside. He turned back to Johannes and shook his head, laughing and muttering.

Ingrid walked down the cracked steps to the inside level of the molo. Her pulse quickened and she tried to relax against the wall. Determined not to be watching if they wrecked, she waited to hear their voices again. She felt the waves behind her almost as if they were hitting her through the concrete; she felt the boat rounding the bend but looked up and saw the water, empty and calmer on this
side but still tossing, waiting for the men's attempted approach, ready to push them away. The boat finally rounded the bend and Ingrid closed her eyes. She looked down at her feet and walked over to the edge of the mooring.

"There she is!" Jetmund shouted. He stuck his oar between the boat's side and the tip of the molo. The waves seemed to comply with his concern by tossing the boat away from the concrete. They rounded the bend and approached the docking area.

"Ready?" Jetmund tossed Ingrid the rope. She caught it and pulled in the boat, the water thrashing it up and down. "That is good!" Jetmund stood and stepped to the front of the boat. Ingrid bent to wrap the rope around the steel bar drilled onto the cement. Johannes lifted the bumpers and dropped them over either side of the boat.

As Jetmund started up the short steel ladder Ingrid stood and smiled, extending her hand. He grabbed it and climbed with no hands, balancing on his feet. "Any fish?" asked Ingrid as he came up beside her and grabbed her around the waist.

"No, my crazy woman. What are you doing out here? It is freezing. We'd barely let down the line before the waves started
picking up and we decided to head back."

"But I bet you fished on the way in."

Johannes carried up the bucket, empty but for a couple of small bass. "This is all," he said.

Jetmund laughed, "I tried to tell him to throw them back but he can't come home with an empty bucket."

They had almost reached the road. Johannes walked on Jetmund's right and Ingrid clung to his left, her arm around his waist. The wind had reached the shore, pushing them on from behind. Jetmund turned to Ingrid and kissed her temple. "I am surprised your sister didn't tie you up!"
Hoddevik, Christmas Eve, 1943, journal entry

The sky is completely overcast tonight. It was thickly dark by 3:00 in the afternoon. The candles lining the center of the Christmas table marked the family places with their light. Johannes and Jetmund, my last two brothers who have not left the farm, sat across from their wives Alvdis and Ingrid. Johannes and Jetmund are much alike except Johannes is quieter—I think he uses up most of his words on the sheep and cows. He identifies each one by name. He will never leave this farm. Jetmund, though, wants to take Ingrid and Målfrid to America, as soon as the war is over. He is quiet too, but he has a distinctive laugh. He and Ingrid still act like newlyweds. I caught them kissing behind the hall door just yesterday. Målfrid sat next to Ingrid and Magne to Johannes. Father headed the table, of course, and Mother sat at the other end. I sat next to Mother at the corner.

Yesterday we heard news of a man in Leikanger caught with a radio and taken away to a concentration camp in Germany. The Germans ordered us to destroy our radios and they carry out surprise searches constantly. They do not want news from England informing us of the wars progress and the whereabouts of German ships, or encouraging us to resist.
Tonight we allowed ourselves to laugh, to savor the strips of cured lamb, boiled rutabaga and red potatoes. Deprived of sugar for months, what little we had stashed in safety for Christmas, we anticipated krumkake and kransekake and berliner kranser. We were nearly finished with dinner when Ingrid heard a whimper outside the front door. Alvdis stood up to go look. When she opened the door a blood hound turned and ran off the porch, she told us.

"The Gestapo are out there," said Father from the far end of the table.

Alvdis nodded, "That was one of their dogs."

Ingrid stood and walked up to a window. "Sit down, Ingrid," said Mother. "Don't let them think they are ruining our Christmas dinner. It is too dark to see them anyway."

The laughing ceased and we ate reluctantly as if the lamb had taken the form of human flesh. The Gestapo lined the road down the center of Hoddevik until late into the evening, perhaps until just before dawn, watching for anyone, we guessed, who might open a back door and sneak to the barn for his radio. We long to hear the voice of our king, exiled in London for safety. He assures us of England's aid and that the war will end soon. Each household hides their radio in the hay as if it were Christ himself.
The Germans tried to win our favor at the beginning of the war, to get us to think their way. They consider us their Aryan brothers. But we resisted, so now they are trying to intimidate us and steal away our morale. The Gestapo march our streets showing off their power. If they catch us with a radio or arms they take us away like worshippers of a forbidden god.

We ate dessert quietly. They never came to our door. We went to bed and stared at the dark ceiling. The children slept. Målfrid woke once, crying, and we heard Ingrid's footsteps creaking on the wood floor to go and comfort her.
Hoddevik, May, 1945

Ingrid, Jetmund, and their neighbor Jon climbed the steep northern slope, Jon carrying a supply of fireworks in a backpack. He had taken them out of his cellar to celebrate the end of the war.

They huddled together on a wide ledge. "Okay, Jetmund, you light the first one," said Jon. Jetmund struck a match to the fuse and ran back. They covered their ears as the explosion resounded into the air. They all three plastered their backs to the dirt wall behind them, laughing and cheering. "My turn!" said Ingrid. She smiled, breathing in the lingering smoke. She bent down and lit the fuse. Running backwards she reached for Jetmund's sleeve.

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That evening all of Hoddevik heard five explosions in the hills. "Has it started again?" several asked out loud. Halfdan decided to investigate. He crept up the mountain toward the sound. Hoddevik panicked for almost an hour until Halfdan came running down the mountain, laughing. Jetmund, Ingrid and Jon followed, embarrassed, stifling their laughs. When they reached the street Lars Hoddevik, eighty-six years old, approached them. He yelled at them for several
minutes. Back at the house Ingrid told Alvdis what the noise on the mountain had been. They laughed until they cried.

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The next afternoon several small German boats docked at Hoddevik. The soldiers left the boats tied to the molo and cheered as they walked up the street without their usual stiff march. One soldier noticed Peder, a one-year-old boy who lived in the house closest to the beach. The boy sat in the yard beside Halfdan, five years older. Halfdan sat reading a book and Peder was attempting to tear out one of the pages. The soldier approached the brothers. "Shh," said Halfdan. Both children looked up.

The soldier smiled, "Hello my friends!" he shouted in Norwegian. "Are you happy we can be brothers again?!" The soldier reached down and picked up Peder, holding him high in the air. "You should be happy!"

Peder squealed and let himself be set back down onto the grass. The soldier waved and hurried away.

Halfdan stood and watched as the soldier joined the others walking into town.
Oslo, May, 1953

Randi lay in the narrow bed, not wanting to leave her dyne comforter, goose down inside a cotton cover stitched with bits of lace. She sat up, keeping the dyne snug to her front, the air chilling her back, and gathered the edge of the white curtain, easing it aside. She fingered the lace and looked out across the small plot of grass to the new mental hospital on the other side of the backyard fence. The concrete wall rose high and windowless, down the length of their own and three neighbors' fences.

By the time she woke up her mother was already at the hospital, giving out pills and shots and lifting patients off the floor and back into their wheelchairs if they had managed before someone caught them to wriggle out of their cloth restraints without realizing they couldn't stand anymore.

Before giving birth to Randi, her mother used to take care of babies in the pediatric ward at Oslo's city hospital. The year Randi turned ten her father's fishing boat sank and he died with the rest of the crew. A few weeks after the accident Randi woke up to silence. The early morning sounds and vibrations of drilling and sawing that had invaded her room for months had ended. Her mother inquired
that day about openings for nurses and was hired immediately.

Randi imagined her mother walking up and down the halls and into the different rooms. She had gotten to do her rounds with her one afternoon and remembered her leaning down to the older patients and saying "And how is Elsie today?" in the same tone of voice she used to say "And how is Randi this morning?" a few years ago.

Randi let the curtain drop and reached for her robe quilted from old clothes hanging over the chair beside her bed. She hurried into her wool-knit slippers and went straight for the phone downstairs in the living room. She lifted the receiver and dialed Magnhild's number. "Magnhild, my Ma said we could swim at the hospital pool--since she works there!"

"But what about all the strange people? What if they try to kill us or drown us or somethin'?"

"Mom says there are lots of nurses around and we have to tell them who we are."

For the last few weekends they had been cutting out Victorian angels and pasting them to their scrapbook. They cut and pasted green letters to put on the front of the book: "Boken av Magnhild og Randi." The pages were almost full, and the angels, imported from
England, sitting in hearts and flowers and smiling with big blue eyes and smooth pink faces, had started looking pretty much the same.

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Swimsuits beneath their clothes, carrying towels in a thick plastic bag, Randi and Magnhild opened the backyard gate and walked along the blank wall to the front of the hospital. They stood before two large wooden doors. Randi started for the handle but Magnhild whispered, "Wait." Magnhild looked up and Randi followed her gaze. Rows of windows and balconies covered this side of the building. A flowerbasket hung over each balcony rail. Two stories up, a young woman reached over the rail to pick pansies from her flowerbasket, smiling as she stuck the stems into her hair above her ear. She kept poking them in, carefully, until the clump became too many for the side of her head, and they started to fall, the petals spinning down over the iron rail like injured butterflies. The lady reached down to catch one and the whole clump escaped her hair. She watched it fall and through the scattered petals she saw the girls staring up at her. Her smile disappeared. Calmly, she scooped her hand into the flowerbasket, lifted a fistful of dirt and tossed it at them. Randi and Magnhild ducked under the nearest balcony. Randi heaved the door
open and pulled Magnhild in by the arm.

Bright white tiles lined the floor and half-way up the walls. Yellow-shaded lamps with frosted bulbs hung from the lobby's ceiling. Up and down the halls each wooden door had a small square window at its top, with a number painted in gold on the glass. Randi remembered leaving one of the rooms with her mother and noticing the number looked black from the inside.

"Okay, this way. We get to go up the elevator."

"Visiting?" called a nurse from the counter.

They walked up to her. "I'm Mrs. Nevre's daughter. She said we could swim here."

The nurse nodded. "Okay, have fun and be careful. Don't stare at the residents okay?"

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They stood a few feet apart, toes curled over the cement edge, Randi in a yellow bikini and Magnhild in a blue one-piece. They looked down into the blue water, trying not to look up at the faces waiting for their splash, the walls amplifying the voices calling out to them.

"Hey--it's deep on that end!" "Make it a race! I root for the girl in
the yellow!" Magnhild looked over at Randi. She jumped in and Randi followed an instant after.

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The girls, towels around their shoulders, walked along the edge of the pool for the hall and home. One patient in her late thirties approached the pool in a royal blue bathingsuit patterned with large red flowers. She gave the girls a bright lipsticked smile.

"That's a real pretty bathing suit. I've never seen one like it," said Randi.

"I got it in America." She paused, "What are your girls's names?"

"Randi and Magnhild," Randi said.

"My name's Ingrid. Come swim a little more."
Oslo, July, 1955

The nurse knocked on door 239.

"Kom inn." Ingrid sat in a pinewood chair by the window, crocheting a blue sweater sleeve. Her head, bent over her work, revealed a perfect perm, brown waves neatly reaching her shoulders.

"You have a young visitor here."

Ingrid looked up. "Randi!" She stood, dropping the sweater on the chair, and half-ran to the door. She clasped Randi's hands, "Oh, I am so glad you came little venn. It is so nice outside. I was just thinking of going for a walk, and now I have company."

The hospital grounds spread around the building in flat grass stretches and small rolling hills like a golf course. A garden had been added behind the building, extending between the hospital's side wall and the Nevre and neighboring fences. A trail led through a stand of birch trees interspersed with clearings of rose patches surrounded by hedges. A wooden bench sat along the trail every few yards. A shallow creek ran through the trees. The trail crossed it over a wooden footbridge, too large and impressive, the water trickling insignificantly toward the streetpipe at the edge of the grounds.
"My mom told me you were back," Randi said. "I am glad—but—you seem so normal to me. I don't understand why you have to stay in a place like this."

Ingrid walked silently beside her, reaching down to pick a blush-red rose. Randi almost blurted out her mother's strict warning of the fine if anyone was caught picking flowers, but Ingrid was so calm and sure about it, Randi thought maybe her mother made it up.

"I don't really understand it myself," Ingrid said, stripping the thorny stem from the rose, leaving a short smooth stalk. She stuck it into Randi's hair above her ear and smiled. "You are such a lovely young girl."

Randi, thinking of her round face and short brown hair, opened her eyes wide, "Me?" she laughed. "Everyone calls me tomboy."

"You will grow up to be a beautiful woman."

"Like you?"

"Oh," Ingrid looked askance at the creek, "Let us hope more beautiful than me—"

"But—"

"I don't have to come here. But I like to come here, and it is so good to be back in Norway."
"You don't like America?"

"When I am in America, I miss Norway. And when I am in Norway, I miss America."

"But why do you like America?"

"Jetmund is there."

"And Målfrid. Is she--"

"Yes--Good news for you and me, Randi. She is flying over in a week."