

NEVER WHERE I
PLANNED



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A M E M O I R



ULDIS CIPSTS



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First edition.

Built from a life told aloud, through the Biography Machine.

All names and events are the author's own.





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CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE WE BEGIN



I make things up for a living. Whole worlds that don't exist, a man who lives in boxes, a woman with a golden watch she gives away because it's the only thing she has. I imagine them, I write them down, someone pays me, and I still haven't worked out how to feel about that without becoming unbearable at dinner parties.

Here is what you should understand about a man who invents worlds: he's usually trying to walk past something in the real one. I am Latvian, I make films, and I have spent the better part of forty-odd years engineering departures and calling it philosophy. Fantasy. Horror. Action. An entire career built from the very reasonable premise that the inside of my head is more interesting than wherever I happen to be standing. And then, when fiction wasn't enough, I moved my whole family, six children, which is its own kind of fiction, from Latvia to a village in southern Spain called Gaucin, where you can see Gibraltar from the terrace and, on clear days, the mountains of Morocco, and where I told myself with complete sincerity: this is the real thing. This is where I finally become free. This is where I become myself, the way I never quite got to be.

I have told myself this roughly eleven times. I have been wrong eleven times. I keep arriving at the same boy, waiting. He is waiting, if I'm being accurate about it, for a mother who never quite shows up, or shows up slightly late, slightly elsewhere, slightly behind glass. I



recognize myself in my son Alex, who lives in his own world and doesn't speak, and when I take his face in my hands and say look at me, sometimes for one second he does. Then he goes back inside. I understand the impulse completely.

This is a book about a life that did not go where I planned, which is perhaps the one thing about it I did not plan.

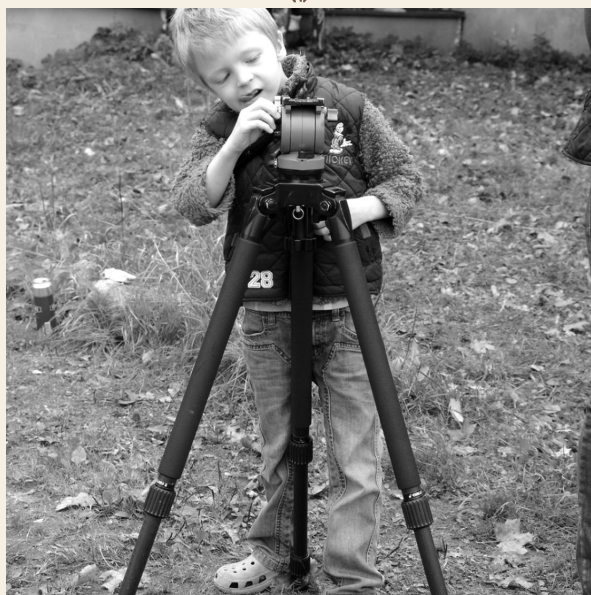
It is also, more than I intended when I sat down to write it, about Diana, the woman I met in a bar after my divorce, whose name I didn't know, whom I tried to leave, and couldn't. She is the sharp, logical center of my mess. She wakes before I do. She is already working. Everything I built my escapes to find was just sitting there, being real, waiting for me to stop running past it.

So. When you start something, you finish it.

Let me start from the beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

MOST KISSED TODDLER
IN THE USSR



I was born in May 1974, when the peach trees were in blossom, or so I have always been told, and I see no reason to dispute it, since it is the most poetic thing about my arrival and I intend to keep it.

I must have been the most kissed toddler in the entire Soviet Union.



This is not a boast, well, it is a boast, but an accurate one. My mother worked for the state dry cleaning company, which sounds modest until you understand that in Latvia in 1976 there was only one dry cleaning company, because that is how socialism works: one company, all the clothes, the whole country. She was quality manager. This meant she mattered. And when she brought me into the office, it meant I mattered also, which was a conclusion I reached quickly and have never substantially revised.

Every single woman in that building wanted to kiss me. I allowed this. I want to be clear that I did not merely endure the kisses, I kissed back. Each one. Systematically. I went down the line of my mother's colleagues like a tiny dignitary receiving foreign ambassadors, and I gave each woman exactly what she needed, which was a soft wet kiss from a boy who already understood that this was his natural role in any room. My mother stood to the side and watched, and I imagine she was proud, or possibly alarmed, or possibly both, which is the same thing, when it comes to me.

I tell you this so you understand the kind of child I was. Confident. Sociable. Dangerously independent. The kind of child who, the moment an adult's attention drifts for three seconds, is already gone.

The excursion to the coast was a work trip. Mother's company, her colleagues, a bus to the coast. I was about two years old. They brought me because, I assume, because you cannot leave a child like me somewhere unsupervised without risk of structural damage to the building. So they brought me to the beach instead, which in retrospect was not the safer option.

The town sits on the Baltic, and the Baltic in 1976 was cold, gray, serious about itself, the kind of sea that does not perform for tourists. But the beach was wide and flat and went on forever, which is exactly



the kind of information that an about-two-year-old should never be given, because what he hears is: unlimited runway.

I ran.

I don't remember deciding to run. I don't remember a moment of calculation, a glance back to check who was watching, a plan. There was the beach, and then I was on it, moving, and the wind was hitting my face, and everything was enormous and bright and mine, and I was absolutely certain, with the full confidence of a person who has just kissed every adult in a government dry cleaning facility, that this was going exactly correctly.

Then I stopped.

And there was no one.

The beach was very wide and very flat and it went on forever in both directions, and every direction looked the same as every other direction, and none of them contained my mother. The sea made a sound like it was breathing, slow and indifferent. The wind, which a moment ago had been thrilling, was now simply cold.

I was lost.

I want to tell you I was brave. I want to tell you I assessed the situation and identified my options and proceeded rationally. What I actually did was stand on the sand in my small coat and feel, for possibly the first time in my life, the specific terror of having run somewhere and discovered that running was not, in fact, the whole plan.

Out there on that flat gray beach, I was nobody's quality manager. I was nobody's ambassador. I was a dot.

The adults found me. Of course they found me, I was the only dot on the beach, but there was a period before they found me, which felt



longer than it was, during which the world was very large and I was very small and my confidence, usually so reliable, had temporarily closed for business. They came back across the sand, my mother among them, and I imagine her face doing the thing that mothers' faces do: the relief arriving half a second before the fury, so that by the time she reached me she had assembled something that looked almost like calm, which is its own kind of love.

I was picked up. The kissing of this particular occasion, I am quite sure, went only one direction.

I have spent most of my life since then running toward the horizon on some beach or another, Latvia, Spain, whatever comes next, and the feeling is always the same: the wind, the space, the absolute certainty that this is the correct direction. And then, sometimes, the stopping. The silence. The moment when the beach is very wide and I am very small and I look around and think: well. Now what.

Someone always comes.



*I should have paid more attention when someone
came.*



CHAPTER THREE

BORN BALD IN SIBERIA



My mother was born in a KGB prison. That is a sentence I have said many times and it still does not feel like something that happened to a real person. But she was real. She was the most real person I knew, and she died at forty-three, and I still think about the things she told me.

She was taken from my grandmother when she was very small. I do not know the exact details of how that happened, she did not always tell those parts, or if she did, I was not old enough to hold them. What I know is that she ended up in Siberia, in an orphanage, alone. Not alone the way children sometimes feel alone. Actually alone, in the specific Soviet way, where the state had decided it was responsible for you and that was supposed to be enough.

She had no hair. That detail I remember. All the orphanage children had no hair, I imagine for hygiene, for control, for the efficiency of processing small human beings who belonged to no one. She had no hair and she spoke Russian the way the other children spoke it, which was not the way her mother spoke it, and this becomes important later.

When she was five years old, the older children organized the smaller ones to go and rob stores.

I want to be careful with that word, organized, because it sounds too clean. What it really was: older kids in a Siberian orphanage in the



nineteen seventies had figured out a system, and the small ones were the system. My mother was five. She and the other small children would go into a shop, take bread, and run. The salesperson would chase them, naturally, because someone was stealing bread, and while the salesperson chased the small children with the bread, the older kids would go to the cashier and take all the cash and run in different directions.

She told me this story more than once. I do not think she told it as a horror story. She told it the way people tell stories about things that happened before they understood that things could be otherwise. It was bread. They were hungry. The older kids had a plan. You went in, you took the bread, you ran. The salesperson chased you and meanwhile the older kids got the money. It was a small criminal operation run by children who were starving, and my mother was the decoy at five years old, running down a Siberian street with bread, with someone behind her.

I think about her small legs. I think about her running.

Then, when she was six, her mother found her. My grandmother had been looking, had gone through documents, had tracked down the orphanage in Siberia. She came to get her daughter.

And she could not believe the girl in front of her was her daughter.

Not because she did not want her. Because the child she was looking at had no hair and spoke Russian differently and looked like every other child in that place and nothing like the baby she remembered. The orphanage had taken a child and made her institutional. Made her uniform. My grandmother stood in front of her own six-year-old daughter and did not recognize her, and my mother stood in front of a woman she had no real memory of and they had to take it on faith, both



of them, that this was the right person.

Documents. They believed the documents.

My mother grew up to be a very nice, very smart woman. She was a good mother to me, genuinely good, the kind of good that is not accidental, that is chosen, that costs something. I think it cost her a great deal. I think she decided, at some point that I cannot locate, that whatever had been done to her was not going to be what she did. She told me these stories not to frighten me or to ask for anything but so I would know where I came from. So I would know what had been survived in order for me to exist.

She died at forty-three. The doctors said an aneurysm. I have always thought, and I cannot prove this, it is just what I believe, that the orphanage killed her slowly, that the body keeps the record even when the person has moved far past the damage. She had moved far past it. But the body does not forget a five-year-old running down a street in Siberia with stolen bread, someone's footsteps behind her, the cold coming off the buildings, the other kids already gone.



*There are things you survive so completely that they
become your personality.*



CHAPTER FOUR

SMALL DIGNITIES, RATIONED SWEETS



I was about five years old and I was very good at waiting.

This is not a skill anyone teaches you. Nobody sits you down and explains the technique. You just learn it, the way you learn everything hard, alone, in a small room, in a town so quiet that when the wind stopped you could hear the river and also your own heartbeat and also absolutely nothing else. My grandmother's house. My great-grandmother shuffling between the kitchen and the window, smelling of something boiled. The two of them were good women. They fed me, they kept me warm, they watched me with the particular exhausted tenderness of women who had already survived enough and were now, additionally, surviving me. But they were not my mother.

My mother came on certain days.

Sometimes.

When she came, she brought sweets. This was not a small thing. In 1979 in Soviet Latvia, sweets were not a decoration, they were an event. She would produce them from her bag like a magician who'd had a genuinely difficult week, and I would receive them with the solemnity of a diplomat accepting a treaty. The whole week reorganized itself backward around that moment. Monday was simply the day that was



still very far from the end of the week. Tuesday was Monday but worse. Wednesday was the philosophical middle, equidistant from both the last visit and the next, which meant it was the most depressing day in human history. By Thursday I was practically vibrating.

And then sometimes the day came and she did not.

I will not describe that feeling in any detail because I am not going to do that to myself in a book that other people will read. I'll just say that a small boy can hold a very large absence, and leave it there.

But when she came, when I heard the gate, when I saw her coat, I ran. Every time. Like I hadn't already been watching the road for six days. Like I was surprised.

The greatest gift she ever brought was a bicycle. I was three, maybe four. Small blue bicycle, the most beautiful object I had ever seen in my life, possibly the most beautiful object that had ever existed. I learned to ride it with the absolute focused fury of a person who has decided this is now the most important thing. I fell. I got up. I fell again in a slightly different way, for variety. I got up again. Within, I don't know, an hour? a week? time is not linear when you are four, I could ride it. I rode it through the streets of the town feeling like a man who had conquered something, which I had.

Now here is where I need to be honest with you about my character.

The bicycle was blue. It was a very nice blue. And I looked at it one afternoon and I thought: I can make this better.

This is a thought that has, in various forms, followed me through my entire life and caused an extraordinary amount of damage.

There was floor paint in the shed. Brown floor paint. The specific brown of Soviet floor paint, which is to say a brown that doesn't occur



in nature, a brown that exists only in Soviet sheds and in the nightmares of people who grew up near Soviet sheds. I took that paint. I found my friends, because every terrible childhood decision needs witnesses. We painted the bicycle.

We painted the whole bicycle.

We were very thorough. We got the frame, we got the fenders, we got places on the bicycle I'm not sure had names. We stepped back when we were finished and looked at what we had made, and what we had made looked, I want to choose the right word here, it looked like something a large animal had done to a bicycle. It looked like what happens when creativity has absolutely no relationship with taste, judgment, or basic awareness of what floor paint is for.

I was not discouraged. I was about four. I got back on the bicycle and rode it through the streets of the town with my friends running alongside me, and I was proud. This is the part that I think explains everything about me: I was genuinely, completely proud. I had taken a nice blue bicycle and made it into a disaster and I experienced this as artistic growth.

My mother, I believe, did not comment on the bicycle. This was either very wise of her or she simply could not find the words. He's wrong, of course. He's always wrong.

But God, he's certain.



The first time I was demoted, I didn't even get a meeting.



CHAPTER FIVE

SMALLER HEAD, MORE POPULAR



Martin arrived in my life the way all truly catastrophic things do, small, red-faced, and screaming, and somehow immediately everyone's favourite.

I was eight years old. Eight. Old enough to have already established myself as the undisputed centre of the known universe, and then suddenly there is this baby, this Martin, who does nothing, nothing, except exist in a blanket and cry and smell bad, and somehow this is more interesting to every adult in the building than anything I have ever done or will ever do. I had opinions. I had achievements. None of this mattered. Martin had a slightly bigger head than expected, and this, apparently, was the event of the decade.

I want to be honest with you. I hated him.

Not in the dramatic way people hate each other in films, with speeches and slammed doors. No. This was the clean, pure, unreasoning hatred of an eight-year-old boy who has just understood, for the first time, that attention is a finite resource and someone else is spending his. I looked at Martin in his little situation there and I thought: this is a mistake, and somebody should correct it. I did not say this out loud. I was eight, not stupid.



What followed was not a warm and touching sibling childhood. We did not build things together or protect each other in the schoolyard. We were not close. I was the older brother in the way a storm is an older weather event than a drizzle, I was already happening when he showed up, I was moving fast, I was going somewhere, and I had no interest in slowing down to carry a small person along. We grew up in the same house with the specific awkward distance of two people who have been told they are supposed to love each other and have decided, independently, to think about it later.

Later took a long time.

Our mother died when I was still very young. Our father too, almost together, the way people who live hard lives sometimes leave. And suddenly I was eighteen or nineteen years old and Martin was my responsibility. Just like that. No ceremony, no instruction manual, no preparation of any kind. One day I was a boy with plans for himself and the next day I was, apparently, someone's parent. I remember thinking: this is extremely inconvenient. I also remember thinking: well. Here we are.

And here is the thing about being forced to be responsible for another human being before you are properly finished being irresponsible yourself, it does something to you. Not immediately. Not gracefully. But it does something. You cannot remain entirely in love with your own chaos when someone small is watching you and taking notes.

We never talked about any of this, Martin and I. We are not that kind of brothers. We did not sit down and say, let's process our childhood, let's discuss our feelings about the early years. We are Latvian men of a certain generation. We process things by continuing to exist and occasionally drinking. This system works.



What happened instead was slower and stranger and, I think, better. We just, accumulated. Years went past. Situations occurred. The kind of situations where you find out who someone actually is. Not the nice situations, not the dinners and the celebrations. The other kind. And every time, Martin was there. Steady. Quiet. Not making speeches about it. Just there.

I will tell you what I know about my brother now. If I needed, today, to do something that cannot be spoken about in polite company, if something happened, if the situation was genuinely, seriously bad, I would call Martin. He would not ask many questions. He would come. He is the person you call when you need to, as they say, dig a body. I mean this as the highest possible compliment. In a world full of people who are excellent at sympathy and terrible at showing up, Martin shows up.

I think about the eight-year-old version of me, furious about the arrival of this baby, absolutely certain that this was an injustice being done specifically to him. That boy was wrong about almost everything, as eight-year-olds reliably are, but he was not wrong to pay attention. Martin was worth paying attention to. I was just, at the time, paying the wrong kind.

We understand each other now the way you only understand someone after you have both survived something. Not warmly, exactly. Not with a lot of hugging. But completely.



*The tragedy of being born already done is that school
teaches you, above all, how long done takes.*



CHAPTER SIX

ALREADY FINISHED, JUST ARRIVED



I was six years old and I already knew everything.

This is not the boast of a confused old man rewriting his childhood. I had genuinely finished the entire primary school curriculum before I started it. Mathematics, reading, language, done. My mother and her husband looked at me and thought, well, we cannot keep this extraordinary creature waiting a whole extra year simply because of an administrative calendar, so they sent me to school at six instead of seven. I walked in on the first day convinced I was about to be recognized as some kind of small national resource.

The teacher started explaining what a number was.

I sat there. I looked at the window. I looked at the ceiling. I looked at the number on the board and thought about the fact that I had already been doing arithmetic for two years, and I thought: this is it. This is my life now. A chair, a blackboard, a woman drawing the number four as if it were news.

We had moved to Riga that same year, me, my mother, my stepfather, into a small house, and for the first weeks I walked around the garden by myself imagining things. There was no travel, no games, no Jules Verne yet, just a garden and my own head, which was already quite a



crowded and frankly dangerous neighborhood to live in. I was lonely in the particular way that very clever, very bored children are lonely, which is to say I was not sad so much as I was a problem waiting to happen.

The gang formed naturally. These things always do, when you put enough bored boys in a small radius. I cannot tell you I was elected leader. I will simply say that nobody else had the ideas.

By the time I was about twelve, we were well organised and entirely without supervision. Our most serious operation was the botanical garden. There was a chemical storage yard attached to it, and it had a fence, and a fence to a twelve-year-old boy is essentially a large sign that says PLEASE. We got in without difficulty. Inside there were bottles and drums and all manner of interesting substances, and we conducted what I can only describe as independent scientific research, in the sense that we mixed things together and watched what happened and ran away a lot.

Then we found the liquid.

It had no label we could read, or possibly no label at all. What it had was a smell, not the dramatic chemical smell of something that knows it is dangerous, but a deep, quiet, wrong smell, the smell of something that had decided long ago it did not need to advertise. I picked it up. I thought about it carefully, the way a twelve-year-old who has read ahead in every subject thinks about things. And I made a command decision.

I told my friends to pour it into the school kitchen.

I wish I could tell you I had a sophisticated strategic rationale. I did not. I had a bottle of something that smelled terrible and a school I found boring, and the distance between those two facts was about four seconds of thought. My friends, who I had apparently trained to be



operationally obedient, did it the next morning.

The following day, the entire school smelled like the inside of a chemical plant that had lost an argument with itself. Not unpleasantly bad, not noticeably bad, spectacularly, historically, cosmically bad. The kind of smell that has opinions about you. The kitchen workers started feeling ill. Then the cooks. One by one they were helped out of the building, eyes streaming, lungs making new and experimental sounds. Several of them went to the hospital. The kitchen was evacuated. The school was in mess, teachers walking the hallways pressing handkerchiefs to their faces, children screaming, someone calling the police.

The police came. There was an investigation. A serious, extended, not-joking investigation, because in 1986 in Soviet Latvia, a school kitchen filling with toxic fumes and hospitalizing the staff was not treated as a charming prank, it was treated approximately like an act of war. If it happened today they would have a word for it that would follow me for the rest of my life.

They never found us.

I remember sitting in class during the investigation feeling what I can only describe as a cocktail: twenty percent fear, eighty percent the very specific satisfaction of a person who has finally, at last, after months of boredom, done something genuinely interesting. The math olympiad I won that same year. The language competition. These were fine. These were expected. But this, this was creative. This was original. This was me.

Looking back now from a warm house in southern Spain, I understand that I was not a bad child. I was a script with no director. I was an architect who had not yet found his building. I was pouring poisonous



liquid into kitchens because Jules Verne had not reached me yet,
because nobody had handed me the right bottle and said: this one. Put
this one somewhere useful.

The cooks, I am told, recovered fully.

I have never verified this.

I prefer not to.



*At seven, I discovered I was a genius. I have spent the
rest of my life finding out what for.*



CHAPTER SEVEN

GENIUS OPENS A BIG BOTTLE



There is a boy who is seven years old and already completely convinced he is the smartest person in any room he enters. This is not arrogance, you understand. This is simply accurate.

He has already figured out that school is for people who cannot entertain themselves, that adults are mostly just larger and louder versions of confused children, and that the only interesting problems in life are the ones you have personally created.

This is important background for what happened with the ammonia spirit.

My friend's mother ran the Botanical Garden. This sounds like a sentence from a fairy tale, the director of the Botanical Garden, her son, her apartment full of interesting and dangerous things, and in a way it was, because a woman whose job is to organize plants professionally has, it turns out, a remarkable number of chemicals lying around the apartment. We were not looking for trouble. We were just seven. When you are seven, trouble has a way of organizing itself on your behalf and presenting itself as an opportunity.

There was a big bottle. I do not mean a bottle. I mean a big bottle, the kind of bottle that exists not in ordinary kitchens but in scientific



supply closets, in laboratories, in the dreams of people who want to strip paint from an entire building at once. Concentrated ammonia spirit. The kind of substance that, I should tell you, was used at the time to revive people who had fainted completely unconscious. You wave it near someone who is technically dead and they sit up and start apologizing. This is what we broke.

I do not remember exactly how the bottle broke. Memory is kind like that. What I remember is the sound, a very definite, unambiguous sound, and then the smell arrived. Not gradually. Not politely. It arrived like an announcement. It arrived like a government official. The entire old apartment, with its high ceilings and thick walls that had been holding Soviet-era air since approximately 1955, became instantly, completely, professionally unbreathable.

My friend started making a noise that was partly crying and partly something a small animal makes when it has reconsidered its life choices.

I, however, was thinking.

This is the part of the story I tell with some pride, though I admit the pride is not entirely justified by the ethics. Somewhere in the apartment, because his mother was the director of the Botanical Garden, because her apartment was genuinely full of scientific equipment, because the universe occasionally hands you exactly what you need at exactly the right moment to do something morally questionable, there were two respirators. The rubber kind, the full sealed kind, the kind that makes you look like a very small Soviet pilot or a child who has committed to a theme.

I put one on. I handed the other one to my friend.

I want you to understand: I handed him a respirator. I did not leave him



helpless. He had rubber. He had coverage. He had protection that was, technically, better than nothing. I simply also made sure that mine was the one with the working seal, the proper fit, the functioning filter. This was not selfishness. This was resource allocation. Someone had to be capable of coordinating the cleanup operation, and that someone needed to be able to breathe with some regularity. I was doing us both a favor by being the one who could think clearly.

We cleaned. Him mostly gasping, me mostly directing from behind my excellent respirator like a very small emergency services commander. We collected what we could, mopped what remained, opened the window, did everything two seven-year-olds can do about a quantity of concentrated ammonia that could have revived a small horse.

Then I ran home.

My friend, as I later learned, got in very significant trouble from his mother, who arrived home, walked through the door, and immediately understood that something had happened which no amount of explanation would adequately address. I was not there for this conversation. I was home, in my room, already several blocks away, which is the correct distance to be when someone else's mother is forming her questions.

I felt, and still feel, that I had contributed meaningfully to the cleanup effort. I had been present. I had worked hard. I had breathed almost normally throughout. The fact that I was also the one who had given him the slightly inferior respirator and then left before the maternal investigation, this was not a moral failing. This was just an early sign of what I would later call instinct for survival, or creative problem-solving, or the capacity to be elsewhere when the consequences arrive.

I was seven. I was already learning the most important skill I would



spend the next forty years perfecting: how to be both completely responsible for a disaster and somehow not quite there when it finishes landing.



The statute of limitations on childhood, I have since learned, is approximately never.



CHAPTER EIGHT

EIGHT MINUTES OF TRESPASSING



I was seven years old and already I had discovered the single most important truth about life, which is this: if there is a fence, you climb it. The Botanical Garden sat between our apartment block and the school like a rumour of a better world. Three minutes by the street, which was grey and smelled of diesel and featured absolutely nothing of interest to a seven-year-old boy except, occasionally, a dead pigeon. Or we could go the other way. Over the fence, through the garden, past the roses and the greenhouse and the enormous pine trees that in 1981 in Riga felt like something from a film, which, now that I think about it, was probably the beginning of everything. My friend's mother was the director of the Botanical Garden. This is the kind of fact that, when you are seven, feels like being handed a small kingdom. We did not knock on the gates and ask permission. We were not that kind of children. We crawled over the fence every morning like tiny, self-appointed criminals, schoolbags bumping against our backs, and then we dropped down into the garden and became, for eight minutes, explorers. The guards knew us perfectly well. They knew we were the director's son and his unfortunately-influential friend. They would see us coming, two small boys picking themselves up from the dirt, straightening their jackets with enormous dignity, and they would look at each other, and then they would look at the sky, and then they would



look at literally anything else. This, I now understand, is what diplomacy looks like at its most refined. Nobody said yes. Nobody said no. Everyone was simply looking at the sky together, and somehow we walked through. And the garden, I want to be precise here, because I am always precise, except when I am not, which is frequently, the garden in the morning in early autumn was the most extraordinary place. Not extraordinary in the way a grown man writes about things when he wants to sound sensitive. Extraordinary in the way that a seven-year-old boy knows in his chest: the dew on the grass was cold through your shoes, the greenhouse glass was fogged from the inside, and if you pressed your face against it you could see tropical plants living their impossible green lives in there, knowing nothing of Latvia, knowing nothing of diesel fumes and grey streets, just growing, slowly and completely, because that was their entire job. I thought that was the best arrangement I had ever heard of. We were not quiet. I want to be honest: we were not two small poets tiptoeing reverently through the flora. We ran. We hit things with sticks. We almost certainly frightened birds. I explained to my friend with great authority which plants were poisonous, I was, at this point, already deeply interested in chemistry, which had already become a source of some concern to the adults in my vicinity, and would become more so, but that is a different chapter. The point is we arrived at school every morning slightly muddy, slightly out of breath, carrying the specific and excellent feeling of having gotten away with something. I did not know, at seven, that this was going to be the defining experience of my life. I thought it was just Tuesday. But I have been crawling over fences ever since. Different fences, bigger gardens, guards who are sometimes less cooperative. Latvia to Spain in a car packed so full the children could barely see out the windows. Scripts that should not exist, made because a famous actress read one on her laptop during a divorce and said we will do this and I said we have no



money and she said we will do this and somehow that was the end of the argument. Films built entirely from dreamed things, from worlds that do not exist until someone decides to build them. Every single time: the fence, the cold wet grass, the guard looking carefully at the sky. The fence was never the obstacle. The fence was the whole point. I can see us now, two boys dropping into the garden in the grey Riga morning, me already convinced, with the serene totality of the truly deluded, that I was the most interesting person in the vicinity, which was probably not entirely wrong, and also not entirely the point, walking between the rose beds toward school, taking our time, in no particular hurry to arrive anywhere we were actually supposed to be. Some habits, I am pleased to report, I have kept.



*The years between then and now are littered with
gardens I walked through instead of arriving.*



CHAPTER NINE

LYING THROUGH THE GARDEN



We walked to school through the garden every morning, me and my friend, I will not even try to explain which garden, because in Soviet Riga in 1981 every route to school went through some grey, half-dead rectangle of grass and broken benches that someone had optimistically labeled a garden, and those walks were, I am now completely certain, the finest creative work either of us ever produced.

We were seven years old. We had nothing. And I mean nothing in the Soviet way, which is a specific, architectural kind of nothing, where the shelves in the shop are empty but they are empty in exactly the same way in every shop, so at least you feel the solidarity of it. Everybody was poor. Nobody knew they were poor. People were, honestly, happier than now. Make of that what you like.

So we walked through the garden and we lied to each other. Magnificently. Competitively. With total commitment.

The rule, unspoken, never broken, was that the story had to be impossible. Not just unlikely. Impossible. The kind of thing that could not exist inside the borders of the Soviet Union, which meant, in practice, anything interesting.



I would start. I would say, very casually, the way a man mentions he left his umbrella somewhere: My father is in a film. A real film. He called me last week and I was on the set with him and there were cameras everywhere and I sat in the director's chair.

My friend would nod. He would think for three seconds. He would say: My uncle lives in America. He is a millionaire. He is coming to get me in one year and I will live in his house which has a swimming pool inside it.

I would raise him: I saw five men shooting at each other.

This one always landed. It had everything. It had foreignness, danger, colour, literally colour, in a country where everyone was approximately the same shade of grey overcoat, and it had guns, and it had plurality, five of them, not one, not two, five, because if you are going to lie you might as well commit to the number. In the Soviet Union in 1981, this image, five men shooting at each other, was so cosmically, structurally impossible that it was basically science fiction. Nobody crossed the border. Nobody had an uncle in America unless that uncle had also, in the process, become an enemy of the state. Nobody had a millionaire relative. Nobody had a father on a film set. And nobody, certainly nobody in Riga, had witnessed a gunfight of any composition.

We knew this. We knew it completely. That was not the point. The point was the telling. The point was the two minutes after I said it, when my friend had to top it, and I could see him actually thinking, actually building something in his head, and for those two minutes we were both somewhere else entirely. Somewhere with swimming pools and cameras and bullets in the air.

I think about those walks now and I realize: that was already directing. I was seven years old, I was walking through a dead Soviet garden in a



coat that had previously belonged to someone larger, and I was making films in my head and projecting them directly into another person. The audience was one boy. The budget was zero. The location was miserable. The reviews were instant.

We never discussed what we actually wanted. We didn't say I want to leave or I want a father who is present or I want to live somewhere the shops have things in them. We just, built the fantasy and walked through it for twenty minutes and then arrived at school and sat down and did mathematics.

But somewhere in those stories, between the millionaire uncle and the five men and the film set that existed only in the exhaled breath of a seven-year-old, there was a real thing. A real wanting. I wanted to make something. I wanted to be somewhere big and loud and alive. I wanted, though I would not have said this word then or possibly ever, I wanted to matter.

Two boys, walking through a garden in the Soviet Union, telling each other impossible things.

That is, I now understand, how you survive. You imagine the life you cannot have, in enough detail, for long enough, until, and this is the part nobody tells you, some of it, by accident or stubbornness or sheer repetitive force of fantasy, becomes real.

Or you move to Spain. Same principle, better weather.



*I moved to Spain for three years, then came back,
which means I am the kind of person who practices
freedom as a day trip.*



CHAPTER TEN

SACRED GROUND BEHIND THE GYMNASIUM



We were eight years old and we already knew everything about forbidden things. In Latvia in 1982, forbidden things were everywhere, certain radio stations, certain conversations your parents had and then stopped having when you walked into the room, certain silences that were louder than anything. We were experts. We had a complete catalogue.

So when a friend came to school one Monday with his grandmother's Bible tucked under his arm like he was smuggling plutonium, every single one of us understood immediately that we were in the presence of something extraordinary. He held it the way you hold a grenade you found in a field, with great reverence and also with the slight suspicion that it might go off.

We gathered behind the gymnasium. This was the correct location for forbidden activities. The gymnasium smelled of old rubber and Soviet ambition and the particular despair of children being asked to climb ropes, and the space behind it had historically hosted the trading of foreign stamps, the smoking of things that were definitely not cigarettes, and at least one incident involving a frog that I personally



had nothing to do with. It was sacred ground. It was the right place for a forbidden book.

He placed the Bible on an old crate. We stood around it in a loose circle, approximately eight of us, in our grey scarves, in the cold. Nobody touched it yet. It had a dark cover and gold letters and it looked ancient in a way that nothing around us looked ancient, everything in our world was either brand new and Soviet or broken and Soviet, and this thing looked like it had survived something. We were impressed.

"Is it actually forbidden?" someone whispered.

He nodded with great authority, which meant he had absolutely no idea.

Here is the thing nobody tells you about forbidden books. You expect them to hit you like a lightning bolt. You expect the first page to explain everything, the secret mechanism of the universe, the reason adults are so strange, the location of whatever they've been hiding. You expect revelation, capital R, the kind that reorganises your entire understanding of life immediately and leaves you changed forever and also possibly slightly taller.

What we got instead was Genesis. Which begins, as I discovered standing in the cold behind a Soviet gymnasium in 1982, with several very long chapters about who was the father of whom, and then who that person was the father of, and then that person's sons and what those sons were called, and various animals walking into a boat. I am paraphrasing but not by much.

We passed it around with enormous seriousness. Each of us held it for a moment, squinting at the tiny print, nodding as though we understood, then passing it to the next person with the expression of a man handing over a document of great importance. I remember the size of it,



genuinely heavy, the pages thin like they were embarrassed about their contents, or possibly just cold.

Someone said, "This is incredible." Nobody disagreed, because disagreeing would have meant admitting that you also didn't understand it and had been hoping the next person would explain it, and none of us were willing to make that sacrifice.

But I remember standing there with it in my hands, behind the gymnasium, the cold working its way through my jacket, and feeling something I didn't have a word for at eight. Not the forbidden knowledge I'd promised myself. Something stranger. The book gave absolutely different ideas than I expected, not the laws of the underground universe, not the answers to the questions that kept me awake, but the clear sense that someone had thought about everything completely differently, from a completely different direction, and had written it all down very carefully. That was the shock. Not the content. The existence of a completely different angle.

In the Soviet Union in 1982, that was possibly the most radical idea available.

He got it back eventually and tucked it under his arm again, and we dispersed with the slightly dazed look of people who have had a powerful experience and are not sure what kind. We went back to playing war games and riding bicycles to places our parents had specifically forbidden. The Bible went back to the grandmother's shelf, probably, where it had been sitting the whole time, not forbidden, simply not respected, which in some ways is a harder thing to survive.

I thought about it for weeks afterward. Not what it said. That it existed. That someone had written it down and kept it and that it had weight and gold letters and thin paper and had come, improbably, to a crate



behind a gymnasium to be held by eight Soviet children in grey scarves who had expected the secrets of the cosmos and got a list of very old names.

We were, I think, mildly traumatised. In the most useful possible way.



*I spent the next six years believing I had a destiny.
This is, medically speaking, a very difficult thing to
recover from.*



CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHOSEN BY GOD, ADJACENT



CHAPTER: I was ten years old and I was going to be in a movie.

Not a school play. Not some amateur thing filmed on a relative's camera where your uncle holds it sideways and everyone agrees to pretend it went well. A real movie. Directed by a man who in Latvia in 1984 was roughly equivalent to being hand-selected by God, if God wore a turtleneck and had opinions about lens filters.

I had been chosen. Out of everyone. I want you to sit with that for a moment, because I certainly did. I sat with it for approximately three weeks, during which I became insufferable to everyone in my immediate vicinity, which, looking back, was excellent preparation for my entire adult life.

The film was called *If We Could Suffer All This*. A title that, as a ten-year-old, I found extremely serious and important, and which in retrospect describes every project I have ever attempted. My role was the younger brother of one of the main revolutionary characters. The year the story was set was 1905. Latvia. Uprising. Heavy coats. Men with serious faces making serious choices in serious rooms. And me, ten years old, hair combed, shoes cleaned by my mother that morning with the specific maternal energy of someone who knows the shoes will not

stay clean, standing at the edge of all of it, pretending to be eleven.

Now. Here is where I should mention what my role actually required me to do.

My brother, my character's brother, the revolutionary, had been hanged.

And I had to go out at night and cut him down from the rope.

I want to be clear: at ten, I understood this was dramatic. I understood this was important cinema. What I did not fully anticipate was that they would construct an actual hanged man, suspended from an actual rope, in actual darkness, and then send me, a child, a small child, a child whose shoes had been cleaned that morning with love, out to deal with it.

The scene was shot at night. Obviously. Because what this film needed, on top of everything else, was for the child actor to be cold. The set was dark the way only a Latvian night in October can be dark, not romantic darkness, not cinematic shadow, but the specific darkness that informs you, calmly and without drama, that warmth does not exist and never did. I stood there in my period-appropriate coat, which was scratchy in the way that only historical clothing is scratchy, as if authenticity itself was designed to be uncomfortable, which, now that I think about it, it usually is.

And there was my brother. Hanging.

I had to go to him. I had to take him down. I had to perform grief that was real enough to convince a camera and an audience and Rolands Kalniņš, who had cast me for this and was standing somewhere in the darkness with the calm certainty of a man who had made actors cry before and was perfectly prepared to do it again.



So what did I feel?

I felt alive.

I mean, obviously I was terrified. Obviously part of me wanted my mother and her shoe-cleaning energy and a warm room and something normal for dinner. But underneath the terror there was something else entirely, this enormous, almost violent sense that this was real, that this was the world working at full intensity, that somewhere on the other side of this darkness and this rope and this grief was something that mattered more than anything I had done in my ten years of existing. That gray, ordinary life, school, routine, the flat predictable rhythm of days that looked exactly like the days before them, was sitting somewhere far behind me, and I was walking away from it, into the dark, toward something that would cost me something real.

Which is, I would later discover, more or less the only place I ever want to be.

I cut him down. I did the scene. And when it was over, the revolutionaries came, these big, serious, heavy-coated men, and they took my character with them, into whatever came next for people brave or foolish enough to believe that the world could be different than it was.

I stood there watching them prepare the next shot, these men moving through the dark with their lamps and their ropes and their director-approved intensity, and I thought: I want to make this. Not just be in it. Make it. Build the darkness. Choose the rope. Be the one standing outside the camera's eye, imagining something that doesn't exist yet and then dragging it, inch by inch, into the world.

I was ten. I had not yet developed the full suite of delusions that would characterize my professional life. But that one, the one about making



worlds out of nothing, that one turned out to be completely true.

Which is, statistically, better than my average.



*There is a developmental window, I have since
discovered, between knowing you can make
something from nothing and learning what nothing
actually costs.*



CHAPTER TWELVE

DYING DRAMATICALLY IN DITCHES



There is a particular genius to being ten years old in a Soviet small town in 1984, and that genius is this: you have absolutely nothing, and it turns out that nothing is exactly the right amount of material to build an entire civilization.

We had the street. We had the bushes. We had each other. And nobody, not the state, not our parents, not the grey administrative philosophy of the entire USSR, had yet managed to convince us that this was insufficient.

The games we played were, in retrospect, historically confused. Indians and cowboys was an interesting choice for children of the Soviet Union, given that the correct ideological position on cowboys was roughly that they represented capitalist land theft, but we did not know this, and more importantly we did not care. Someone had seen something, or read something, or invented something, and now half of us were Indians and half of us were cowboys and we were running through bushes screaming, which I maintain is the most honest response to geopolitics available to a human being. The war games were more officially approved, the propaganda machine had been very thorough on this point, and we had absorbed enough heroic Soviet imagery to



spend entire afternoons dying dramatically in ditches and then getting up to do it again. I was very good at dying. This is, I think, a skill.

The searching games in the bushes were the ones that felt most like actual life to me, which should tell you something about the life I would later go on to build. You were looking for something. You were not entirely certain what. The bushes were vast and scratchy and full of possibilities that never quite materialized, and yet you kept looking, because the looking itself was the point, and also because it delayed going home.

Going home was the enemy of all great art.

We walked forbidden distances. This was perhaps our finest achievement as a collective, the thing I am proudest of when I review the complete works of my childhood. Our parents had drawn invisible borders around the acceptable world, the way all parents do, and we treated these borders with the respect they deserved, which is to say none whatsoever. We walked for what felt like hours, into territories unmapped by anyone who loved us, and when we returned we wore the faces of people who had simply been playing nearby, just over there, just around the corner, nothing unusual. We were very convincing. Or our parents were very tired. It is difficult to know.

But I should tell you about the scooter. Because the scooter is where the story gets genuinely interesting, by which I mean the story becomes the story of how I very nearly lost my head.

I was ten. I was visiting my friends. Someone had a scooter, one of those simple Soviet things, metal, heavy, with all the elegant engineering of a garden tool, and we were riding it down the street the way you ride things when you are ten and Soviet and have no helmet and no concept of personal fragility. I was on the back. My friend was driving. He was



leaning forward with the focused expression of a man who has a plan, which in retrospect was a warning sign, because children with plans are the most dangerous organisms on the planet.

There was a rope across the street.

I want to be very clear about this rope. It was not a small rope. It was not a rope someone had carefully considered and then positioned at a safe height. It was a rope at exactly the height of my neck, stretched between two fixed points, waiting with the patient malevolence of a thing that has no intelligence and yet somehow knows exactly what it is doing.

My friend saw it at the last moment and did the only reasonable thing, which was to lean down and thus save his own head entirely. His head went under the rope. The rope then met my neck with a velocity that I would describe as enthusiastic.

I did not lose my head. I want to be clear on this point because I am still using it. But what I received in exchange for my continued existence was a stripe across my neck, bright red, vivid, precise, the kind of mark that a doctor might call a contusion and that I would call a message from the universe about the importance of paying attention on scooters. It glowed. It was magnificent in a terrible way. I was alive, which I found genuinely surprising.

We did not tell anyone. We rode the scooter some more.

This is what I mean when I say I was most alive then, not the rope, specifically, though the rope certainly clarified things. I mean the totality of it: the friends, the distances, the bushes, the games that didn't quite make sense, the moving through a world that had not yet decided what it wanted from me. After we moved, it was different. Riga was school and homework and different rhythms and I did not have such



friends again, not like that, not the kind you meet every day without planning to.

I stood on that street in 1984 with a red stripe around my neck, still breathing, slightly faster than usual, and I had no idea it was the last of something.

I was, as usual, the last to know.



*The next year, I graduated from losing friends to
throwing rocks at them, which was, in retrospect, a
lateral move.*



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONE STONE, WRONG ALTITUDE



I was ten years old in 1984, which means I was exactly the right age to be completely convinced that the best way to solve a disagreement with your closest friend was to throw rocks at each other. Not big rocks. We were not savages. We had rules. You aim for the legs. This was the Geneva Convention of our neighbourhood, agreed upon by two boys who had never heard of Geneva and would not have cared.

The fights were regular. This is important context. It was not as if one afternoon the devil whispered in our ears and suddenly we were throwing things. No, we had developed a whole system. There was an argument, there was an escalation, there were stones, there were legs as the official target zone, and then eventually it ended and we went home for dinner and came back the next day. A beautiful friendship. Very healthy. I cannot recommend it enough.

What happened on this particular afternoon was that the system broke down. I will not say whose fault it was. I will say it was not entirely mine in ways that feel important to establish immediately.

The stone went too high. That is all. One stone, one error of trajectory, and my friend went down like a very small, very dramatic tree. He made a sound I had never heard before. He put his hand to his head. His hand



came away with something on it that was not supposed to be outside of a person's head.

I stood there for perhaps two seconds, which felt like the entire length of my life until that point. And then a thought arrived, and the thought was: I have killed him.

Now, he was sitting up. He was making noise. These are not, technically, things that dead people do. But I was ten, and ten-year-old boys are not strong on technical distinctions when there is blood involved. The logical part of my brain, the part that would eventually grow up and make films, direct actors, construct scenarios, completely abandoned me and ran off somewhere to lie down quietly. What remained was pure, screaming panic.

I ran. Not to my friend. To his mother.

I want you to understand the distance involved. I ran across the yard, up the stairs, to his apartment door, and I knocked. When she opened the door, I was standing there, breathless, red-faced, with the expression of a person who has just done something irreversible and knows it. And I said, I remember this precisely because it has lived in me for forty years as a monument to human stupidity, I said:

"Sorry. I think I killed your son."

She stared at me.

I want to give her credit. She did not faint. She did not immediately start screaming. She went through several emotions very quickly, like a woman flipping through television channels, settling briefly on shock, horror, and then something that was possibly just the flat exhaustion of raising boys in Latvia in 1984. She went to find him. He was, as I mentioned, sitting up. Still making noise. Definitely, medically,



technically alive.

I do not remember much after that. I think I was sent home. I think I apologised many more times. I think I spent that evening in the specific private hell of a ten-year-old who believes he is a murderer and cannot tell anyone because telling someone would make it more real.

And then the next morning I went to school.

And there he was. My friend. Walking in through the door. With a bandage on his head, white, clean, slightly heroic-looking, the kind of bandage that immediately makes every other boy in the class deeply jealous because it is an artefact of actual, documented adventure. He sat down at his desk. He looked at me. I looked at him.

We were still friends. Just like that. No ceremony, no conversation, no formal reconciliation. In the way that only boys of that age can manage, we simply agreed without speaking that it had happened, he had survived, and we could go back to whatever we had been doing before.

He looked, I have to say, much more interesting than me. He had the bandage. He had the story. People kept asking him what happened and he got to tell it. I was just the one who had run screaming to his mother, confessed to a murder that had not occurred, and then shown up to school the next day with nothing to show for it except the memory of his mother's face and a lesson about aim that I have, frankly, never needed to use again.

I think about that moment sometimes, the door, the breathless confession, the shock on her face. I was so certain I had destroyed something permanent. So certain the worst had already happened and nothing could be undone.

He walked in with a bandage and sat down next to me.



That is probably the most useful thing I have ever learned, and I was too young and too stupid to know I was learning it.



*The years between eleven and thirteen are
architecturally very simple: a door you shouldn't
open, and four of you.*



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BOYS AT THE EDGE OF ARITHMETIC



We were eleven years old and we had already opened the lock to the attic.

I should say that first, the lock. Because that was not accidental. Someone had a piece of wire, someone else had been watching the janitor, and we had time, which in 1985 in Riga meant we had everything. School finished, parents were at work, the afternoon was just sitting there in front of us like an unlocked door. So we found one and opened it.

The building was twelve stories. Twelve stories in a Soviet residential block is not architectural ambition, it is just arithmetic, how many families can you stack before the thing falls over. We lived in places like this, all of us. Concrete corridors, shared stairwells that smelled of cabbage and cigarettes and someone else's life. But the roof, the roof was different. You pushed through the attic hatch and suddenly you were above everything, above the whole flat grey city, and the wind came at you sideways and the sky was bigger than it had any right to be.

We stood up there for a few minutes. Just stood. Looking at Riga spread out below us like something spilled on a table.

Then someone had the idea.



I don't remember who. It doesn't matter who. What matters is that the idea arrived among us and none of us said no. The idea was this: you go to the edge. You lie down on your stomach on the roof surface. Two of your friends grab your legs, one on each ankle, and they hold. And you let the rest of your body go over.

Head first. Down.

Twelve floors of nothing below your face.

I remember the texture of the roof surface under my palms before I went over, gritty, still warm from the afternoon sun, a particular roughness that I can still feel if I press my fingers together a certain way. I remember the edge approaching. I remember the exact moment when my center of gravity crossed it and the city below me was no longer a view but a destination.

The hands around my ankles were the only argument against gravity. That is all they were. Two boys, each maybe forty kilograms, holding me by the feet while my entire body hung inverted above a twelve-story drop. We did not discuss structural engineering. We did not discuss grip strength or consequences. We were eleven. We discussed nothing. We just held each other.

And what I felt, hanging there, blood moving into my skull, Riga upside down below me, the wind doing whatever it wanted with my jacket, was not terror exactly. It was something cleaner than terror. Terror has a story attached to it, a future in which something bad happens. What I felt had no future in it at all. There was only this: the hands on my ankles, the city below, the specific realness of being alive in a body that could very easily stop being alive. Every nerve I had was paying full attention. Nothing else existed. No school, no apartment, no parents who were somewhere else and not coming home yet. Just



this.

We all did it. One after another, each of us going over the edge while the others held. No one died. I want to say it clearly because it still seems improbable, no one died. Hands held. Ankles held. Whatever combination of luck and eleven-year-old grip strength was required, we had it that afternoon.

Someone had a camera. There are photographs. I have seen them as an adult and they are completely insane. A child hanging upside down from the roof of a twelve-story building while two other children hold his legs and squint into the sun. The city behind him. All of them in their Soviet-era jackets, their ordinary shoes. Completely calm. As if this were a reasonable thing to be doing on a Tuesday.

I look at those photographs and I do not recognise the logic, but I absolutely recognise the feeling. The need to find out what the body does when it has no choice but to be present. To share that with someone standing next to you, even if sharing it means you are the reason they might fall.

We did not trust each other. I want to be precise about this. Trust is something you build from evidence, from history, from someone showing up when they said they would. We were eleven, we had no such accounting between us. What we had was simpler and stranger than trust. We had a shared decision to hold on. To not let go. To find out what was on the other side of the fear and to find it together.

Nobody let go.

We came back down through the attic hatch, back into the stairwell with its cabbage smell, back into the ordinary afternoon. And nobody said very much. There was nothing to say. You cannot really explain to someone what you learned hanging upside down from a roof. You can



only know it yourself, in your hands, in your ankles, in whatever part of
you decided that the feeling of being alive was worth the exact price of
almost not being.



*It turns out the fastest cure for a child who has
learned he is made of something unkillable is to
enroll him in a class about soufflés.*



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHISK ENVY



They sent me to cook school.

Let me say that again so you feel the full weight of it. After eight grades of being, without question, the sharpest mind in every room I had ever entered, my parents sat me down and explained their vision for my future. It was: cook school. A vocational programme that made cooks. I would learn to boil things.

I was fifteen. I had opinions about philosophy. I had opinions about everything. And they sent me to a school where the entrance requirement was essentially that you had a nose, and sometimes not even that.

The other students were, how do I say this with the right amount of compassion, not people who had been turned away from better options due to some cruel bureaucratic accident. They were people for whom this was the ceiling. Good people, probably. People who would go on to make adequate soup. But I was sitting in class listening to a teacher explain the difference between a whisk and a fork, thinking: I read Dostoevsky last month. I read it and I understood it. And right now I am learning what a whisk is.

My parents' logic was money, which is the logic of people who have had to survive and who mistake survival for wisdom. Profession first. Education was a luxury. A trained cook earns. And they were not



wrong that a trained cook earns. They were just spectacularly wrong about which trained cook they were looking at.

So I did what any reasonable fifteen-year-old genius would do when handed an injustice this enormous. I built a barricade.

We had a small room. Five square metres. A box. I sealed the door with wood, proper planks, nailed, constructed, so that instead of a door there was a wall. And in the bottom of this wall I left a hole. A small hole. Dog-house size. You had to get on your hands and knees and crawl through it. This was intentional. This was the point. If you wanted to enter my room, you had to humble yourself first, and even then I probably wasn't letting you in. My mother called me for dinner through the wall. I did not come. Not because I wasn't hungry, I was fifteen, I was always hungry, but because dinner was out there, and out there was the world that had decided I was a cook, and I had decided that I was not.

Inside was mine. I had stacked it, electronics, books, more electronics, more books, floor to ceiling like a man preparing for a siege he expects to win. Soviet electronics were still cheap enough then that my wages could buy them, and I bought everything. Speakers. Amplifiers. Equipment whose function I was still working out. The room was so small that if I stood in the middle and spread my arms I could almost touch both walls, which meant it was also the most acoustically terrifying listening room ever constructed in human history. I didn't care. It was mine. Untouchable. A castle, and I was its only citizen.

Then there was the bed.

I had built the bed myself, which in retrospect explains everything. I had designed it with the legs set at angles, a diamond shape, I thought it looked very interesting and architectural and good, and structurally



what this meant was that the bed was, at all times, one breath away from catastrophic failure. This was not a flaw I had anticipated. Every night I would lie down, and for a few minutes I would feel like a man who had built something, and then I would drift toward sleep and the bed would wait, patient as a predator, and at the exact moment of unconsciousness it would go, the legs would slide, the whole structure would drop, and I would crash to the floor with a sound like a small building falling on a slightly smaller building.

I did this for, I don't know. Long enough that any sane person would have called it information. I called it bad luck and got back on the bed. Eventually I accepted the truth, which was that I had designed a terrible bed, and I put books under the corners. Philosophy books, mostly. Possibly Dostoevsky. I'd like to think Dostoevsky was literally holding up my bed while I slept, which is either very deep or completely insane, and after fifteen years I still cannot decide which.

I also started martial arts around this time, because apparently the barricade and the collapsing bed and the cook school were not enough challenge and I felt I should also be hit by people on purpose. I slept on bare wood for a while, to toughen myself, I had decided, the way men in books toughen themselves, and then I put a mattress down because the wood was agony, and I told myself this was also a decision about toughness, the toughness of a man who adapts.

And I read. I read everything. In my five square metres, behind my dog-hole, propped against my book-supported bed, I read more than the cook school had books. I was making myself educated because no one else was going to do it. I was fifteen and I already knew the deal: if you wanted something done right, you sealed yourself inside a wooden barricade and you did it yourself and you did not come out for dinner.

The room smelled of solder and paperback glue and the particular



teenage certainty that the world had made an error, and that the error was enormous, and that you, specifically, uniquely, definitely you, were the correction.



*I did not eat breakfast that year, which I believed
was political.*



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FIFTEEN, UNBREAKFAST, AND HISTORY



CHAPTER: I was fifteen years old and I had no doubt whatsoever, not a tremor of it, that I was going to change history. This is the kind of confidence that belongs exclusively to fifteen-year-old boys and certain species of golden retriever, and it is, in both cases, almost entirely disconnected from reality. It was 1991, and the Soviet Union was making the noise a very large building makes just before it falls: enormous grinding sounds, sudden silences, the occasional distant crash of something important giving way. In Moscow, the Communist Party had decided they had not quite finished ruining everything and staged a putsch to take power back. And in Riga, Latvia, which is a city that has spent most of its history being owned by someone who did not particularly ask permission, the people went into the streets. Everyone went. My mother, my stepfather, the neighbors, the woman from the bread shop who had a face like a disappointed Tuesday, all of them, out the door, into the cold. And me. Fifteen years old, wearing what I believed was a very serious expression and what was probably just the face of a boy who has not yet had breakfast. The barricades were enormous. I want you to understand this. People had dragged trucks, concrete blocks, furniture, pieces of their own houses into the streets and stacked them into walls that looked like God had knocked over a very ambitious toy



box. Whole intersections had simply ceased to be intersections and had become instead large arguments made of stone and iron. I had seen pictures of barricades from history books, and those looked thin and manageable and almost decorative. These looked like the city itself had decided to sit down and refuse to move. And the food. This is the thing I have never forgotten and cannot properly explain to anyone who was not there. Total strangers were handing out food. Not selling. Handing. Soup appeared from nowhere. Bread appeared. Old women arrived with pots they must have been carrying since the thirties and began distributing whatever was inside with the calm authority of people who have fed armies before and found the experience not particularly impressive. If you were standing there, cold, a little frightened, slightly unsure whether you were participating in a revolution or just watching one, someone found you and gave you something warm to eat. I ate soup from a stranger's pot at a barricade in Riga in 1991 and thought: this is what people actually are. Not the grey shuffling version I'd watched stand in queues for years. This. This version. Of course, I was fifteen, and fifteen is exactly the age at which you mistake a very good Tuesday for the permanent nature of mankind. But still. The risk was real, which naturally made everything feel more important, especially to a fifteen-year-old who had not yet developed the part of the brain responsible for accurately calculating danger. The Communist party was not finished. There were soldiers somewhere. Things could go wrong in the kind of way that does not get better afterward. I understood this the way you understand bad weather, intellectually, at a distance, not yet on your skin. The adults around me understood it differently. I could see it in how they stood: feet apart, heavier somehow, as if they'd decided to weigh more. But nobody left. That is the thing. Not one person I saw that night looked at the barricades and the soldiers somewhere in the dark and the soup getting cold in the pot



and decided actually, you know what, home. They all stayed. The whole cold night, they stayed, and they fed each other, and they stood in front of walls they had built with their own hands out of whatever they could find. I have spent a large portion of my adult life making films about people choosing between the life they're supposed to live and the life they actually want. Between the box and the open sky. I did not know I was going to do that when I was fifteen. But standing at those barricades, eating soup I hadn't paid for, surrounded by people who had decided in a single quiet collective moment that this thing, this specific thing, was worth the cost, I think I learned the only lesson I've ever really tried to teach. People are capable of it. That's what I believed then. I still believe it now, even after everything, though I'll admit the evidence has not always been enthusiastic in its support. Most people, most days, want to be comfortable and successful and left alone, which is entirely reasonable and also a little bit sad. But somewhere under that, under the personal ambitions and the sensible choices and the very understandable desire to not stand in the cold, there is this other thing. The thing that comes out when a truck appears at an intersection at midnight and someone hands you a spoon. The barricades are what I see when I close my eyes and try to remember what humans look like at their best. Not heroic. Not dramatic. Just, people in the cold, feeding each other, going nowhere.



*My mother had been dying quietly for years, so
when she finally announced it with some urgency, I
took it personally.*



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HER PANTS, THE CORRIDOR



She woke up one morning holding her head with both hands. That was the first sign. Not gradual, not a slow decline, just my mother sitting on the edge of her bed, pressing her palms flat against her temples like she was trying to keep something inside. I called the ambulance. They came. She couldn't stand by herself when they arrived, so two men held her arms and walked her to the door, and she let them, which told me everything, because she was not a woman who let people hold her arms.

At the hospital they took her immediately somewhere behind a set of double doors and a doctor came out, young, tired, the kind of face that has already seen too much of what it is about to see again, and he looked at me and said he needed to examine her but she could not manage her clothes herself. He needed me to remove her pants.

I was eighteen years old. She was my mother.

I went in and I did it. I don't know what else to tell you about that. It was embarrassing and disgusting in the particular way that only love can be embarrassing and disgusting, when you have to do the thing that crosses the line you always believed would never need crossing. I pulled her pants off and I did not look at her face and she did not look at mine



and then I left and sat down in a plastic chair in a corridor that smelled like disinfectant and linoleum and I waited.

This was a few years after Orest.

Orest was my stepfather. Cold man, never hugged me once in the years I knew him, which I understood later was simply how he was built, not cruelty, just architecture. He'd been a neurosurgery student, which I always found interesting: a man whose hands were steady enough to cut open other people but who could not bring himself to put one on my shoulder. When his hands started shaking he left neurosurgery and became a jeweler, making cheap amber pieces, and then when that stopped working he became a photographer with a red darkroom in the house, black and white pictures, trays of chemicals, that small red light, and I respected him for that, for finding new containers for himself each time the old one broke.

The tooth fell out while he was watching television.

He was just sitting there, relaxed, and then the tooth was in his hand and he was looking at it. That was the beginning. They found it late, the kind of late where the doctors' faces go flat and professional, and the medicines cost more than we had, and then he got worse anyway, injections into the chest bone that were somehow wrong, and an infection came that the medicines couldn't touch, and I was there when he died. First time I had watched a person leave. I didn't know the body did that, the specific way it stops, the absolute stillness after so much effort. I was eighteen.

My mother loved him completely. I don't think I understood until after, how much of her had been organized around him. The funeral had the drinking that Latvian funerals have, people getting loose and red-faced and telling stories, and my mother sat through all of it like a



person who had been unplugged from the wall.

She was depressed for years. Then came the morning with her hands against her head.

So I sat in that corridor and I waited, and after some time, I couldn't tell you how long, time in hospitals doesn't move the way it does outside, the surgeon came through the double doors. He was still in his gown. He looked at me and he said they were going to do a difficult surgery and they needed cognac. Just like that. We need cognac.

I thought: okay. This is something surgeons do. I went and I found a place and I bought the best bottle I could, the most expensive, because my mother was behind those doors and this man was about to help her and I was not going to give him bad cognac. I came back. I gave him the bottle. He looked at it. He went back through the doors.

Ten minutes later he came back out.

He was pushing a gurney, and my mother was on it, and she was not moving in the way that people move when they are asleep or sedated, and I understood.

She had died on the table. The cognac was for after, for him, I suppose, or for whoever drinks cognac after that. I don't know. I didn't ask.

I went home and I told my brother.

Then I was alone. We were alone, me and my younger brother, and I was responsible for him, which meant I was responsible for something, which was strange because in every other way I was completely free in a way I had never been free before. No one was coming home. No one was waiting up. I started going to bars, the worst parts of town, the kind of places that don't ask you anything, and I felt the grief and underneath the grief I felt something else that I am not proud of and



also cannot pretend wasn't there: space. An enormous, terrifying, exhilarating amount of space.

I chose my own friends after that. I chose everything.

I still think about the cognac. The way I walked out of that hospital to find a bottle, already calculating how much I could spend, already doing the responsible thing, the adult thing, already becoming someone who handles it. While she was dying behind those doors, I was standing in a shop holding bottles up to the light.



*The most competent I have ever been in a crisis is
also, I now understand, a character flaw.*



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

OLD MAN, BORROWED LIGHT



CHAPTER: My parents died and left me with two things: grief, and the freedom to choose who I was going to spend time with.

The grief I knew what to do with, roughly. You carry it. You don't put it down because there is nowhere to put it. But the freedom, that was stranger than I expected. I had spent years inside a house that had its own gravity, its own rules about which direction you were supposed to face. And then the house was gone, and I was nineteen years old in Riga in 1993, and I could walk toward anyone I wanted.

I walked toward Arniolds Plaudis.

I don't remember now exactly how we first met, in the way you don't remember how a smell reached you, only that suddenly it was there. He was an old man by then, and famous in the way that matters inside a small country: not famous to the world, but famous to every person in that world who cared about anything. He had worked as a scenographer, painter and scriptwriter, and as scenographer he had collaborated with the great theater director Eduards Smiļģis, iconic productions, the kind that people in Latvia still talked about the way people talk about something that changed what they thought was possible. He had lived inside art his whole life. Not around it. Inside it.



He had a studio. I remember the light there, the specific horizontal light of a Riga afternoon coming through windows that probably hadn't been cleaned in years, which gave everything a slightly amber quality, like old photographs of themselves. He moved slowly but he didn't move carefully, there's a difference. Careful is what you do when you're afraid of breaking something. He just moved at the pace that suited him, and the room waited.

He didn't teach me anything directly. I want to be precise about that, because the indirect way was the whole lesson. He didn't sit me down and explain creativity as a concept. He just lived in front of me. He worked. He talked about work. He showed me what it looked like when someone had spent fifty years refusing to be bored by their own imagination, and the result was a man who at eighty-something still found the space between his ears to be genuinely interesting territory.

He told me once that to be a real artist you had to be capable of imagining a horse on a tomato.

Not a horse near a tomato. On it.

I thought about that for a long time. I am still thinking about it, in some way. The point wasn't absurdism, he wasn't telling me to be strange for the pleasure of strangeness. He was telling me that your imagination has to be able to go somewhere that reality refuses to go, and go there without apology, without explaining to reality why it was doing so. A horse on a tomato is not possible. It is also completely vivid. You can see it right now. That gap, between impossible and vivid, is where everything interesting lives.

And then there was the quote. He said it in relation to directing, but also in relation to something else, something older and simpler. He said: Sensing the intention, resentment arises.



He meant it about audiences. If a person watching your film can feel what you are trying to make them feel, if they can detect the machinery of your intention, they will resist it. They will resent it. The moment a viewer senses they are being led, the leading fails. You have to create the conditions for the feeling and then get out of the way. The feeling has to arrive as if it chose to come on its own.

But he also meant it about people. About women, about anyone you wanted to move toward you. The moment they sense the wanting, the direct, undisguised wanting, they will pull back. Not because they are cruel, but because that is how people are. You have to pursue gently, indirectly, the way you'd try to approach something that would startle easily.

I did not understand the second part fully then. I was nineteen and not yet good at indirection with anyone.

He died about twenty years later. He was ninety-five. He died on a fitness machine, not dramatically, not as a metaphor, just a man at ninety-five who was still exercising, because that was apparently how he had decided to live, all the way to the end of it. When I heard that, I felt something that wasn't exactly grief but was related to it. A kind of recognition. Here was a man who had found out how to be himself and had simply continued being that until there was no more time left to continue.

I was nineteen. My parents were gone. The house with its gravity was gone. And I sat in that amber light and watched an old man who had figured out what a horse on a tomato meant, and I thought: there is a direction here. I cannot name it yet. But there is a direction.



*The biological father showed up right on schedule,
which is to say, eleven years late and by telephone.*



CHAPTER NINETEEN

MY FACE, RETURNED SECONDHAND



He called me. That's how it started. Not a letter, not a knock at the door, a phone call, because apparently that's how you introduce yourself to a son you've never met. I was twenty

years old, my mother was gone, my stepfather was gone, and I was living alone with my youngest brother in an apartment that felt like a waiting room for something that wasn't coming. And then the phone rang and there was this voice, and he said who he was, and I said nothing for a moment because what do you say.

We arranged to meet. I took the tram across Riga in 1994, which was not a city that rewarded optimism. The streets were the color of old arguments. I found his building, I climbed his stairs, I knocked on his door.

And then the door opened and I looked at my own face thirty years from now.

That was the strangest part. Not the meeting, not the handshake, not the words, just the face. My jaw, my forehead, my particular way of standing as if I'm already thinking about leaving. He was right there in front of me, wearing it all like he'd had it longer and therefore owned it more. I felt nothing. I want to be precise about that because it would be



easy, looking back, to invent some great wave of feeling, but there was no wave. There was just a man who looked like me opening a door, and me stepping inside.

His wife was Valentina. A Russian woman, composed and careful in the way of someone who has spent years managing a large personality in a small space. She was polite to me in the way you are polite to something complicated your husband has brought home. And then my sisters, fourteen years old, both of them, with his face and their mother's wariness, came out and looked at me and I looked at them, and that was the part that actually meant something. Not him. Them. We got close eventually, the three of us, in the way that siblings do when they share a source of confusion.

He made tea or poured something, I don't remember, and then he sat down and told me about his life as if I had asked. He had driven across both Americas. North to south, or south to north, it didn't matter to him, he drove it. He'd driven from Riga to South Africa. From Riga to Tibet. He'd tried to reach Australia by car, using ferries, which is exactly the kind of plan that sounds insane until someone actually does most of it. His last trip, his car got stuck on the border between Vietnam and Cambodia, and I have thought about that image many times since, this man who could drive to the edge of any continent, finally stopped at a line on a map he couldn't cross.

He was also, I should say, a serious engineer. He designed the Latvia. That was the only Latvian car ever made, a minivan, and his name is on it somewhere, in some design document, in some archive. The man was genuinely talented. That is not nothing.

He told me, at some point during that afternoon, how I came to exist.

He had climbed the water pipe. Four floors, up the outside of a girls'



dormitory, hand over hand on a pipe in the Latvian dark, because he wanted to get in. He reached the fourth floor, came through the window, looked around the room, and chose the most beautiful girl. That was my mother. They slept together. She became pregnant. They married because that was what you did, and they were unhappy because that was what followed, and then he left because that was what he did.

I sat in his living room with Valentina's careful eyes and my sisters' fourteen-year-old faces and I listened to this story about my own beginning, a water pipe, a window, a choice, and I tried to locate how I felt about it. My mother had been a real person. She had been born in a KGB prison in Russia, taken from her own mother, raised alone in Siberia, and she had grown up into someone who survived things that would have ended other people. And this man had climbed a pipe and picked her like he was selecting something from a shelf.

He offered to take me on one of the trips. A sponsor's car, months in a small cabin, crossing something enormous. I said I would think about it. I never went. The way he described it, the arguing, four months compressed into the interior of a vehicle with someone who has opinions about everything, it didn't sound like freedom. It sounded like a different kind of trap with better scenery.

I respected the idea of him, I think. The idea that you can simply decide to drive to Tibet and then do it. I have some of that in me too, the part that looks at an obstacle and thinks, well, but what if I just went anyway. But I saw the rest of it too. The way he moved through rooms as if they existed for him. The way attention drifted off him and toward whatever was next. I recognized it. I recognized it the way you recognize your own handwriting on a page you don't remember writing, and it frightened me in a specific, useful way.

He died recently. I don't have much more to say about that. He was a



man who drove to the edge of the world several times and never quite made it to my door until he called, and by then I was already someone else's problem to raise. His car is still stuck, I suppose, somewhere on that border. Mine kept moving.



CHAPTER TWENTY

BONUS SIBLINGS, SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED



By the time I was twenty-two, I had already met my biological father, which was its own category of surreal, a man appearing from nowhere to inform you that you exist partly because of

him, as if that were helpful information to receive two decades late. That meeting deserves its own room, and it got one, earlier in this book. But the father was only the beginning of the inventory. Because a few months after I'd processed the existence of this man, he called me and said, essentially: there is more.

There were sisters.

Two of them. Twins. Fourteen years old.

I want you to understand the geometry of this for a moment. I had spent twenty-two years as a person with one sibling, Martin, my brother, eight years younger, whom I had raised with a combination of genuine love and spectacular incompetence after our parents died. Martin was my family. Martin was the whole list. And now, in the space of one phone call, I had doubled it. No, I had tripled it. My father had been busy in ways that I, frankly, respect enormously in retrospect and found only alarming at the time.



He drove me to a small house. I don't know what I expected. Something cinematic, probably, because I was already the kind of person who thought about things in terms of how they would cut together. The long-lost reunion. The swelling music. The slow recognition across a yard.

What actually happened is that I stood in front of this small house feeling exactly like a man who had dressed for the wrong occasion and couldn't remember what the right occasion was supposed to be. I was twenty-two, which means I was mostly bravado with a thin crust of actual confidence, and the bravado was, at this precise moment, doing absolutely nothing for me.

They were already in the doorway when we arrived.

Jana and Daya.

Jana was the shy one. You could see it immediately, she stood slightly behind her sister, watching me with this careful, assessing look, like she was deciding something important and wasn't going to be rushed about it. She had that quality that some people have where the quietness is not absence but weight. She looked at me and didn't say anything immediately, and I respected that, because I also wasn't saying anything immediately, and at least one of us should have been doing it with dignity.

Daya was the other thing entirely. Daya was already talking.

I don't mean this critically. I mean she had the emotional openness of someone who had never once considered the option of keeping a feeling on the inside. She was fourteen and she was already completely, magnificently herself, which is an achievement that some people never manage in a full lifetime and I myself have managed only on alternate Tuesdays. She was excited, and she was not performing the excitement,



she simply was it.

And I, I, the sophisticated twenty-two-year-old who had survived orphanhood and raised a child-brother and made films and thought of himself as the sort of man who handled situations, I stood there in front of these two fourteen-year-old girls who were my sisters, and I felt something happen in my chest that I was absolutely not prepared for and would not have admitted to if you'd asked me about it directly that same afternoon.

Fourteen years. They had been alive for fourteen years and I had not known they existed, and they had been alive for fourteen years and had not known I existed, and here we all were, standing in front of this small house, trying to figure out what to do with that.

What you do, it turns out, is talk. And then talk more. And then at some point everyone is sitting somewhere and the stiffness of it dissolves into something easier, something that feels, with an unexpectedness that still gets me, like actual family. Not the formal word for people you share genetics with. The real thing, the comfortable, specific, slightly chaotic thing.

Jana warmed up slowly, the way the good ones always do, and when she did, what was underneath the quietness was this steadiness, this calm that I would come to know well over the years and depend on more than I would probably admit to her face. She became, across the years after that small house, someone I could genuinely talk to, which is a rarer thing than it sounds.

Daya became something slightly different: a continuous, beautiful emergency. This is meant with all possible affection. She got drunk at my house once, years later, and decided it was time to go home, so I called a taxi, and what followed was a negotiation of such chaotic



warmth and stubbornness that it was, I realized halfway through, the most purely familial thing I had ever experienced. You cannot manufacture that. You can only inherit it.

Which, apparently, we all did, from the same man who had thought to mention none of this for twenty-two years.

My father stood somewhere to the side while the three of us tried to assemble something out of the raw material of fourteen missed years. I don't know what he expected either. I suspect he was relieved. I suspect he had been carrying this particular piece of unfinished business for a while, and now here it was, being finished, loudly and imperfectly and in front of a small house, which is probably the only honest way any important thing gets finished.

We have good relations now, the three of us. Close ones. I did not expect, at twenty-two, to accumulate family this way, in installments, as surprises, from a man I had only just located. But the sisters were real, and the small house was real, and the feeling in my chest that I refused to name that afternoon was real too.

I'll name it now: it was relief. Someone else had been out there, carrying the same unasked questions, and they had survived them, and now we were, collectively, going to be fine.





CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SECOND CHOICE, FIRST CAMERA



I wanted to be a director. I was eighteen years old and I knew this the way you know certain things at eighteen, completely, in your chest, with a confidence that has not yet been tested by anything real. I walked into the Academy and I said: directing. That was the plan. That was the whole architecture of it.

They said no.

Not a complicated no, not a come-back-next-year no. Just no. The directing programme had its places filled with people who were, presumably, more ready than I was to direct things, although I have spent the thirty-odd years since then wondering what exactly that means. More obedient, maybe. Better at sitting still in a room and agreeing with older men.

So I took cinematography instead.

This was not nothing. Cinematography is a serious discipline and the school taught it seriously, light, composition, the grammar of how a camera moves through space and what that movement means to the person watching. I learned all of it. I sat through the lectures, I read the theory, I understood the mechanics of what makes an image land with weight rather than just sitting there flat on a screen doing nothing.



Dayan, one of the teachers, was meticulous in the way that genuinely good technicians are meticulous, not pedantic, but precise. He drilled into us that you do not make an emotional scene with actors alone. You make it with where the camera is. With what the light is doing to a face. With the cut. He was right about all of this and I still believe it.

I absorbed every word and then I never, not once in my professional life, worked as a cinematographer.

Because the practical exercises happened.

The way it worked: you were paired with a student from the directing programme, and together you were supposed to produce something. The cinematography student would operate the camera and the directing student would direct. Clear division of labour. Clean. Sensible.

The problem was the student I was paired with.

He was studying direction, he had the badge, he had presumably passed whatever test I had failed at eighteen. He was going to be the director. I was going to be the cameraman. These were the facts of the situation.

Except that within about fifteen minutes of standing on a set together, I was telling the actors where to go. I was moving the furniture. I was deciding where the light needed to land and why. Not because I was being aggressive about it, or not only because of that, but because the choices being made were wrong in ways I could not watch without saying something. And I was not afraid, even then, to say something. This is a character flaw that has served me very well.

The other student receded. Not dramatically, not with a fight. He just, stepped back, and let me run it, and at some point it became undeniable that this was the natural arrangement.



What nobody said out loud, but what everyone in the room understood, was that the boy with the camera was the director.

I finished the programme. I had the cinematography training and I had, apparently, none of the temperament for the actual job. I went on to do other things, real estate for a while, which is its own kind of directing except that nobody applauds at the end and the buildings just sit there ignoring you. It took me until my thirties to go back and formally study what I had known at eighteen I was. I got the master's in directing. I started working.

But I think about that practical exercise sometimes. Some student whose name I no longer remember, taking one look at the way I had rearranged his entire scene, and deciding the simplest thing to do was get out of the way. I was holding a camera I was never going to use professionally, and I had already turned his rehearsal into my film.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ACCIDENTALLY PROMOTED



The real estate business was not exactly what I had imagined for myself. But then, what I had imagined for myself was standing behind a camera telling other people what to do, and the

cinematography school had made it abundantly clear that nobody was going to let me anywhere near a camera unless I also agreed to be quiet and subordinate and grateful. Three conditions I have never simultaneously managed.

So. Real estate.

I started as an assistant, which is a word that means "person who carries things and is blamed for other things he did not carry." I was twenty-two, I owned one good jacket, and I had approximately the personality of someone who should not be anyone's assistant. Within about four months I had opinions about every project we were developing. Within eight months I was explaining those opinions at full volume to people who had not asked. Within two years I was a manager, partly because I was genuinely good at seeing how a space could become something, how a building was a story before it was a building, and partly because promoting me was the only way to make me someone else's problem.



I stayed in real estate for nearly ten years. Ten years is a long time to spend somewhere you did not intend to be. But I want to be honest: I was not suffering. I was learning something about how the world was actually built, how money moved, how people convinced other people of the value of things that did not yet exist. That last part turned out to be useful.

And I was good at it. I want to say that plainly without excessive pride, which means I will say it with the usual amount of excessive pride: I was excellent at it. I could develop a project, I could see the shape of a thing before the thing existed, I could sit in a room with people who had money and explain to them why they should give it to me, and they would do it. This is, when you think about it, essentially filmmaking. Except nobody wins any awards and the thing you build has to have a functioning sewage system.

Eventually I left. I left because I had done what there was for me to do, and because staying anywhere too long makes me itchy in a way Diana has since diagnosed as a personality disorder but which I prefer to call vision.

What came next was the advertising agency. J. Walter Thompson, JWT, and they made me Managing Director, which is a title that sounds impressive until you understand it means you are responsible for everything that goes wrong and invited to approximately none of the parties where things go right. JWT was a proper machine. International. Serious suits. Budgets that required multiple meetings just to discuss the meetings about the budgets.

And I sat in all of these meetings, in my serious suit, watching serious people spend serious money on advertisements that a person would watch for thirty seconds before leaving the room to make a sandwich.



This bothered me. Not morally, I am not that kind of bothered. It bothered me aesthetically. It bothered me the way a wrong note bothers someone with good ears. You have all this money, all this attention, thirty seconds of a human being's actual life, and you spend it showing them a car driving through fog? You show them a woman laughing at a salad?

I went to my clients and I said: what if instead of an advertisement, we made a series? What if the story itself was the advertisement, but the story was good enough that people watched it voluntarily, like an actual human choosing to watch a thing, rather than a hostage waiting for it to end?

They looked at me the way people always look at me when I say a new thing, which is with an expression somewhere between interest and the quiet wish that I would go away.

But I kept pushing. Because that is what I do. I push until the room either agrees with me or I find a different room.

And this is where it started, not in a film school, not on a set, but in a conference room in Riga with a client who made insurance products and a budget that would have embarrassed a student film festival. The idea that a story could carry a brand. That people would follow a character through six episodes and at the end of it feel warmly toward the company who paid for the whole thing. It was not a revolutionary idea. It was obvious. That was the problem with it. Most good ideas are obvious once someone says them out loud, and then everyone acts as if they knew all along.

I did not know all along. I figured it out sitting in a meeting about fog and cars, thinking: there has to be a better way to waste this much money.



That is essentially my origin story as a filmmaker. A man with an arrogance surplus and a low tolerance for bad thirty-second decisions about salads. Diana, when I told her this version, pointed out that I had left out the part where it took me another decade to actually direct anything worth watching. I told her I was still in the building part. She went back to her book. Which, frankly, was a better response than I deserved.



The worst ideas I have ever had all began with the words let me explain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

INVISIBLE INTENTION,
VISIBLE DAMAGE

There is a thing I learned around 1994, when I was twenty, that changed everything, my work, my relationships, the entire shape of my life, and the tragedy is that I then used it to

become, for several years, a fairly complete bastard.

Let me explain the lesson first, because it sounds clever when I explain it before explaining what I did with it.

In directing, you have this phenomenon where if you push too hard, if the audience can feel you grabbing them by the collar, feel your desperate intention to make them feel something, they immediately feel nothing. The emotion evaporates. The more visibly you need them, the faster they leave. But if you create the conditions and then stand back, if you make it seem as though the scene doesn't care whether they cry or not, they fall apart completely. They chase the feeling because it didn't chase them. I called this invisible intention. The intention is absolutely there, massive, total, burning, but it cannot be seen. The moment it shows, it dies.

I was twenty. I applied this to girls.

Now, to understand why this was both a revelation and a disaster, you



have to understand my starting position. I had a mother. I had no sisters. I had no father, he left when I was young, which I will get to, because apparently I talked about it enough in therapy to fill several filing cabinets. My experience with women was theoretical, optimistic, and spectacularly unsuccessful. I chased. God, I chased. With the full, visible, humiliating intention of a golden retriever chasing a car. I made my feelings enormously clear. I sent signals so obvious they could be read from the mountains across the sea. And the girls, sensibly, correctly, ran in the other direction.

Until twenty-five, this was my entire romantic biography. Running after women who were running away from me. A very athletic period, actually.

Then I understood: cool. Flirt lightly, give space, create the conditions, and then become slightly unavailable. Not cold. Not stupid. Just, don't chase. Don't show the need. And the extraordinary thing, the thing that still strikes me as almost unfair, is that it works immediately. The moment I stopped chasing, they started. It was like I had discovered a cheat code for a game I'd been losing for years, and I could not believe nobody had written this down somewhere I could have found it at fifteen.

I used it to meet Diana. That part I'm proud of. She was different from anyone, sharp, completely herself, not performing anything for anyone, and I was absolutely not intending to fall in love, I want to be clear about that. I was not looking for serious anything. When she went to Portugal with my sister, I actually called her and told her it was over, we were finished, I wouldn't see her again. This is how I treated the one person I have ever genuinely loved. Mercifully, she did not listen to me, which has been the pattern of our life together and is, I think, the reason I'm still alive.



But before Diana anchored all of this, I used the lesson badly. I was cruel in a very specific, cowardly way. I would meet a girl, apply everything I had figured out, watch it work, feel the small disgusting thrill of the technique succeeding, and then when it had served its purpose I would leave. Not dramatically. I would just go, the way a director leaves the set. Scene done. Moving on.

I regret this. I want to say that clearly, because I am capable of honesty about myself when pressed. It was wrong. These were real people.

The therapy explanation came later, and it is embarrassingly obvious once someone says it aloud, which is the specialty of therapy. My father left. No father to surpass, no masculine measuring stick in the house, no one to beat at anything. So I manufactured contests. Every woman I could make want me and then leave behind was proof of something, masculinity proved, score settled, nobody left me, you understand, I left first, preemptively, every time. I was twenty years old doing the emotional arithmetic of an eight-year-old and calling it freedom.

The boy who spent years waiting for someone to come home, he became a man who left before anyone could.

My therapist, I'm sure, felt very good about that session. I sat there listening to myself be explained and thought: yes, that's it exactly, I have paid a lot of money to feel this bad about something I already half-knew.

The lesson itself still works. In film, it's the only thing that works. You hold the intention completely invisible, and the audience, they walk toward it. They don't know why. They think they're choosing freely.

They are always chasing something that already knows they're coming.



*I have spent a significant portion of my adult life
walking confidently toward things that already
knew I was coming.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FOURTH DEGREE, EXTREMELY BEAUTIFUL



The river had a name I couldn't pronounce then and can't pronounce now, and that should have been the first warning. The second warning was the equipment. When they said "rough equipment," they meant it the way a dentist says "slight discomfort", technically not a lie, just a complete failure to prepare you for reality. This was Ukraine, 1994, a fourth-degree river the Germans apparently loved, which told you everything you needed to know about German recreational philosophy. Fourth degree. I didn't know what the degrees meant exactly, but I knew that first degree was probably a nice float with a beer and fourth degree was something that had a body count attached to its reputation.

I was twenty years old and completely invincible, which is the only mental illness that kills more young men than anything else, and it is not in any medical textbook because the people writing the textbooks survived it.

I was with Liva. My girlfriend. She was beautiful in the way that makes twenty-year-old men agree to fourth-degree German rivers in Soviet-era equipment, which is to say she was extremely beautiful.

The speed of the river was genuinely incredible. I will give it that. You forget, sitting in your warm house with your coffee, you forget that



water can move like that, like it has somewhere urgent to be and you are simply luggage. The rocks came at you sideways, and you didn't steer around them so much as you negotiated with them at very high velocity. There were moments where I felt genuinely, electrically alive, and I thought: yes. This is it. This is the kind of story you tell.

And then the boat went upside down.

It did not go upside down slowly, with warning. It went upside down the way a sentence ends with an unexpected word, axe. One second I was on top of the river, the next second the river was on top of me. I came up somewhere, gasping, and my first instinct, I am not proud of this, my first instinct was to check that I was still there. Arms, legs, face. Good. Present. Excellent. And then I looked around with the magnificent self-satisfaction of a man who has survived, ready to receive acknowledgment from the universe.

No Liva.

I screamed her name. The river screamed back, which was not helpful. I turned around and I understood, in the specific, horrible way you understand things when the understanding is very bad, she was under the boat. The overturned boat. There was a net along the inside of the raft, a safety feature, which had done the very impressive trick of catching her like a fish and holding her under the surface of a fourth-degree river. She had perhaps a minute. Maybe less. The water was not interested in negotiating.

I want to tell you I had a plan. I want to tell you I assessed the situation with calm, decisive intelligence, that my years of, I don't know, existing, had prepared me for this moment. I had no plan. What I had was something much more primitive than a plan. Something that lives below thought, below personality, below all the stories you tell about



yourself. I have read since then that a cornered rat will attack a dog ten times its size. I always thought that was a metaphor. It is not a metaphor. It is a hydraulic system that turns terror directly into strength, no intermediary steps, no conscious participation required.

I got to the boat. I put my hands under the edge of it in the rushing current, the rocks somewhere around my legs, the size of the thing enormous and stupid and wrong, and I flipped it. I flipped a loaded rubber raft on a fourth-degree river, alone, with my bare hands, in about one and a half seconds. The man who does twelve push-ups and then lies on the floor feeling sorry for himself flipped a raft like it was a pancake.

Liva came up. She was coughing. She was alive. I pulled her out.

That was it. We got to the bank. We sat there. The river continued without us, completely unbothered, already somewhere else.

Here is the humiliating part: I forgot about it. I forgot about it the way you forget a film you half-watched. It came back to me only because of a newspaper, someone writing about something, I don't even remember what, and I thought, oh yes. That. I saved someone's life once. Almost drowned my girlfriend in a safety net on a German river in Ukraine. Standard summer.

What I understood, sitting on that bank in 1994, soaking wet, twenty years old, watching Liva catch her breath, I understood that somewhere inside every person who thinks he knows himself completely, there is a room he has never found. You spend your whole life rearranging the furniture in the rooms you know. And then one afternoon a river turns you upside down, and you kick a door open you didn't know was there, and the room inside is enormous.

I haven't needed it again. I hope I never do.



I am not sure I could find it on purpose.



*The trick I have pulled off most consistently in my
life is being last choice somewhere and then acting,
for years afterward, as though I had simply chosen to
arrive late.*



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LOWEST SCORE, LOUDEST GUESS



The Academy of Culture accepted me with the lowest grade of anyone they let through the door that year. Let me say that again so it lands correctly: they accepted everyone above me, and then, at the very bottom of the pile, they found my application and said, fine, him too, apparently. This is the story I tell as a triumph, which tells you something about me and possibly about the Latvian education system. I was twenty-two. I had already been managing director of an advertising agency, which sounds impressive until you understand that in 1996 in Riga this meant I was a reasonably confident young man in a bad suit telling other young men in bad suits what to do, and everyone was inventing themselves from scratch because the whole country was inventing itself from scratch. We were all just guessing. The difference was I guessed loudly. I had also done something in real estate before that, which I remember approximately as well as a dream you describe at breakfast and can no longer locate by lunch. What I actually wanted, what I had always wanted, before the suits, before the agency, before the sensible detours, was to make films. This is the part where I am supposed to say I felt it in my bones, except what I actually felt was irritation. A low-grade, permanent irritation at not yet being a film director. This is either a calling or a personality disorder; I have never resolved which. So I left the agency. I did not



agonize over it. You pack a box, you stop showing up, it is done. The competition for the directing program at the Academy of Culture ran for three days, which is either how long it takes to identify genuine talent or how long a committee can sustain enthusiasm for watching nervous people perform under pressure before they need to just make a decision and go home. Three days. I was tense. The main professor, Peteris Krilovs, wanted his students loose and free and porous, the way a good director needs to be, open to everything, nothing bouncing off the surface, and I was arriving from an advertising agency, where my job was specifically to be impermeable and certain and slightly terrifying in meetings. These are opposite human states. Krilovs could see this. He graded me accordingly. I knew him already, which perhaps saved me. My girlfriend at the time was an actress in his course, so I had met him before under circumstances where he was not yet formally evaluating my worthiness and I was not yet trying to impress him, which is always when you make a better impression. This prior acquaintance did not, however, produce a better grade. It produced the worst grade of everyone accepted. I want to be very clear: I was not rejected. I was included, technically, the way you include the last olive in the jar when you're already full, because throwing it away seems wasteful. I was sure I deserved better. I had staked my entire worldview on it, signed it in blood in my head, notarized it by God. He was right. The Academy gave me philosophy and art history and culture history and an enormous quantity of films, they fed us films the way you feed a sick child soup, constantly, in the belief that enough of it will eventually produce a transformation. What they did not teach, in any structured or accountable way, was how to actually direct. This is not a criticism. This is just the nature of these places. You absorb. You marinate. You learn to talk about the great directors at sufficient length that people assume you know what you're doing. The actual directing you learn



later, on set, from people who have been doing it for thirty years and have run out of patience for anyone who doesn't understand it immediately. For me that person was Dayan. I worked with him in Moscow, a cinematographer with thirty years of experience, which meant thirty years of specific, accumulated, non-negotiable opinions about where to put a camera and why. He did not teach me cinematography. He taught me something closer to seeing. Every shot, he said, must be special. Every shot must be unique. You are not recording what the actors do, you are constructing a meaning that is bigger than what the actors do, through light, through framing, through the cut. Nothing is neutral. Nothing is just coverage. You print something on the film every morning, he told me, you either print it flat, like a document, or you print it vertically, like a poem. This is what he meant. Filmmaking is poetry. I learned to think this way, which means I learned to think about metaphor in every single thing I do, which my wife Diana will confirm has made me somewhat exhausting to watch a film with socially, but that is a separate issue. The first time I felt it working, really working, the poetry of it, was much later, with Anna of Green Gables. The novel is a miracle of compression: every line carries two meanings, sometimes three, and when you find material like that you understand why it existed. You don't adapt it so much as let it pull you somewhere you wouldn't have reached alone. That is my best work. I say this with complete confidence, which I note I was also saying from the bottom of a grade sheet in 1996, so perhaps confidence is simply my resting state regardless of available evidence.



*It has since occurred to me that the distance between
confidence and delusion is mostly a question of
which chapter you're in.*



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BIG BED, BIG PRODUCER, NO CLUE



The show was called Big Bet. I was the producer. This was my first time producing. I had never produced anything. I want to be clear that these two facts lived comfortably side by side in

my head without creating any anxiety whatsoever, the way you can know intellectually that a stove is hot but still touch it because you have decided you are different. Three or four salesmen competing to take the most photographs of half-naked women in their cars. I want you to know that in 2001 this seemed to me like an extremely sophisticated concept. I was twenty-seven. I had come through the real estate business, I had survived a stint as managing director at JWT, which is a very grand-sounding title for a man who still had not made anything with a camera, and now I had done what any serious creative person does at that point in his life: I had found someone else's money and attached my name to it. A car company gave us the budget. The automobile company, makers of the very cars in which these women would be positioned. I am sure this synergy seemed very elegant to me at the time. I am sure I explained it to someone at a dinner table as "brand integration."

The series was supposed to be twenty-four minutes per episode. This is a normal television length. Twenty-four minutes. A person sitting with



a stopwatch could tell you how long twenty-four minutes is. I was not that person. What I did not know, what nobody told me, what I did not think to ask, what seems completely obvious to any human being who has ever watched television, is that you have to count the seconds of material you are actually shooting. You have to know what you have. Otherwise you edit everything together and you discover, in a cold editing room, that your episode is fifteen minutes long and the network needs twenty-four. We had shot everything. Great actors. The salesmen were funny. The half-naked women in the cars were, I assume, convincing. The whole thing was done and I sat with the editor and we assembled it and we had: fifteen minutes of content. Plus a three-minute title sequence I had been very proud of. Plus a three-minute outro. So: twenty-one minutes. Still three minutes short. Which does not sound like much until you realise you have shot every scene you wrote and there is simply nothing left on the tapes. What do you do? You go back to the footage. You look at what exists. And what exists, what I had, in my great wisdom, chosen to shoot on the day because the light was nice and I had some time, was approximately four minutes of the main character sitting on a bench in a park. Talking. Slowly. About nothing in particular. I think he was discussing something about his childhood. Or possibly the weather. The performance was not electric. The bench was a bench. We put it in. All of it. Four minutes of a man on a bench. And when you add the three-minute intro and the three-minute outro and the four-minute bench and the fifteen minutes of actual show, you get twenty-five minutes, which is one minute too long, so we cut thirty seconds from the bench sequence and thirty seconds from the exit titles, and the whole thing landed at twenty-four minutes exactly, and I want you to know that I felt, briefly, like an engineer.

The director went hysterical and left the set roughly every second day.



This I had not budgeted for, not financially, just emotionally. He was a friend, talented, but his relationship with pressure was what you might call exploratory. He would reach a certain temperature and simply leave. Walk off. Gone. And so every second day the directing was done by our DP, who was seventy years old and had shot the first film I ever worked on as a client, back when I was still in advertising and knew nothing, which means he had seen me at my most ignorant and had survived it, which meant I trusted him completely. He was very calm. He moved slowly and he made good decisions and he did not leave. I learned something important: stay on set last. Be the last person there. Not because you are diligent, I am not diligent, but because the person who leaves first is the person who finds out later what happened, and finding out later is always worse.

The series went out. It was not beloved. This is a diplomatic way of saying that the response was roughly equivalent to the response you would get if you put a man on a bench in a park for four minutes and asked people to watch him. But I learned, genuinely learned, how to count, which sounds like something a person should not need television production to teach them. The next projects were better. Tighter. I knew what twenty-four minutes felt like from the inside, because I had stuffed it and re-stuffed it like a suitcase I was already sitting on, already zipping shut in my mind. Big Bet. It exists somewhere. Three-minute intro, four minutes of a man on a bench, three-minute outro, and in the middle: salesmen, cars, and the absolute confidence of a twenty-seven-year-old who had never once counted a second in his life.



Turns out ten minutes is not a suggestion.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

FIVE KIDS, NO SLEEP



The series was called Ours. A family with five kids. Warm, funny, the kind of thing you make when you are twenty-eight and you still believe that warmth and funny are enough. My

own kids watch it now, twenty years later, and they get genuinely excited, which is either a testament to the work or a very damning statement about what else is available on Latvian television.

We had no time and we had no money, which in my experience are the two ingredients that make a director feel most like a director. The system was simple: bring the scenario in at night, shoot it the next day. Every single day. You want to talk about exhausting, I have directed in the rain, I have directed in minus twenty, I have directed actors who could not remember their own names by take six, but nothing, nothing prepares you for reading pages at midnight knowing that in eight hours there will be a camera crew standing in your kitchen eating your bread and waiting for you to have opinions. I was having opinions constantly. Most of them were wrong. I had not yet become the kind of director who knows when to keep his opinions to himself, which means I was exactly the kind of director who makes everyone on set quietly furious by ten in the morning.

But we made it. We made something real.

The best moment, and I say best in the way that you say best about



something that was also the most insane thing that has ever happened to you, came during a shoot at our house. Diana was expecting Theodore. This is important information that I had, and yet somehow I had also scheduled a full shooting day at the same location where Diana was living, breathing, and being nine months pregnant in a way that left no room for ambiguity about the timeline.

She went into labor.

Now, a reasonable man, a man with, let's say, a firmer grip on priorities, would have called the day, sent the crew home, driven his wife to a hospital. I want to be clear that this reasonable man was available to me as an option. I simply did not take him.

Diana, for her part, said she was not going anywhere. This is very Diana. She went to the bathtub. I went downstairs, looked at my crew, looked at my cast, and announced, with what I can only describe as the calm of a man who has completely lost control of his own life and decided to frame it as a directorial choice, that I was going upstairs to deliver the baby, and that they should continue shooting the scene without me.

I want you to understand what I said. I said: continue without the director. On purpose. And then I went upstairs to deliver my son, because there was no doctor, because Diana was in the bathtub, because this is simply what was happening now.

What I did not anticipate, what I could not have scripted, was what happened to the people I left behind in my living room.

They cried.

The entire crew. The cast. Hardened professionals of the Latvian film industry, people who had eaten cold sandwiches in snowstorms and argued about lens choices at two in the morning, just, wept. They were



shooting a family series about warmth and love and five children, and directly above their heads, their director was delivering his son into the world in a bathtub, and something about the absurdity of that, the realness of it, broke all of them open completely. They kept the cameras rolling because there was nothing else to do. They shot the scene, crying.

Theodore arrived. He screamed, that first scream, the one that means everything is fine, everything is here, the world has one more person in it, and downstairs, on a microphone that was meant to be recording dialogue for a family television series, you can hear it. Quietly. Underneath the scene. A scream from upstairs, so small you almost miss it.

I did not miss it. I was there. I was holding him.

And then I came back downstairs, because we had more scenes to shoot and the light was going, and every single person on that crew was red-eyed and wrecked, which I personally thought was a bit much, I was the one who had just delivered a baby, but I chose not to say this, which was one of the more mature decisions of my career.

Theodore is fourteen now. He has never watched the episode. I keep meaning to show him the part where you can hear him arrive.

I probably should.



I should say, in fairness to everyone involved, that the next chapter takes place seven years earlier, when I was still the sort of person who deserved what was about to happen to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CATASTROPHICALLY UNKNOWNING IN RIGA



I was thirty-one years old, recently free of a girlfriend, and already deeply convinced that the problem with most men is they don't know how to appreciate their freedom. I was appreciating mine very thoroughly. Models, mostly. The kind of women who walk into a room and rearrange it. I was not suffering.

The bar was loud and warm the way Riga bars are loud and warm in that era, which is to say, everyone is drinking fast because it is cold outside and the music is bad and nobody wants to examine too carefully why they are there. I was with a friend. We had been drinking with the commitment of men who had nowhere better to be, which we did not, because we were free.

And then a woman appeared at my elbow, smiled at me the way you smile at someone you already know, and said hello.

She was beautiful. Not in the rearranging-the-room way. In the worse way, the way where you look at someone and something in your chest does a small, undignified thing it wasn't asked to do. She was older than me. She had the eyes of a person who has already thought through every exit from the conversation she's about to have with you, and selected the most efficient one.



She said hello as if I should know her. I did not know her. I was drunk and smiling and absolutely, catastrophically unknowing.

What I did not realize until much later was that I had met her before. Once, at some party, before my divorce, before all of this, I had been there with models and she had been there and neither of us had cared remotely about the other, which in retrospect is the funniest joke the universe ever told at my expense. She had not cared about me, so I had not cared about her. This is how my system worked. I am not proud of the system. The system was an idiot.

But now here she was, saying hello like we had history, and I was nodding along like a man who absolutely remembered everything, piecing together nothing. She sat down. We talked. I have no memory of what I said but I can guarantee it was charming and at least forty percent fabricated.

That night she came home with me.

The next morning I knew three things about her: she was extraordinarily intelligent, she had opinions like furniture, solid, heavy, there whether you wanted them or not, and I did not know her name.

I want to be clear about the timeline. We started living together. That is not a metaphor. We were in two apartments right next to each other, hers, mine, a wall between us, which in practical terms meant nothing because I was always on her side of it. She had two small children. A five-year-old, and a one-year-old named Kristen, who is now twenty-four and studying fashion design at the Art Academy of Latvia, which tells you something about Diana's genes and absolutely nothing about mine. We were going out to parties, leaving a walkie-talkie in the apartment so we could hear if Kristen woke up. That is the image. A thirty-one-year-old man who fancied himself a director, a creative, a



sophisticated European, pressing a plastic walkie-talkie to his ear in a loud bar, listening for a baby.

And I still did not know her name.

By this point I had her in my phone as Beautiful Girl. This seemed reasonable at first. It then became the most humiliating ongoing situation of my adult life, which is a competitive category. Every day that passed made it more impossible to ask. You cannot, on day three, say what's your name again? That is embarrassing but survivable. You absolutely cannot say it on day nine. On day thirty-something, when you are living in adjacent apartments and monitoring her infant with military radio equipment, asking her name is no longer a social failure, it is a personality revelation. It reveals that you are precisely the kind of person you have been trying very hard not to appear to be.

So I didn't ask. I asked her friends, eventually, with the casual detective work of a man whose dignity is already on the floor anyway. Diana. Her name was Diana.

I changed the contact in my phone from Beautiful Girl to Diana like a man correcting a spelling mistake on a document he had already submitted.

She knew. Of course she knew. She has never said so but I know she knew. She is the smartest person I have ever been in a room with, and I have been in rooms with some very smart people, most of whom I have, admittedly, overestimated. Diana I have never overestimated. You can't. There is no ceiling to find.

Anyway. We would come back from the party, both of us slightly drunk and laughing about something, and check the walkie-talkie. Kristen, one year old, sleeping. The apartment quiet. And I would think: I have no idea how I got here. Which was, strictly speaking, true.



And which was also, I was beginning to suspect, exactly where I was supposed to be.



*The wedding was not supposed to look like that, but I
have learned that the phrase not supposed to does
almost no work in the real world.*



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SCAFFOLDING FOR THE CEREMONY



The church was under renovation. I want to be absolutely clear about this, because I need you to understand the full picture before I explain why I am a genius. The church where Diana

and I got married in 2005 was wrapped in scaffolding, threaded through with metal stairs that went nowhere useful, and decorated, if that is even the word, with buckets, plywood sheets, and the kind of industrial equipment that suggests a serious structural problem nobody wants to talk about. The pews were there. God was presumably also there. Everything else was essentially a construction site with candles. And I chose this. On purpose. Because here is the thing about me: I have a very sophisticated sense of what is authentic, and what I have learned is that authentic things look terrible. You cannot trust beautiful. Beautiful is for people who are trying to hide something. I wanted a wedding that looked exactly like what it was, which was two people making a permanent, unbreakable, canonically irreversible decision in front of God and several confused relatives, surrounded by scaffolding and the faint smell of cement dust. That is what commitment looks like from the inside. I stand by this completely.

I had come to faith the honest way, which is to say through a friend who was a priest and also the kind of man you want to have a beer with,



which is the highest possible qualification for explaining an ancient religion to someone like me. He did not come at me with guilt or theater. He answered questions. Logically. Every question I threw at him he caught and returned with something reasonable, and I have a lot of questions, Diana will tell you this at length and with visible exhaustion, so this was not a small achievement. By the end I believed. Not my parents' faith, not Latvia's faith, mine. I chose it the same way I choose everything: by being completely impossible until someone survived me.

The thing that sealed it, the actual non-negotiable beauty at the heart of it for a man with my particular history, is this: no divorce. You stand there and you say the thing and then that is it. The door closes behind you and the handle comes off in your hand. For someone who had spent the previous decade treating his own life like a building he could exit through any window, this was not a threat. It was a relief so enormous I almost couldn't look directly at it.

Diana, naturally, was radiant. Diana is always radiant in the most infuriating way, where she doesn't appear to be trying and yet somehow the universe arranges itself around her face. She looked at the scaffolding and then she looked at me with the expression she reserves for moments when she has already understood something I have not yet explained to myself, and then she picked up her keys from the counter and put her coat on, slowly, the way you do when you are being very careful not to say the obvious thing out loud.

Our son was there. He was a baby, we had done things in what you might call the European creative sequence, meaning the baby arrived before the wedding, which is fine, this is the twenty-first century, this is also probably fine with God because God can see the whole picture and the whole picture is that we are excellent parents. He slept through



most of the ceremony, which I took as a sign of either profound trust or very good sedation.

Then we went to the castle.

This is the part where, if you were skeptical about the scaffolding, I need you to recalibrate, because the rest of the day was held at a rented castle outside Riga, which is the kind of sentence that sounds like I am making myself sound better than I am, but I am not. It was a castle. We rented it. This was the plan all along: God and construction equipment in the morning, medieval architecture in the evening, which is a perfectly reasonable arc for a wedding day and I will not be taking questions. The castle was everything the church was not, which is to say it was beautiful and large and had the sort of hallways that suggest people were once murdered in them for political reasons, and in this context Diana looked even more radiant than she had among the scaffolding, which I had not thought mathematically possible.

Davis, for his part, had recently turned one. Or was about to. The timing is close enough that the whole occasion had the atmosphere of a joint celebration that nobody had officially announced, which suited him perfectly because he had done nothing to organize the wedding and yet was clearly the reason it had happened when it did. He received the castle with the equanimity of someone who had already decided the world was his and was simply taking inventory.

The party went the way parties go when you are in a castle in Latvia and everyone has a reason to be happy and nobody wants to be the first to leave. There was food and there was music and there were relatives who had been confused by the scaffolding but were now reconciled to events by the presence of stone walls and adequate wine. At some point late in the evening the whole thing began to feel less like a party and more like a fact, something that had been true for a long time and was only now



being acknowledged by the relevant parties.

And then, eventually, there was the bed.

A castle bedroom somewhere in Latvia, Diana in her dress, me in a suit that fit remarkably well for a man who had spent the morning confirming there would be scaffolding at his wedding, and between us, taking up a genuinely unreasonable amount of space for someone who weighed perhaps four kilograms, our son, asleep, one fist curled against his cheek. Our wedding bed. Our castle. Our baby, who had turned one, or nearly one, and who had no opinion about any of this except that the people on either side of him were warm and present and could be trusted absolutely.

I have done many things in my life that I would describe as bold decisions and that other people would describe using less flattering words. I have moved countries with our possessions in a truck. I have made films with no money because a famous actress read a script I wrote in a month and said we will do this. I have stood in airports and hospitals and carried coffins up mountain roads and held the hands of people I was not sure I could hold on for. But I keep coming back to that bed. That specific geometry: the castle, the dress, Diana's shoulder, the baby between us breathing with the absolute confidence of someone who has no doubt whatsoever that the people on either side of him are going to be there in the morning.

The church had scaffolding. The castle had stone walls four feet thick. The marriage had no exits. The baby had no idea. I was, for once in my life, exactly where I was supposed to be.



Three months later, I moved to Portugal.



CHAPTER THIRTY

PORTUGAL AS TACTICAL RETREAT



I was thirty-two years old and I had survived quite a lot already, the end of a long relationship, the particular Latvian talent for making a crisis feel like Tuesday, and I had decided, with the calm

certainty of a man who has understood absolutely nothing about himself, that I was done with serious relationships. Finished. Retired. I was free. I was creative. I was, in my own assessment, doing extremely well.

Diana was the problem.

She was not supposed to be the problem. She was supposed to be one thing and then become a memory, the way things do when you are thirty-two and convinced that freedom is something you choose in the morning like a shirt. But Diana had this quality, still has it, I should say, twenty years later, four children later, three countries later, of being correct about everything in a way that is genuinely exhausting. She did not argue dramatically. She did not throw things. She simply stood in the middle of whatever room she was in and was right, and this made her, from my point of view at the time, extremely dangerous.

So I did the sensible thing. I waited until she was in Portugal.



This is important. She had gone with my sister, my own sister, whom I love, who was apparently willing to be used as geographical cover for my cowardice, and they were in Portugal, which is very far from Latvia, which was exactly far enough that a phone call seemed not only reasonable but almost considerate. I would not make a scene. I would not be dramatic. I would be clean, modern, efficient. A quick call. I will not see you anymore. Done. Clean. Free.

She was very quiet on the phone.

I am not going to describe what that quiet sounded like because some things you do not need described to understand them, and also because I do not come out of that part looking particularly good, and this book has its limits. What I will say is that it was painful for her and it was painful for me and I spent the next several days being extremely free and creative and miserable in approximately that order.

Then I saw her on the street.

This is the moment I am least able to explain with any logic, which is perhaps exactly the point. There she was. Just walking. In Riga. On a street that I was also on, because Riga is not a large city and the universe, it turns out, has no interest in my plans for personal liberty. She was walking and I stopped her and she looked at me and I looked at her and I felt, and I say this as a man who has directed films, written screenplays, spent thousands of hours constructing emotional architecture for other people, I felt something that no screenplay I have ever written has quite managed to catch.

I also felt, very strongly, like an idiot.

Because what do you say to a woman you called in Portugal to tell you would never see again, while she was on holiday with your sister? What is the correct sentence for that situation? I do not have it. I did not have



it then. I stood on that street in Riga looking at Diana and I was embarrassed in the particular way you are only embarrassed when you have done something that cannot be defended even by you, and you are, in general, a man who can defend almost anything.

I don't remember what I said. I have thought about it. I genuinely do not remember the words. I remember the embarrassment, which was complete. I remember that I was sorry, which I was, which I am. I remember that she looked at me the way she still looks at me when I have made one of my better decisions and tried to unmake it, with that specific expression that contains, somewhere inside it, both patience and the knowledge that she was right.

We started living together again.

We have been living together since. We have four children together, if you count only the ones born after that street in Riga, and we have not lost a single one, not to distance, not to the various catastrophes I have introduced into our family's life with such consistent creativity. She is still the sharpest, most logical, most correct person in every room we share. I am still the one who occasionally thinks he can outmaneuver this.

I cannot. I could not. Standing on that Riga street at thirty-two, I think I knew it.

I just needed to look like I was choosing it.



*He was a natural, which I told myself was the same
as consent.*



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MY SON, RENTED OUT



Davis was seven years old when I put him in front of a camera and asked him to pretend he had a different family.

He was small enough then that his whole face was basically just eyes and a serious expression he seemed to have been born with. I cast him in Ours because he was my son and because even then, at five, there was something in him that was not entirely located in the same room as everyone else. He lived slightly to the left of wherever you were standing. You could call his name and he would look at you and you would feel, just for a moment, that you had interrupted something important happening in a place you couldn't see.

I thought I knew what I was putting him through. You point a camera at a five-year-old, you tell him where to stand, you tell him what to say, and you hope he doesn't cry and refuse to come out from behind the set. That is the normal version of this. I had worked with child actors before. I knew what to expect.

What I got was something I didn't understand until about fifteen years later, when Davis was in his twenties and studying film direction and living in Tallinn and had become, quietly, without announcing it, a serious person with his own views about cinema and about life. We were talking, the way you can finally talk to your children once they are adults and have stopped needing to be managed, and he told me the secret.



He said: I wasn't acting.

Not in the way a bad actor isn't acting, he meant. He meant that the parents on screen, the characters, the other actors standing opposite him on that set in Latvia in 2007, he had perceived them as real. Not metaphorically real. Actually real. He had not been playing a boy with a fictional family. Inside his own experience, he had simply been a boy, and those were his people, and what was happening was happening. The scene where the mother called him in for dinner, real. The scene where the father put a hand on his shoulder, real. The whole careful constructed fiction of the series, real, to him, completely, the entire time we were shooting it.

When he told me this I didn't say anything for a moment.

I thought about what that means. To be seven years old and to be present in a story that completely, without any of the armor that the word pretend gives you. No exit. No distance. Just the full weight of it, every day on set, believing every word.

And the performance had been extraordinary. I can say that without it being pride, or at least not only pride, it was simply what it was. People who watched Ours still mention Davis. My younger kids watched the series twenty years later and were excited by it in the way children are excited when something has been made with real feeling inside it. That feeling was real. It had come from a five-year-old who didn't know he was allowed to keep it separate from himself.

I wonder sometimes what that cost him. He has never said it cost him anything. He lives in Tallinn now, studying direction, and he seems, by every measure, fine, more than fine. He has his father's interest in how stories are made and, I think, his mother Diana's precision about how things actually work. He sees me, I know, as something like a model.



That is not a comfortable thing to carry, a child's idea of you as someone worth becoming. It asks you to be consistent in ways I am not naturally consistent. It asks you to have actually lived what you appeared to live.

But I think about Davis believing those screen parents were real, and I think: maybe the only way to do anything that matters is to not know you're allowed to keep your distance. Maybe the price of the performance that moves people is always that you didn't protect yourself from it.

I have spent most of my life protecting myself from things.

Davis, at seven years old, on a television set in Latvia, just walked straight in.

What I hope for him now, and I don't say this to him, because he doesn't need me to say it, is that he learns you don't have to choose between that kind of openness and having a life that holds together. That you can be free and still structured. That you can love people and still make things. That the two don't have to eat each other.

I'm still learning it myself. He has time.



I have spent a long time explaining freedom to people while standing very firmly in one place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MACHINERY, HOT FOOD,
NOBODY LEARNS

The series was called *No Formers Exist*, which is either a very profound title or a very bad translation, and I have never been completely sure which. This was Moscow and then Minsk, around 2009, and I had come in as a replacement director because the previous one had, as they say in the industry, quit, and as they say in real life, run away screaming. I was thirty-five years old and I thought this made me wise. It did not make me wise. It made me thirty-five.

But here is the thing about working in Russia with a big studio behind you, the machinery. God, the machinery. Trucks, crew, catering that could feed a small army, which in Russia is not a metaphor because some of the crew actually were. When you are used to directing in Latvia, where the entire budget sometimes fits in one envelope and the grip also drives the van and also plays a small role in the film because you cannot afford an extra, this felt like arriving on a different planet. A planet with hot food and people whose only job was to carry things. I was not prepared for how much I would love it.

The series itself, a man goes to Greece, his brother is killed, he comes back to investigate, discovers he has a daughter, the daughter gets kidnapped by powerful people, he solves everything, nobody learns

anything, credits roll. Solid television. The kind of story where someone is always standing in a doorway looking meaningful. I understood it. I believed in it. I was ready.

What I was not ready for was the main actor.

I will not say his name, because he is almost certainly still connected to the Russian Ministry of Defense, and I enjoy being alive. What I will say is that this man had decided, somewhere deep in his magnificent soul, that he was not an actor in a series. He was an artist who had graciously agreed to be filmed. He did not perform scenes. He held court. He called the producers directly, not through me, not through anyone, just picked up his phone and called them, actor to producer, as if I were a piece of furniture that had been given a walkie-talkie. He directed himself. He directed other actors. Once I am fairly certain he tried to direct the camera operator. The camera operator did not speak to me for two days, which I took personally until I realized he was not speaking to anyone and had simply entered a kind of professional trance state.

This man had his position because someone very important and very powerful had recommended him to the studio and the studio had made his presence in the film a condition that was not a condition but was absolutely a condition. You know this kind of condition. The kind that is written nowhere and enforced everywhere.

So I tried the normal approach first, which was to direct him. He smiled at my direction the way a very large dog smiles at a very small fence. Then I tried the respectful approach, which was to frame my directions as questions. He answered the questions and then did whatever he had already decided to do. Then I tried the approach that every director eventually discovers, which is to simply pretend the difficult actor does not exist as a human being with opinions, and to treat him instead as a



piece of the set that occasionally moves on its own. I ignored him. Looked through him. Spoke around him. Directed everyone in his orbit and trusted that he would eventually, through some biological process, end up in the right place.

Mostly this worked. Mostly.

The producers, meanwhile, decided that the real problem on set was not the actor who was calling them every evening to complain about me. The real problem was my Director of Photography, who was my friend, and who was very good, and who had the catastrophic professional flaw of having his own ideas. He had a style. He wanted to use it. The producers did not want style. They wanted the thing that looks like television because it was made by people who had forgotten that television could look like anything else. So they threw him out. Midway through. Just, gone. My friend, my DP, removed like a problematic footnote.

I was angry. I was genuinely, properly angry, which for me has a specific physical sensation somewhere between indigestion and a desire to overturn a table. But you do not overturn the table. You do not, because you started the work, and when you start work you finish. This is the only law I have kept perfectly. Everything else, marriages, addresses, career plans, diets, negotiable. But you finish what you started.

So we finished. The series came out more or less okay. Not my best work. Not the work I would show you if I wanted you to think I was talented. But finished, which on that job felt like a form of victory that nobody else would recognize as victory, which is fine, because I would know, which is the part that matters.

The main actor, I heard later, was very pleased with his performance.



*I had spent fifteen years preparing for a job that
turned out to require the one skill I had specifically
decided not to develop.*



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

PIANO ARRIVES PRE-TUNED



Before Dayan, I thought directing was mostly about telling people what to do. Which, if you know me, is something I had already mastered without any formal training whatsoever. I

was very good at telling people what to do. I had been telling people what to do since approximately 1987. The problem was that the films looked like they had been shot by someone telling people what to do.

This was Moscow, around 2011. I was thirty-seven years old and working there as a director only, no producing, no budgets, no phone calls at midnight about permits or catering, just directing, with an enormous crew around me like a warm Soviet machine that existed purely to make me look competent. I had come from Latvia, where making anything required you to simultaneously be the director, the producer, the driver, the person arguing with the city about the parking permit, and sometimes the catering. In Moscow you arrived on set and things were simply already there. The lights were up. The camera was loaded. Someone had made coffee. It was like being a pianist and suddenly discovering that in this particular city, the piano arrives tuned.

Dayan was the cinematographer. He had done many feature films, long series, serious work, the kind of credits that sit on a page and make you



feel slightly short. He was not a man who wasted sentences. When he decided to explain something to you, you understood it was a gift, and you should stop moving your mouth and use your ears.

What he taught me, and I say this with the full awareness that I am about to make it sound obvious, was that cinematography matters. I know. Remarkable. A cinematographer told me that cinematography matters. But here is what I mean: before Dayan I thought the camera was basically a very expensive witness. You put it in front of the actors, the actors did the thing, the witness recorded the thing, and then you had a film. This is also more or less how cheap television series work, and I had been making cheap television series, and they looked exactly like that, like expensive witnesses pointed at people. The visual language of a surveillance camera, essentially, but with better hair.

Dayan would stop and say, not dramatically, just the way a plumber says there's the problem, that this shot had no meaning. Not that it was technically wrong. That it had no meaning. That light could carry emotion. That a camera moving toward something was a completely different psychological event than a camera moving away from something, and if you didn't know why you were moving and in which direction and at what speed, you were just making noise. That every frame could either be average, the visual equivalent of a phone photo of lunch, or it could carry a metaphor inside it, something that the audience feels without knowing why they feel it.

I stood on that Moscow set and something genuinely rearranged inside my head, which is not a comfortable sensation but is apparently necessary. I started looking at the world differently. This is the part that is difficult to explain without sounding like someone selling a meditation app, so I will try to be precise: before, I had been looking at reality through what I think of as emotional glasses, my own



experiences, my own meanings, my own story laid over the top of everything like a filter. Sentimental glasses. I saw the world and immediately translated it into what it meant to me. Which sounds deep but is actually very shallow, because you stop seeing the thing itself. You see your reaction to the thing.

After Dayan, I started seeing the ugly details. The specific ugly details. The way light hits a wet street at a certain angle and creates something genuinely strange. The composition of two people talking that tells you more about their power relationship than anything they are saying. I started treating the frame as a poet treats a line, everything in it is there on purpose, everything earns its place, nothing is filler.

It clicked properly later, when I made Anna of Green Gables, my best series, I will say it plainly, the best thing I have made, because that material is already written in layers, every line carrying two or three meanings underneath, and for the first time I felt the camera could do the same. Not just record the scene. Mean something.

But it started in Moscow. On a set that was already lit, already loaded, already caffeinated. With Dayan pointing at a frame the way a man points at an obvious crack in a wall. No meaning, he said. And for once in my life, instead of arguing, I looked.



The decade between those two sentences cost me two marriages, one passport, and whatever it was I used to believe about my own taste.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ORPHAN GIRL, MEET YOUR ADAPTER



The first time I understood what it meant to make something truly poetic, not clever, not technically impressive, not the kind of thing that wins a jury prize from twelve exhausted people in a hotel conference room, was when I adapted *Anna* from *Green Gables*.

I was thirty-eight. I had just finished a long run of series work that had taught me, with the patience of a very slow and very expensive teacher, that I needed to get away from producers. That I needed to make something that was mine. So naturally, what I chose was a hundred-year-old novel about an orphan girl. Very original. Very independent. Very me.

Here is what you have to understand about that book: it is a genius work. I do not use that word often, because most things that people call genius are merely competent, and I know the difference. But this novel, every single line, every single character, carries two meanings. Three meanings. You read one sentence and you think you understand it, and then it turns a corner and you are somewhere completely different, somewhere deeper, and you did not even feel yourself moving. That is the rarest thing in storytelling. I have spent my entire career chasing it, and here was this woman who did it quietly on every page like it was



nothing. Humbling. Genuinely humbling. Which, if you know me, is not a state I visit often or enjoy.

The casting nearly destroyed me before I shot a single frame. Anna in our adaptation is fourteen years old, and in Latvia, I love my country, I will always love my country, but I must be honest, in Latvia there are no professional actresses under twenty. We auditioned something like a thousand girls. A thousand. I sat in rooms watching a thousand Latvian teenagers stare into camera lights and I thought: this is what purgatory looks like, and I built it myself. Then I found her. One girl out of a thousand who had it. That particular quality where you point a camera at a person and the camera simply agrees with them. You cannot teach it. You cannot manufacture it. You find it or you don't.

And then there was Theresa Colomena, who played the stepmother. I had known her before. She came in and she taught me things about directing actors that I had been too arrogant to learn from anyone else up to that point. I will not pretend this was comfortable. Being taught things you should already know at thirty-eight is its own specific category of embarrassing.

But the stepmother, that character. I cannot explain what happened when I started working on her scenes. She is a lonely woman, the stepmother. Never married. Bad experiences. The kind of woman who has arranged her life into a tight, manageable shape with no room in it for anything unexpected. And then this child arrives, this Anna, this nobody's girl, and from being this cold, closed, dancing-on-the-street kind of existence, she suddenly opens. Breaks open, really. Like something that has been holding its breath for fifteen years.

I related to Anna immediately. Of course I did. The girl who has nothing, no name, no family, no ground under her feet, and who conquers love and respect from a whole world not by performing for it,



not by becoming what it wants, but by being, relentlessly, sometimes exhaustingly, exactly herself. That path. That terrible, beautiful, expensive path. I know something about the price of it.

But the stepmother surprised me. I had not expected to find myself in her. And yet there I was, somewhere in the edit at two in the morning, Diana asleep, the apartment quiet in the way apartments get quiet only very late, when even the building seems to have given up, watching this woman on screen discover that love had walked in through her back door while she was busy making sure the front door was locked. And I felt something I did not entirely have words for. Something that had to do with hard experience, and caution, and the specific terror of allowing yourself to be changed by another person.

The completed series was, I can say this now without too much embarrassment, my best work. Every layer I had wanted was there. The poetry was there. It set a bar that made every simple job afterward feel slightly fraudulent, which is both the gift and the punishment of doing something right. You spend the rest of your career explaining to yourself why the current project is just as good, knowing it isn't yet, hoping it will be.

One hundred-year-old orphan girl. She ruined me in the best possible way.



*Poverty, it turns out, is an excellent substitute for
vision.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

FREE, ON A SPANISH
MOUNTAIN

We had no money. I mean none. Not the kind of "not enough" that producers say when they want a smaller catering budget, I mean the kind where the actors work for free, the crew works for free, you work for free, and at the end of the day everyone goes home on a bus they paid for themselves. Magdalena's Land. We made it anyway, around 2014, and I am still more proud of that film than almost anything else I have put my name on.

The subject was David's friends. A group of people who had all come through the mathematics gymnasium, the first gymnasium, the one that took only the smartest children from the entire country and then sharpened them against each other for years until they either cracked or became something extraordinary. David knew these people. I knew them through him. And the crew we assembled for that film had this same quality, including Robert, who was only in his first year of film school when we shot it. His grandfather was a legendary director of photography, a man whose name meant something in that world, and here was the grandson, twenty years old, first-grade student, standing on a mountain in Spain with us. We would stop between takes and talk about the metaphorical meaning of a single shot. Not because we had to. Because we wanted to. It was the most joy I have had on any set.



There was one location we needed. A mountain top, next to a village, very high. The kind of place where you understand, standing at the bottom and looking up, exactly what you have agreed to. No road for cars. No road for horses, actually, the path was too steep even for them, which I found out only when we were already committed to being there. So our small crew carried everything. Every piece of equipment, every bag, every cable, up this path that was doing its best to kill us.

And then there was Rezija. Rezija Kalnina, the actress, and she had a health condition that meant she could not exert herself. No hard physical effort. We had not entirely thought through what that meant when the location was at the top of a mountain with no road. So four of us carried her. Four grown men, already carrying equipment, now also carrying a full-sized adult human being up a path where, walking alone with nothing in your hands, you would have struggled. I do not know what we looked like from the outside. I do not want to know. At some point she looked at us, at our faces, which must have been a particular shade of gray, and she said she would walk. We did not argue. None of us had the breath.

It took much longer than twenty minutes. I know this because I had estimated twenty minutes and I was completely wrong, which is a habit of mine on locations.

When we reached the top, someone produced a bottle of martini. Not water. Martini. I do not know whose idea this was. I am also not entirely sure it was a bad idea, because we drank it, all of us, sitting in the sun on top of this mountain, exhausted and slightly delirious, and after a while we felt much better. Also drunk. The crew waiting below waited for about an hour. We sent no message explaining why. There was no signal anyway, which was convenient.

And then we shot.



The long dialogue scene between Magdalena and Mark, there on the mountain, I have watched that scene more than a hundred times. I edited it shorter in the final cut because you must, because a film is not your private pleasure, but I have watched the full version more times than I have watched anything else I have ever made. There is something in it that does not exist in work made with money and schedules and producers watching from chairs. I am ashamed of a lot of what I have directed. I watch it and I see the compromises, the places where someone told me no and I accepted it. This film, no one told me no. There was no one to tell me no. There was only the mountain and the martini and Rezija and Robert and the rest of us, dying from exertion, making something real.

The last shot of the film is from a distance. You see the mountain cliff, and against the sunset, two silhouettes, very small, very far away, Magdalena and Mark, walking. That is all. Two tiny figures and all that sky.

When I first saw the footage back, I did not feel anything immediate. You are too tired. You have been on the mountain. But later, alone, watching it on a small screen, I understood that we had done something true up there, and that the only reason we had done it was because there was nothing to lose and no one to stop us, and we were all slightly drunk on a mountain in Spain, which is, I have decided, the correct condition for making art.



*I moved to the mountains three times in my life,
each time for a woman, and once, briefly, for art,
which is the same thing with worse odds.*



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

EVERYTHING UP ON YOUR BACK



The mountain was not the kind of mountain you negotiate with.

I had found the location months earlier, driving the roads above the coast until the road stopped being a road and became something else, a goat track, a suggestion, a joke. Up there, above the point where any vehicle quits and any horse apparently has the good sense to refuse, there was a cliff edge that looked like the last place on earth. Which was exactly right, because it was the last place in the film. The final shot of Magdalena's Land. Magdalena and Mark, two small figures against the sky, and everything between them already said and unsayable at the same time.

You cannot move a shot like that. The shot is the location. So the location wins, and you carry everything up on your back.

We started before the light softened. Six, seven people, I have blocked the exact number because the memory of it is mostly physical, a pressure in the legs and the lungs, hauling cases of equipment up a path that had not been designed for cases of equipment or, frankly, for human beings in any comfortable sense. Lenses. Lighting rigs. Sound. The camera itself, which weighs what it weighs regardless of how steep the ground is, and the ground was steep. Nobody complained out loud



because there was no breath available for complaining.

Then we had the second problem.

Rezija, the actress, Rezija Kalnina, who was extraordinary, who had come to this project because she believed in it and I believed in her, she had a heart condition. Real one. The kind where a doctor has written something down in a file and the something is: no significant exertion. A steep mountain path in direct sun is, medically speaking, significant exertion. We needed four of the crew to carry her up in a kind of improvised chair arrangement, which is as undignified as it sounds and as physically punishing for the four people doing it as anything else that day. They carried her halfway.

Halfway, she said stop.

She got down. She said she would walk the rest herself.

I will tell you that I argued. I will tell you that I made the case, calmly and then less calmly, for why this was not a good idea. She looked at me with the particular patience of a woman who has already decided and is simply waiting for you to finish talking. Then she walked. Slowly, with someone on each side of her, up the last stretch of path, while I watched and did not breathe correctly until she was at the top.

The crew had been up there for an hour waiting.

They had finished the water.

What they had, because someone had packed it for the celebration that was supposed to happen after the shot, was martini. A bottle of martini at altitude, after carrying half a film studio up a mountain on a warm afternoon, on an empty stomach because nobody had thought much about lunch. This is not a recipe for professionalism. This is a recipe for a crew of eight people sitting on rocks at the edge of a cliff, drunk,



sunburned, looking at each other with a kind of helpless hilarity that is very close to tears.

We shot anyway.

First the dialogue scene. Mark tells Magdalena she is the only person he has never lied to. Then he tells her he is not sure he feels anything at all. It is a brutal thing to say to someone. It is also, and this is what I needed the audience to understand, what I still understand when I watch it, which I have watched perhaps a hundred times, it is also the most honest thing he has ever offered anyone. Magdalena hears it and does not run. She sees that he might be real. She decides to keep meeting him. I love that scene in a way that is almost embarrassing. The honesty of it. How it costs him everything to say nothing.

Then the final shot.

We pulled back as far as the cliff allowed. The camera found them small against the sky, Magdalena and Mark, two silhouettes at the edge of the world, the sun going where it goes in the evening over the water and the mountains and Gibraltar somewhere in the distance below the haze.

Small. Human-sized against something much larger than humans. The sunset did not care about our schedule or our exhaustion or the martini. It was simply beautiful and it was happening and we caught it.

The crew sat in the last of the light, drunk and done. Nobody said much. There was nothing useful left to say.

I looked at what we had in the camera and I thought: yes. That is the one. That is worth every meter of that path.



*Three weeks later I was the father of a child who had
attempted a triple backflip, and the beautiful thing
in the camera did not seem like enough.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

TRIPLE BACKFLIP, KIND
OF BAD

The call came on a Saturday, which is when children decide to destroy themselves. Davis was twelve, and twelve-year-olds have no relationship with consequence, they live in a pure, beautiful, terrifying present tense, which is wonderful until it isn't. We were somewhere else. I don't remember exactly where, which tells you something about how fast everything moved after, because I remember everything. The phone rang and it was Davis, and he said, very calmly, the way children say things that should not be said calmly, "I broke my hand jumping on the trampoline." And then he said he had been doing a triple backflip. A triple backflip. He was twelve years old and throwing himself into the sky like he had made some arrangement with physics that the rest of us hadn't been told about. I said, "How bad?"

He said, "Kind of bad."

"Kind of bad" is the worst unit of measurement in the world. It tells you nothing. It could be a bruise. It could be a hand pointing in a direction God never intended. It was the second thing. We came back immediately, and I remember walking through the door and seeing the hand, and the hand was, there is no gentle way to say this, the hand was wrong. It was hanging at an angle that exists nowhere in nature, nowhere in anatomy textbooks, nowhere except in the kind of film



where you look away. The fingers were going one direction and the wrist was going another and everything between them had decided to have a completely separate conversation. I am a man who has directed action films. I have been on sets where stuntmen went five meters into the air and came down hard and cracked their heads open and bled in front of me, and I kept it together because someone had to. I thought of myself, at that moment, as someone who keeps it together. I was incorrect. The ambulance came, and the doctor, a good man, a serious man, looked at me with the particular expression that medical professionals use when they are about to ask you to do something unpleasant and need to know whether you will faint on them. He said, "Do you have strong nerves?"

I said yes immediately. Instinctively. The way you say it before your body has been consulted. He asked me to hold Davis's hand during the realignment. I held Davis's hand. Davis was twelve and scared but trying not to show it, the way you do when your father is watching, the way I had done at his age when I needed someone to come home and someone didn't. I held the hand, and I looked at Davis, and I was trying to project the message that this was fine, everything was fine, fathers do not fall apart in corridors, and then the blue stars appeared. I do not mean this as poetry. I mean actual stars, the blue popping kind, the kind your vision throws at you when your blood is doing something panicked and your legs are making exit plans without permission. The room was still there. Davis was still there. But at the edges, the universe was doing something cinematic and unwelcome. I thought: I have survived a stuntman nearly dying on my set. I have moved my entire family across Europe in a car and a truck. I once left Latvia because it was becoming grey and depressing and I just, left, like that, packed everything. I am not a man who faints in a hospital corridor holding his twelve-year-old son's hand. The blue stars disagreed. And then the



doctor said "bomb", I think he said bomb, some word, a signal, and there was a sound, a quick terrible sound, and then the hand was straight. Just like that. Back to being a hand. Davis exhaled. I exhaled. The blue stars retreated, embarrassed, back to wherever they live. Everything was fine after that. This is the strange part, the part I think about: how quickly the disaster becomes the story, how fast the terrible thing becomes the thing you tell at dinner, even if at the moment you had no doubt whatsoever, a bone-deep conviction, that you were going to fold onto a hospital floor while your son watched. Davis healed. The hand healed. He probably would have tried the triple backflip again the following weekend if Diana hadn't intervened, which she did, logically and completely, the way she handles everything I cannot. But I think about holding that hand. I think about how I would walk through fire for my children without a single second of hesitation, would hold a broken hand while stars exploded in my peripheral vision and my knees held a meeting about resigning, would do it again tomorrow, and yet I know I wouldn't do the same for a stranger. I would like to believe I am the kind of man who would. I am not. This is not something I am proud of. It is simply true, and the only people who make it true, who make me that kind of different, are Davis and his sister, and Diana who woke them into the world. I nearly passed out. I stayed on my feet. I called it strength. The stars knew better.



*There are men who move their families into
beautiful rooms because they are building
something, and men who do it because they are
fleeing something, and I have always been impressed
by how identical the boxes look on moving day.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

SEVEN ROOMS, TWO
SILENCES

We had just moved into the Santa Rosa apartment, seven rooms, proper Deco bones, high ceilings, the kind of place that makes you feel, briefly, like a person of consequence. Before, we had the little house, which was fine, which was perfectly adequate, which I was very happy to leave. The Santa Rosa apartment was a statement. What the statement was exactly, I was still working out, but it involved seven rooms, and that felt like enough for now.

I brought Jana with me. My sister. Peaceful, silent Jana, who had this quality of being present in a room without disturbing any of the air in it. She was the kind of person you could sit with for two hours and feel, afterward, that you had genuinely rested. Our father was never home, not in the poetic sense, not as a metaphor, literally never home, and our mother, Russian, warm in the way that a radiator is warm, which is to say functional and not to be touched, had shaped Jana into someone who kept everything she felt in a sealed container somewhere behind her sternum. You could not get in there. Nobody had ever gotten in there. I had known this woman her entire life and I was not entirely sure she had tear ducts.

She was very pleasant to live with.



So: the apartment, the seven rooms, Jana, me, the beginning of what I was already telling myself was a new chapter. Spain does this to you. The sun is relentless and warm and eventually you start believing things.

And then the thieves came.

I will say this for them: they were efficient. They took all the electronics, everything with a screen or a battery or a plug, and they left everything else, which suggests either strong principles or very poor upper body strength. The police came. They filled out their forms. They had the specific Spanish policeman energy of men who have seen everything and been surprised by none of it and would like a coffee. Jana came home to find the police and the empty spaces where the televisions and computers had been, and she was, in the way Jana always was, calm. Supportive. A little bit like a mountain that has decided to be on your side.

I looked at Jana being calm and peaceful about the theft and something in my brain, which has never once operated in my own interest, said: now.

While she was talking to the police in the hallway, I took her clothes from the bedroom. All of them. I put them in another room and I closed the door and I walked back out and I said, very seriously, the way you say things when they are unfortunately true: Jana. I have to tell you. They also took your clothes.

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

The police were still there, which, in retrospect, was a complication I had not fully considered.

And then, for the first time in my life, the first time in forty years of



knowing this woman, the first time since the small house and the absent father and the sealed container behind the sternum, Jana cried.

Not a little. Not a polite, contained, Jana-appropriate single tear. She cried like someone who had been saving it. Like someone who had a warehouse of it and had been waiting for the right provocation, and apparently the provocation was not our father leaving, was not our Russian mother, was not anything that had happened in four decades of life, it was the news that her clothes were gone. All of them. In Spain. In a seven-room Deco apartment. With two policemen watching.

I stood there for approximately four seconds, which is about three and a half seconds longer than I should have, and then I said: Jana. It is a joke. Your clothes are in the other room.

She stopped crying. She looked at me. The police looked at me. The police had the expression of men reconsidering their career choices.

Jana did not say anything. This was, somehow, worse than anything she could have said.

But here is the thing, and I am not telling you this to make myself look good, because I am aware I do not look good in this story, I look like a man who made his grieving sister cry in front of law enforcement as a prank, here is the thing: for four seconds, whatever was in that sealed container was open. I saw it. Forty years old, seven rooms, thieves, police, and a pile of hidden clothes, and I finally saw my sister's face with nothing in front of it.

It was only four seconds.

Then the container closed again, and Jana went to get her clothes, and the police left, and we had dinner, and she did not mention it, and I did not mention it, and we sat together in the big Deco apartment in the



Spanish evening and it was, as always, very peaceful and very quiet.

The electronics, I replaced. The moment, I kept.



*This is the problem with keeping moments: they fill
up all the space where the work was supposed to go.*



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

EMPTINESS, BEAUTIFULLY FRAMED



I was forty-two years old and I could not explain what my own film was about.

Not to a producer. Not to the crew. Not even to myself at three in the morning with a glass of wine and no one watching. I had the story of Magdalena's Land, I had it completely, I could feel it in my chest the way you feel a song you cannot name, but when I opened my mouth to direct someone, what came out was the kind of thing that sounds profound for exactly four seconds before everyone in the room quietly starts checking their phones. "It's about emptiness," I would say. "The feeling of a life that has forgotten itself." Beautiful, no? A complete disaster in practice. You cannot light a scene from "the feeling of a life that has forgotten itself." You cannot tell a camera operator to frame "emptiness" and expect anything except a very expensive, very artsy shot of a ceiling.

This was around 2016. We were in Spain, we had come to Spain because Latvia had become small and heavy and we packed the car and the truck and we drove, which is the kind of decision I make that seems insane for about three days and then turns out to be the only correct thing I have ever done. The sun. The warmth. The people who look at you like you are a person and not a problem. We had the house. Diana



was there, already awake before me every morning, already at work before I had finished being embarrassed about still being asleep. She has this quality where she is simply already ahead of you before the day has technically started. I find it infuriating. I also find it the most stabilizing thing in my life, but I would not have said that to her at the time. I would have said something like "yes, I was also working, just horizontally."

But the film. Magdalena's Land.

I had Rezija Kalnina, which is not nothing, this was a woman with talent that could fill a room and then charge the room rent. I had a crew. I had a location. What I did not have was the thing that tells everyone, the cinematographer, the production designer, the actors, what world we are building. A film is a world. A world needs rules. My rule at that point was "emptiness and forgetting oneself," which is not a rule, that is a mood board caption.

And then one morning, early, before the children woke up, which is the only time I have ever had an original thought, I woke up and I just sat there and I understood.

No water.

The character has no love, there is no water. Glasses standing empty on the table. Taps turned on, nothing. You look in the bottom of a glass and there is one single drop sitting there like a small apology. The whole world of the film, dried out, cracked, thirsty. And then, only then, only when she begins to feel something again, when love comes back like a crack of light under a door, the water comes back. A tap suddenly works. A glass is full. It is not announced. No character says "interesting, I notice the water situation has improved since I began experiencing human emotion." It is just there. Unconscious. The



audience does not know why they feel it. They just feel it.

I sat with this for about forty-five seconds before I was convinced I was a genius. This is a character flaw I am aware of. The gap between "I had an idea" and "I am the cleverest man alive" is, for me, roughly the length of a deep breath. Diana could tell you. Diana has watched this happen hundreds of times. She has a look, not unkind, just accurate, that she gives me when I am in the genius phase, which says: let's see how this one lands before we order the trophy.

But this one landed.

I went to the set and for the first time I could tell people things that were actually true. Not "we are making a film about emptiness." Now I could say: that glass on the table, empty. The tap in the background, dry. Let me see it. Show me the dust. The crew understood. Rezija understood. When you give an actor a world with rules, they know exactly how far to go and in which direction. Before the water metaphor, I was directing in fog. After it, I had coordinates.

The metaphor never appears in any interview. No reviewer has written about it. No one in the audience has turned to their companion and whispered "the water, darling, do you see it?" That is exactly the point. The best thing in a film is the thing no one can name but everyone feels, the thing working on them from underneath, quiet and patient as a current.

I thought about this for a long time after. How the right thing is usually invisible. How it operates best when no one is looking directly at it.

Diana was already at her desk when I came back inside, coffee cooling next to her keyboard, working. She did not look up. I did not tell her I had just solved everything. I made coffee. I sat down. Outside, somewhere, one of the kids was beginning to wake up and the morning



was ending.



*I have always believed in the clarifying power of the
perfect ending, which is probably why I have spent
most of my life beginning things.*





CHAPTER FORTY

ONE DRESS, ONE STUNTMAN, NINETY



The last shot of Magdalena's Land was supposed to be simple. Two people on a motorcycle, riding into the sunset, disappearing into the dust of the road. You could read it as death. You could read it as the most beautiful escape anyone ever made. That was the whole point, to leave the audience holding both things at once, unable to put either one down.

Getting there was something else entirely.

The main actor, who was good, who was genuinely good, refused to drive the motorcycle. This is a reasonable position for a human being to take, and I understood it, and I went and found the only stuntman available to us at that moment in Spain in 2016, which was a ninety-year-old man. I want to be precise about this number. Ninety. He was not vigorous-ninety in the way people say when they want to soften the number. He was ninety the way ninety actually looks. And he was also, it turned out, an artist, a real one, a painter, which meant he understood immediately what we were trying to do with the shot, which was the only thing that made any of this feel like it was going to work.

The problem, after the stuntman, was the dress.



There was one dress. One. The costume department had made one dress for the main character, and we had no backup, because we were not making this film with the kind of money that produces backup dresses. So the ninety-year-old stuntman had to put on the actor's dress. This is what we needed. The shot required it. The actor took off the dress, the stuntman put on the dress, and we did not discuss any of this more than was absolutely necessary because there was only one dress and no underpants situation we were all pretending was not happening.

At some point between setups, I started to explain to the stuntman the logistics of what was going to happen next with the dress, who was going to wear it, in what sequence, how we were going to,

He held up his hand. He was very calm about it. He said, please, could you not tell me these details, because you are very my suit now.

That was it. That was all he said. And I stopped, and I respected this request completely, and we moved on.

We got the shot. The motorcycle went down the road in the last light and the dust came up behind them and swallowed them, and I watched through the monitor and I knew we had something I would never be able to describe to anyone adequately in words, which is always the sign that the image is doing what an image is supposed to do. You could see it as two people riding away into whatever comes after. You could see it as two people who were simply gone. The road kept being there after they vanished. The dust settled slowly and then the frame was just road and sky and the particular orange of that Spanish evening, and the absence where they had been was not nothing, it had weight, it had a shape, and I thought, yes, that is the ending.

Later, when we needed to shoot the scene where the main character laughs, a real, uncontrolled laugh, not a performance of laughing, I

watched the actor and could not understand how he was doing it. It was the most natural thing I had seen anyone do in front of a camera. Completely unguarded. I asked him afterward.

He said he had just been thinking about the no-underpants story.

We showed the film twice before the festival process, and the two audiences were the clearest lesson I have ever received about the difference between cultures, or maybe just the difference between people. The Spanish audience stood up for five minutes. Five minutes, which is a long time to stand and clap for anything, and which I will tell you honestly I have never experienced with my own work before or since, that particular warmth that comes up from a room of strangers who have decided together that something mattered. The English audience sat very still, and when the lights came up they were crying quietly, and then they went home. They had watched two people die on a motorcycle at sunset and they were going home to think about it alone.

I love standing ovations. I have never received one. And I am not sure what to do with that fact except to say that the motorcycle went down the road and the dust rose up and the shot was one of the most beautiful things I have ever made, and a ninety-year-old man in someone else's dress drove it for me, and afterward he never asked me to explain a single detail.

*I have spent my whole life looking for collaborators
who ask no questions, and somehow it took me until
middle age to notice that most of them are related to
me.*



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

DAYA TAKES THE TAXI HOME



My sister Daya is not a normal person. I say this with complete love and total exhaustion.

She is the kind of person who walks into a room and the room immediately feels it has been doing something wrong. Not because she judges, she is the opposite of a judge, she is an acquittal, she is a full pardon with fireworks, but because she brings with her this absolute refusal to pretend. Everything she feels, she feels loudly, physically, with her whole body, and if the emotion needs a wall to lean against, the wall cooperates. This is a quality I respect enormously. I also respect it from a distance.

This was 2016, and she had come to spend the evening at our place in Riga. Diana made food. The kids were in bed. I opened wine. This was my first mistake. My second mistake was opening more wine. My third mistake, and I should have seen this coming, I am a director, I understand narrative structure, I understand that three mistakes in a row is not bad luck, it is a genre, was not driving Daya home myself.

She wanted to go home. This was good. This was the responsible choice, the smart choice, and I was fully supportive of this choice except for the fact that I had also been drinking, and so rather than drive her myself I called my friend, who was a taxi driver, and I said, look, my

sister, she's had a little wine, just take her home, it is fifteen minutes, easy money. He said fine. He was wrong.

She got into the car. What happened next I know only from the report he gave me afterward, because he called me, this man who has driven taxis for years, who has transported drunk businessmen and crying brides and one man who insisted on transporting a medium-sized goat, and he said to me, very carefully, like a man choosing his words because the wrong ones might start a war: "I have never. In my life. Seen anything like this."

Apparently Daya had feelings during the ride. Large ones. About what, exactly, I cannot tell you with precision, because when she is emotional she moves between three languages and several emotional registers at a speed that defeats translation. But she had them loudly. She had them physically. She hit the door. She may have hit the seat. She definitely hit something that was not her own body, because my friend listed for me, with the flat voice of a man who has accepted his fate, the specific damages to his car. The door handle. The thing above the door handle. A piece of something near the window that had previously been attached to the car and was now, philosophically speaking, retired.

I listened to this. I said, "Is she okay?"

He said, "Yes, she is fine, she is completely fine, she arrived home, she was happy, she kissed me on the cheek."

I said, "And the car?"

He said a number.

I said, "I'm so sorry."

He said, "I know."

And here is the thing, and I know how this sounds, I know that the



correct response to your sister demolishing a taxi is pure mortification and a long conversation about boundaries, but when I hung up I felt something I can only describe as admiration. Because Daya did not learn to be that open from comfort. I know where we come from, I know what kind of childhood teaches you to keep everything pressed down and managed and presentable, to never let anything show because showing things was a liability. I built my whole personality around the exit, around the door, the escape, the controlled explosion, because that was safer than actually being felt. Daya went the other direction. Somewhere she decided: I will feel everything. Out loud. In your taxi. My God.

Diana, when I told her, laughed for a long time. Then she looked at me with that specific expression she has, the one that means you think this is funny but you also owe someone money, and she said, "You're going to pay for the car."

"Of course," I said.

"And you're going to stop opening the second bottle."

"That," I said, "is a completely separate conversation."

She was already walking away.

I paid for the car.



*I did stop opening the second bottle, briefly, which is
the kind of progress that looks better in a sentence
than it does across a decade.*

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BILLING SOMEONE FOR
THE AMBULANCE

Moscow, 2017. I am forty-three years old, I am a director of films and series with a proper crew and a proper budget, and I am a man who loves nothing more than imagining

worlds that do not exist and then billing someone for the imagination. This is not a bad life. This is, in fact, the best life. I want to be clear about that before I tell you how I nearly killed a man over it.

The job was an action scene. Moscow. Big machinery, as I always call it, a proper Russian production with a full crew and catering and an ambulance parked at the edge of the set, which should have told me something about the day ahead but which I chose to read as professionalism rather than prophecy. The scene itself was simple enough, which in filmmaking means it was complicated enough to destroy a person. A car rolls over an old man. A second car hits him. The old man is, of course, a professional stuntman dressed as an old man, coat, shuffling posture, the full performance, because the actual old men I know are not available for being rolled over by automobiles, not for any reasonable day rate.

The stuntman was extraordinary. The kind of professional who makes you feel briefly, dangerously, like a genius. First take: the car rolls over



him, the second car hits him, he rolls over the car the way water rolls over a stone, lands on the asphalt, hard, brutally hard, the crack of it reaching the back of my teeth, and he stands up. Just stands up. Like nothing. Like he checked a coat at a restaurant and collected it again. Everything perfect. The shot was clean, the light was right, the asphalt had that wet Moscow grey that turns beautiful on camera, and I am standing behind the monitor thinking: yes. This is why I do this. This is the world I dreamed and here it is, existing, paid for.

Then the producer came to look at the monitor.

A producer, for those fortunate enough not to know, is a person who has money and opinions, and the ratio between these two things is always wrong. He looked at the playback. He looked carefully, the way a man looks at a receipt he's already decided to dispute. And he found something. There, at the edge of frame, half-visible, practically a ghost: a bystander. Some civilian who had wandered close to the set and was standing there, staring at us the way civilians stare at film sets, blank, slack-jawed, with the specific expression of a man who has no idea what he's witnessing but has decided to witness it anyway. In a scene of raw urban action, this man looked inexplicably strange. Wrong. Like he didn't belong in the world we had built.

And so the producer said: we must do it again.

I said yes.

This is where I should have been braver, smarter, the director I tell myself I am at dinner parties. I should have said: the shot is perfect, the man is fine, nobody will ever see the bystander, we move on. Instead, I said yes, because the producer was holding the money and because I was forty-three and still performing the part of the man who can always get it better. My particular vanity has a very consistent price list.



We reset. We called the stuntman back. He rolled his shoulders, no drama, nothing, the professional calm of a man who does not know what is about to happen to him, which is the only reason he can do his job at all.

Second take.

Something was different. A fraction of a degree in the approach angle, a half-second of mistiming somewhere in the machinery, I do not know exactly what went wrong because what I saw next took up all available space in my brain and has never fully left. The car hit him and he went up. Not over. Up. Five meters into the air. I remember thinking, in the specific absurd way your mind narrates disaster in real time: that is too high. That is not the correct height for a person.

He came down hard. He hit the asphalt and there was blood, real blood, not the careful movie kind, and there was a moment of complete silence on set, the silence that falls when a crowd of professionals simultaneously understands that something has crossed a line from drama into something else entirely.

The ambulance, which I had considered a formality, became the most important vehicle I have ever seen in my life. They had him and they were moving before I had fully processed what my eyes were reporting. He survived. Broken head, blood, five meters of unscheduled air, and he survived, because he was that good at his job even when his job was actively trying to kill him.

I stood on that Moscow street and I shook. Not the artistic trembling of a sensitive director, I shook the way a man shakes when a thought arrives that he cannot make smaller: I made that decision. The first take was perfect. I looked at a bystander in the corner of a frame that a hundred thousand people would watch for thirty seconds on their



phones while thinking about something else, and I sent that man back into the car's path, and I nearly killed him for it.

The worst part, and I say this as a man who has made many terrible decisions and found a way to be proud of most of them, is that nobody would have noticed the bystander. Nobody. Not one person on earth would have seen that smudge at the edge of frame and thought: this ruins it. Only the producer saw it, because the producer always finds the one thing that doesn't matter and makes it matter, and I let him, because somewhere inside the forty-three-year-old director was still the boy who wanted to be told the world he made was perfect.

The stuntman went to hospital. The producer stopped shaking, eventually. I didn't stop for a long time.

The shot, as far as I know, was never used.



*Two years is nothing, until it's the distance between
the country where you broke something and the
country where you are simply a foreigner who
arrived with too much equipment.*



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

FOREIGNERS PROCESSED DIFFERENTLY



I was forty-five years old and living in the absolute center of Minsk, which is either the most glamorous thing I have ever said about myself or proof that my judgment has always been slightly broken. Probably both.

This was during the presidential elections, which in Belarus is a performance staged entirely for the benefit of one man who has been performing it since before some of my crew members were born. Everyone in the city knew the numbers were theater. The anger that came out of that knowing was not theater at all. It had weight and noise and the specific smell of something that has been held down too long finally coming up.

I could not reach my apartment. That is the simple version. The longer version is that the streets between me and my front door were filled with soldiers in lines so neat they looked architectural, and I am a man who knows something about architecture because I have spent years filming people who design things, so I can tell you with authority: those formations were load-bearing. You did not walk through them. You were processed by them, or you were not processed at all.

Except, it turned out, if you were a foreigner.



I approached the first line doing the face I have been doing since I was twenty-two, slightly bored, slightly important, the face that says I have a meeting and you are already making me late for it. A soldier looked at me. I looked back. He stepped aside. I walked through. I did this three, four, five times. Each time the same small miracle. The foreigner just keeps walking and somehow the machine parts for him, because the machine has been programmed to eat its own people and I, technically, was not its people.

I felt very clever about this. I should say that upfront, because feeling very clever is usually the setup.

Every night the studio called. Not to ask how the work was going, not to ask about dailies or scheduling. To ask one question: are you in custody right now? And every night I said no, not yet, good night. This became a kind of ritual. A prayer, almost, except the god being appealed to was a minor deity with a terrible sense of humor.

Then one night I heard it. Not shots exactly, not the sound you know from films, something flatter, harder, a sound that lands in the chest before the brain knows what to do with it. Rubber bullets. And then under my window, for ten minutes that felt like they had been imported from a longer, worse decade, ten thousand soldiers in black armor ran in one direction. Not walked. Ran. A river of black that did not stop, did not break, did not look up. Ten minutes. I stood at the window and counted nothing because there was nothing to count. You don't count a flood. You just watch it go.

The symbol of resistance, I had been told, was white. White ribbon, white clothing, white flowers. And I had also been told, quietly, by people who said it quietly for a reason, that wearing white could get you taken by the KGB before you finished the sentence explaining why you were wearing white. The KGB did not wait for explanations. The KGB



found explanations slightly irritating.

On my corner, two girls were standing. They were young. They were wearing white. They were not doing anything except standing, which in that particular city at that particular moment was the most aggressive possible act. They were very still, the way people are still when they have decided something and the deciding has used up all the energy that would otherwise go into moving.

I went outside. I filmed them. I told them I was a foreigner, not local, which felt both true and cowardly to say, a disclaimer before the credits even started. They looked at me with the flat, serious look of people who have already calculated every version of what comes next and have decided to stand there anyway.

Then a man in black armor came around the corner.

One girl ran.

The other did not.

He pushed her. She went with him. And then the corner was just a corner again, concrete, lamplight, the ordinary geometry of a city that had just swallowed one more person without changing expression.

I thought about Riga, 1991, fifteen years old, people building barricades in the streets and bringing food for free for strangers because what else do you do when history is happening and you have sandwiches. That feeling of everybody supporting everybody, enormous and warm and completely impossible to sustain, which is maybe why it only comes in those moments when everything else has already broken down.

I still believe in it. That readiness. Not the average person on an average Tuesday, that person wants a parking spot and a raise, which is



reasonable, I want those things too. But underneath. Underneath there is this other version, the one that stands on a corner in white while black armor fills every street in every direction.

The one that doesn't run.



The gap between the person who doesn't run and the person who is looking at his phone is, I have measured it, approximately eleven minutes.



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

BRIEFLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE SECOND SOUND



I was looking at my phone. I know. I know. I am not asking for your forgiveness and I am not offering an explanation, because there is no explanation that makes a grown man with a wife and children in a large German vehicle look at his phone while driving through the dark Spanish countryside except the oldest and most honest one: I thought I was fine. I always think I am fine. This is, historically, the moment just before I am not fine. It was a Friday night, which matters, because on a Friday night in the hills above the coast between Gibraltar and Morocco, the roads empty out completely. Not quieter, empty. You could film a post-apocalypse movie there and not need to close a single street. The landscape is beautiful, genuinely one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen in my life, the kind of place where aristocracy builds their houses because the climate is perfect and you can see Africa from the window, and it is also, at night, on a Friday, the kind of place where absolutely nobody is coming to help you. The phone. The big Mercedes Jeep. The road that had an edge to it I was not, at that precise moment, monitoring. And then the sound, not one sound, but two sounds, one after the other, close enough together that for a brief optimistic second I told myself the second one was an echo.



It was not an echo. Both front tires. Gone. Just like that. The Jeep wobbled off the road like a proud man who has had slightly too much wine at a dinner party and is already composing, in his head, the anecdote about how well he handled it. We stopped. I sat there for a moment. Diana straightened the already-straight stack of papers on the counter, twice, which told me everything her voice wouldn't. Diana is very good at saying nothing in a way that communicates everything. After eleven years together, her silence has a grammar. I had one spare tire. One. Because who brings two spare tires? Nobody brings two spare tires. You bring one spare tire because statistically, in all of human driving history, the chances of cutting two tires on one Friday night are essentially zero, and I had just personally destroyed the statistic. We did not speak Spanish. Not a word. We had been living in Spain for several months at this point, eating their food, loving their sun, enjoying the warmth of their people, and contributing to their economy, but communicating in their language, no. We had not gotten around to that yet. We had gotten around to ordering from menus and asking where the bathroom was, which is genuinely useless when you need two replacement tires for a Mercedes Jeep at nine o'clock on a Friday night in a place where the nearest visible light is a farmhouse approximately three hundred metres away up a dark hill. So I did what any responsible father does. I sent the children. David was, I want to say fourteen, fifteen. Maya was younger. I told them: go to that house, knock on the door, find a solution. This is, I want to be clear, not bad parenting. This is the kind of parenting that builds character. This is the kind of story they will tell for the rest of their lives. I was giving them a gift. I watched them walk up the hill into the dark, two small figures heading toward a stranger's front door in a foreign country to explain, in no language anyone there spoke, that their father had destroyed the family car by looking at his phone. They were incredible. They knocked, and the



family inside, and this is the part that still gets me when I think about it, the family came out. All of them. They brought tools. They brought enthusiasm. They brought, I am not joking, a spare tire. It did not fit a Mercedes. Of course it did not fit a Mercedes. A Mercedes is not a car, it is a statement, and statements have specific tire requirements, but the family brought it anyway because that is what you do when two children knock on your door at night and look at you with their big eyes and point down the hill at a large Jeep sitting sadly in a ditch. We left the car on the road. I locked it and walked away from it, which felt somehow like leaving a pet. The Spanish family loaded all of us, me, Diana, the children, whatever bags we had, into their minivan. And they drove us home. An hour. Sixty minutes, through the dark hills, for free, for a family of strangers who didn't speak their language, because a man who absolutely knew better had been looking at his phone. I sat in the back of that minivan watching the lights of the coast pass in the window, and I thought about the price you pay for being yourself versus the price you pay for being what the world expects. I thought about how Spain keeps doing this to me, keeps producing moments I did not earn and did not deserve, handing them over anyway like a golden watch slipped onto a wrist in the dark. The kids were already laughing by the time we hit the main road. Diana was not laughing yet, but she would. She always does, eventually. That's the deal we have.



*She always does, eventually, this has become one of
the more expensive facts of my life.*



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

TWO MILLION, MY IDEA



We went to Namibia twice. This already tells you something about my judgment. The first time, Diana looked at me across the breakfast table in Spain, this was 2022, I was forty-eight, old enough to know better and young enough to still be an idiot about maps, and I described Namibia to her with great authority, as a man who had never been there. Twice the size of Spain. Two million people. I said this like I had personally arranged the population. She picked up her coffee, took a slow sip, and set it down with the careful precision of someone buying herself exactly enough time to decide how wrong you are. Thirty seconds later she was booking flights. This is how we travel. I have the vision; Diana has the logistics, the itinerary, the insurance documents in a plastic folder, and the ability to find the one restaurant in a country of two million people that is actually good. I have the vision. Namibia does something to you in the first hour that Spain took three years to do. There is simply nothing there. I do not mean nothing in the way people say a town has nothing, no good café, no decent cinema, nobody interesting. I mean you drive and you drive and the road goes straight into a kind of geological silence and after four hours you have seen no one, and you start to understand that the planet was not actually made with you in mind. This was, frankly, a surprise. I had been operating under a different assumption. The kids were in the back. Six children in a car in Namibia is, I want to be precise here, loud in a way that the landscape



found insulting. The red dunes did not care. The flat, pale sky did not care. The occasional oryx standing alone in three hundred kilometers of nothing looked at our vehicle with the expression I imagine God has when He watches me make decisions. But the Skeleton Coast. This is the thing. They named it the Skeleton Coast because ships wrecked on it and sailors survived the ocean only to die on the sand, which if you think about it is one of nature's crueler jokes, you beat the water, congratulations, here is two hundred kilometers of nothing. Two hundred kilometers of sand between the Atlantic Ocean and the nearest point where you can find water. We stood there, all of us, and the wind came off the water hard and cold and completely indifferent, and I felt something I do not feel often and try not to advertise: small. Genuinely, physically, cosmically small. The kind of small that has nothing to do with ego or status or how many films you have made, just the pure biological smallness of a warm creature standing in front of something that has been doing this for four million years and will still be doing it after your name means nothing. And then, this is the part I believe in, the part I have believed in long enough that I have built a movie around it, you feel the other thing. Because the sailors survived sometimes. Not always, not even often, but sometimes. And the roads got built and the maps got drawn and somebody came back. The human spirit is, against all reasonable evidence, absurdly confident. It is almost embarrassing how confident it is. Two hundred kilometers of sand, no water, your ship in pieces behind you, and somewhere in the human chest a small voice says: well. Let's walk. This is Skydive. This is what my movie is about, overcoming the thing that should stop you, the fear that is perfectly rational, the height that is genuinely dangerous, and something inside you going anyway because someone you love put their golden watch on your wrist while you weren't looking. That is the whole film. That is also, I realize now, standing on the Skeleton Coast



with Diana beside me and six kids arguing behind us about something I had already stopped processing, most of my life. We went back a second time. I told everyone it was for the children, for their education, for the irreplaceable experience of nature's majesty. Diana said: you just wanted to see it again. She was right. She is always right. I am still waiting for this to stop being true, and I have been waiting long enough that I have accepted it as one of the permanent geographical features of my life, like the Skeleton Coast, vast, unmovable, and considerably more powerful than me.



*I moved to Latvia because I needed, specifically, to be
somewhere she was not, which is how I have now
lived in four countries and learned to say where is
the pharmacy in six languages.*

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

LATVIA, BUT QUIETLY

Latvia had become, let me say this with the diplomatic precision it deserves, a complete disaster. Not a dramatic disaster, not a war-film disaster with rubble and violins, just the slow grey

kind where you wake up one Tuesday and realise the country itself has developed a personality you do not enjoy. Dangerous. Depressing. The winter light the colour of an old receipt. I had a beautiful house, genuinely beautiful, the best area, I want to be clear about this because I am not a man who lives in mediocre houses, and even standing in that beautiful house in the best area I would look out the window and think: yes, but Latvia. Diana had not yet looked up from her hands. Diana rarely needs to say anything yet. She has a way of being right in advance, before the argument, which is both impressive and completely infuriating, and I have spent roughly twenty years trying to win a debate against a woman who has already finished the debate while I was still choosing my opening sentence. We needed to move. This was obvious to both of us, though I arrived at the conclusion myself, independently, after considerable personal reflection, and the fact that Diana had arrived there six months earlier is not relevant. Then the house offered itself. This is the only way I can describe it, someone appeared and wanted to rent the house, the beautiful house, the best area, and suddenly the universe had removed our last reasonable excuse to stay. The house was gone. We were gone. The question was only:



gone to where. Spain. Obviously Spain. The problem with obvious answers is that Spain is very large and most of it, I can tell you, is not Gaucin. Most of it is fine. Fine is not what I was looking for. I did not pack my family, Diana, the children, the particular chaos that travels with six children like a weather system, into a car and a truck and drive the length of Europe to arrive somewhere fine. We spent a weekend looking. I drove. Diana navigated. The children existed loudly in the back. We went through places that were pretty, places that were warm, places that had restaurants with terraces and the sort of light that looks good in photographs but does not actually change anything inside you. And then we went south. Further south. South past the point where sensible people stop going south. And then: Gaucin. I am not a sentimental man. I am a filmmaker, which means I am deeply sentimental but I have constructed an elaborate system of irony to keep this hidden. But I will tell you what I saw when we arrived in Gaucin, because it is simply true and does not require decoration. You could see Gibraltar. You could see the mountains of Morocco. You could see the sea. All at once. Standing on what is essentially a very dramatic rock in Andalusia at forty-nine years old with a truck full of furniture parked somewhere behind me, I could see three countries and two bodies of water simultaneously, and I thought: this is where I live now. I did not consult the truck. What they do not tell you about Gaucin, what I have since discovered, is that for some years the European aristocracy looked at a map, looked at their options, and also pointed at this exact rock and said: here. The climate. The society. The way the light comes off the sea in the afternoon without asking anything from you. I fit in immediately. Whether the aristocracy has yet fully accepted this is, I admit, still slightly unclear, but I remain optimistic and I dress well. The strangest thing that Spain did to me was slow me down. I do not mean this as a complaint. Latvia runs at a frequency that is essentially



low-grade panic dressed up as efficiency, and you do not notice until you leave and feel your shoulders do something they have never done before, which is descend. The people here are warm. Warm in the real way, not the customer-service way. They look at you. They have the dinner at ten at night and they mean it, and nobody is tense, and nobody is aggressive, and at first this made me deeply suspicious because I am Latvian and we are trained to read warmth as a warning sign. Diana adapted faster than me. Diana always adapts faster than me. She probably had a plan for the dinner at ten while I was still arguing that nine-thirty was already quite late. She is the logical center of the whole operation, the one who knows where everything is, including, on most days, me. I stood in Gaucin in 2023 and looked at Gibraltar and Morocco and the sea, and I thought about the boxes I had packed, the beautiful house I had left, the grey country I had fled, and all the ways a man convinces himself he is making a bold choice when really he is just, finally, catching up to the decision his wife had already made. The view was extraordinary. I would have found it eventually on my own.



It turns out you can be genuinely surprised by a death you had already grieved, which suggests I had been grieving, all that time, the wrong thing.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

STILL ALIVE, INCONVENIENTLY



She was a hundred years old.

I did not know that. For roughly twenty years I had believed she was already dead.

That is the part that stays with me, not the funeral itself, not the relatives standing in a loose circle in coats that smelled of mothballs and long drives, but the phone call a few days before. An unfamiliar number. A voice I could not place immediately. A relative of Martin's, technically a relative of mine, telling me about the arrangements, and me sitting there trying to understand how a woman I had mentally buried sometime around 2004 had just now, in 2024, gotten around to actually dying. At a hundred. Sharp until the end, apparently. I believed it completely.

She was that kind of woman.

Martin's grandmother, my step-grandmother, if we are being precise about the architecture of that family, and in that family the architecture was complicated, had been a model in the 1930s. There are photographs, I have seen one or two of them. She was beautiful in the way women were beautiful in that era, which is to say she looked like she understood something serious about survival. Her first husband



served in the German Army and was killed in 1943. After the war, Latvia was occupied, which meant that having had a husband in the wrong army was not a small problem. She solved it the way a genuinely intelligent and beautiful woman in an impossible situation sometimes could: she became the companion of men who had power. Not because she had no morals. Because she had a car. In 1950s Latvia, a car was a philosophical statement.

She survived everything. The repressions. The occupation. The particular loneliness of being a woman who had made herself useful to powerful men and therefore belonged to none of them. She raised Martin's side of the family at a careful distance. When my stepfather died, we saw her rarely and then not at all, and at some point the not at all became permanent in my mind.

I told Martin about the phone call. We are not men who spend a lot of time discussing our feelings about funerals. He had known her longer and more directly than I had, and he received this information the same way I had, with a kind of recalibrating silence that meant he was also doing the arithmetic.

Diana drove. She always drives when I am thinking too hard about something, because she has noticed over the years that I become a philosophical hazard behind the wheel.

The funeral was quiet and orderly and full of people I had never met. Cousins, I think. Second cousins. People who shared some fragment of this woman's bloodline and had spent decades living ten kilometers from me without our paths crossing once. There is something about a funeral for a very old person that pulls the whole scattered web into one room, all the branches that drifted apart under occupation, under independence, under emigration, under simple ordinary life, and you stand there looking at faces and trying to see something familiar in the



jaw or the forehead.

I had told my son recently that you become a man when you carry the coffins of your friends and relatives, when you lose things and feel the size of that loss without running sideways from it. I believe that. I have been carrying versions of that belief since I was eighteen and nineteen and Martin was younger than that, and we were alone in an apartment in Riga, and I was trying to figure out how to be responsible for another person when no one had been particularly responsible for me.

Standing there at her funeral, I thought about the shape of her life. A hundred years. 1924 to 2024, roughly, born into one Latvia, survived another, outlasted the occupation itself by thirty-three years. She had been a beautiful woman in the 1930s in a country that was briefly free, and then that country stopped being free, and she adapted. She had a car. She survived.

I do not romanticize it. She was not warm to us. She kept her distance in the way people keep their distance when they have learned that closeness costs something they cannot afford. But she was sharp. She was not foolish. She made her calculations and she survived everything the century threw at her, and then she died at a hundred, and I drove to her funeral thinking I had already mourned her twenty years ago.

The relatives I met that day I have not seen since. Maybe I will. Probably I won't. That is how it goes with the edges of a family, you find each other once, briefly, over a woman in a coffin who was beautiful in 1935 and impossible to kill, and then everyone goes back to living ten kilometers apart without crossing.



The estate took six weeks to divide; the furniture took longer, because my sister and I agreed on everything except what things were worth.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

FURNITURE,
CATEGORISED AND
DISMISSED

There is a specific torture that no film school prepares you for, and it is this: you are the man who spent twenty years reading faces for a living, the micro-twitch before tears, the jaw that

tightens when an actor is lying, the exact moment a performance becomes true, and your seven-year-old son looks straight through you like you are a piece of furniture he has already categorised and dismissed. Alex does this constantly. He is very good at it. He was seven in the spring we were living in a coastal town, which I will tell you is the best place on the planet, and I say this not as a man who has seen limited places but as one who has seen quite a few and has strong opinions about all of them. You can see Gibraltar from the terrace. On a clear day you can see the mountains in Morocco. The light is unreasonable, frankly, in the way it falls on everything and makes even ordinary objects look like they have been lit by someone who knows what they are doing. And in the middle of all this, inside the house, Alex was conducting his own private film, no dialogue, no other cast members required, set design consisting of whatever small objects he had arranged on the floor in a pattern only he could interpret. I would



walk into the room and he would not look up. I want to be precise about what this felt like, because I am a man who is very comfortable telling you I am a good director, a fair father, an interesting person to have dinner with, I have no shortage of opinions about my own quality, but Alex could reduce me to nothing in about four seconds flat without even trying. Without even noticing, which was somehow the worse part. The boy was not rejecting me. He simply had not registered that there was a me to reject. The speech was the hardest thing. He understood individual words, names, objects, his name, but sentences came at him sideways, like sounds in another language that has some words you recognise but not enough to follow the meaning. You could say "Alex, do you want to eat?" and watch the words land somewhere in the middle distance and dissolve. You could say it again louder, which is the human instinct and is completely useless, and accomplished nothing except making you feel like an idiot who was shouting at furniture. So what I started doing, and I cannot claim this was a brilliant therapeutic insight, it was more like desperation wearing the hat of a method, was grabbing him. Not aggressively. Just: intercept. Get in front of him, get low, take his face gently between my hands if I had to, and say: look at me in the eye.

And sometimes he would. Sometimes those eyes would find mine, and there would be this moment, I am not exaggerating this, I am if anything understating it, where you could see the signal arrive. Where something behind his eyes would adjust, the way a camera adjusts when it finds its focus, and he would perceive what you were saying. Not just hear it. Perceive it. The word would land somewhere real. And then he would behave like a normal person. He would start to recognise things around him. He would respond. For a few minutes he would be fully in the room, and you would be in the room together, and it was such a specific and complete joy that I never once took it for granted. And



then he would drift back. Every time. Gently, inevitably, like a tide going out, back into his own world where the arrangement of small objects on the floor meant something important that I was not cleared to understand. Diana watched all of this from the doorway sometimes. She did not say anything. She has a talent for leaving rooms at exactly the right moment, which I find both admirable and deeply inconvenient depending on the day. What I know is that I have never once won an argument with her, not one, not in however many years, and yet it did not occur to me to stop trying with Alex. That is either love or stubbornness and I suspect there is no difference. I would go back in. Grab him again gently. Look at me.

And when he looked, when he really looked, I tried to be worth looking at. Which is, I realised, the same thing I have always asked of my actors. The same thing I have always asked of myself. Be present. Be real. Make it matter. He was seven years old and he was teaching me the only lesson I had never managed to learn from a book. I did not tell him this because he would not have followed the sentence. But I think on some level, in the three seconds before he drifted back to his objects on the floor, he knew anyway.



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

UNLOCKING LARS'S HIDDEN AGGRESSIVENESS



The character's name is Lars. Or Faith. I keep changing it, which is maybe part of the problem, or maybe it's the most honest thing about the whole project, that I haven't decided yet who

this man is, because I haven't fully decided who I am when I'm being honest.

Here is what I know. Lars is an architect. He lives inside boxes. He draws boxes all day, straight lines, right angles, everything contained and load-bearing and approved by someone with a stamp. He is good at it. He is respected. He goes home to a family that is also, in its way, a box he helped design, and he fits inside it exactly because he made himself fit, shaved down the parts that didn't.

Then he meets Kate.

Kate is not a box. Kate is, and I have been trying to write this scene for eleven months now without it sounding like a greeting card, Kate is the thing that happens when you open a door you didn't know was in the wall. She is not particularly gentle about it. She doesn't mean to destroy anything. She is just completely, dangerously herself, no boundaries



that make us human, no brakes that make us manageable, and when Lars sees her, something in him that was very quiet and very old wakes up and is not quiet anymore.

It unlocks his hidden aggressiveness. That's the exact word I use in the script. Aggressiveness. Not passion. Not fire. Aggressiveness, because what she releases in him isn't soft, it's the part of him that wants something badly enough to ruin things. And he does. He ruins things. He loses the job, the family, the box he built, and he ends up alone, and he becomes a great artist.

That's the price. That's always the price. You can live in the box and be warm and not hurt anyone and die having never once made something that made a stranger stop in the street. Or you can pay what greatness costs, which is usually everything you also loved, and you end up like an animal, very free, very beautiful, no one to come home to.

I have thought about this choice my whole life. I think most people have, but most people think about it theoretically and I kept accidentally doing it in practice.

The film ends in a plane.

Lars is terrified of heights. I don't know yet exactly how to play this scene for maximum effect without it becoming ridiculous, which is its own kind of problem, but here is what happens: Kate wants him to jump. She has been pushing him his whole second life, this life he ruined everything for, toward the edge of things, and now she is pushing him toward a literal edge, and he cannot do it. He is frozen. He cannot make his legs move. The fear is real and total and embarrassing and he cannot get past it even now, even after everything he gave up to become the man who was supposed to be capable of this.

And Kate, without saying anything, because she has said everything



already, and they both know it, puts her golden watch on his wrist. It is long. The strap is long enough. She slides it on while he isn't looking at his wrist, he's looking at the door of the plane and the specific white nothing beyond it, and then she steps back.

And then she jumps.

She's already gone. And Lars looks down at his wrist, and there it is, this gold watch, her watch, the one thing she had that was worth anything, and the world stops. I mean that literally in the script. It stops. Time doesn't move. His fear doesn't move. Everything is suspended in the exact moment he understands what she gave him, what she always gave him, and then he jumps.

That's the end. We don't see what happens after. I don't think it matters.

What matters is the watch on the wrist and the world going still.

I have shown this script to a lot of people. My wife read it first, at the kitchen table with her coffee going cold, and she read it the way she reads everything I give her, very carefully, without saying much, and when she finished she set it down and looked at me in a way that meant she understood exactly which parts were real. She didn't say which parts. She doesn't need to. She has always been better at reading me than I am at reading myself, which is one of the reasons I married her and also one of the reasons she occasionally makes me feel like a very predictable character in someone else's film.

The script is still a little predictable. I know this. I am working on it. I believe in it the way you believe in something that keeps being slightly wrong but is also, underneath the wrongness, true, and that combination, the frustration and the faith, is maybe the most accurate description I have of what it is to make anything.



I don't know yet who plays Kate.

I know who Kate is.



*The project did not make us rich, but it did clarify,
with some efficiency, who in the relationship was a
morning person.*

CHAPTER FIFTY

SIX CHILDREN,
APPROXIMATELY

I woke up at ten-thirty. Diana had been working since seven. I know this because she mentioned it, once, which is how Diana mentions things when she wants you to understand that she has already done three hours of real work while you were performing unconsciousness in the bed. She did not say it unkindly. She didn't need to. The math was already doing all the heavy lifting.

So I lay there for a few more minutes, running through my projects on the laptop the way people tell themselves is working. I had the screenplay open. I was thinking about Lars, the architect who lives in boxes. I was thinking very productively. Then I opened three other tabs, and then it was eleven, and Diana was in the kitchen having already accomplished something, and I was the kind of man who describes this as a slow morning.

This is my life in a coastal town. I describe it differently every time.

The whole point of today was family, kids, dinner, the general performance of being a present father, which I find genuinely easy to love and genuinely hard to survive. We have six children, which I say in the tone of a man who still cannot quite believe his own receipts. The youngest is Alex. He is seven. He has autism, which means the world comes at him all at once, unfiltered, without the small mercy of sorting



itself first.

Yesterday, his brother pulled him into the pool. Alex has scratched ribs.

I want you to hold that information while I describe the rest of the day.

We went into town for dinner, a proper sit-down at a good restaurant, the kind of place where aristocracy goes because of the climate and where I go because of the ajo blanco. White garlic soup, cold, with almonds, a drizzle of oil on top. It is one of those dishes that Spain produces the way the country produces warm people and good light and the general sensation that your blood pressure has dropped by twenty points, effortlessly, without trying, as if effort would be slightly embarrassing. I had a little steak after. It was a fine evening. Diana was there. The kids were there. I felt, briefly, like a man who had planned this.

Then we came home and Alex started screaming.

Not screaming in the way children scream when they are performing for attention, though I respect that art form, Theodore has been practicing it since he was four, but screaming the way Alex screams, which is complete, full-bodied, absolutely sincere. The scratched ribs. The pool. The memory of the pool. The concept of the pool existing somewhere nearby. All of it was in the screaming.

I sat with him on the floor and we did the therapy cards. This is what you do. You take small cards with pictures, a boy riding a bicycle, a boy standing, a boy eating, and you hold them up one at a time, and Alex has to recognize the action. He has been learning this. It sounds simple. It is not simple. It is the hardest thing I watch anyone do, and I have watched actors try to cry on cue.

We got to swimming.



He recognized swimming immediately. He pointed at the card and he lit up, that particular light that comes on in Alex's face when something clicks, when the word and the picture and the meaning arrive at the same moment, which is not always guaranteed, and he smiled the kind of smile that is too big for a face, that smile where you think, there he is, there is a person who is experiencing pure pleasure right now, uncut, at full volume.

Then he got one wrong and cried.

Then I showed him swimming again and he smiled again.

I sat there on the floor of this beautiful house in the south of Spain, with Gibraltar visible on a clear day and Morocco after that, and I watched my seven-year-old son recognize a card of a boy in water and become the happiest person in the room. I am fifty-two years old. I have made more than three hundred advertisements and one real film. I spent half the day thinking about a fictional architect and his road toward creative freedom.

Alex already knows what freedom looks like. It looks like getting the card right. It looks like that smile.

I also dealt with maintenance issues. The rental property. Some boring problem with something structural or administrative, I genuinely cannot tell you, I blocked it from my memory as a protective measure. Diana probably handled most of it. She had been awake since seven.



*There are, I have learned, two reliable cures for
grief: neither of them is directing a play.*

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

BEGINNER JUMPS INTO
GIBRALTAR

There is a particular kind of madness that announces itself quietly, the way a radiator starts ticking before the whole pipe bursts. Directing theater for the first time at fifty-two, that is

the radiator. And me, naturally, standing next to it with a cup of coffee, telling everyone the sound is charming.

The play is called *Machine Now. Not Machine*. I made this correction to people approximately fourteen times in one week, which tells you something about either the play's obscurity or my inability to let anything go. It is one of the first expressionist plays, one of the first genuinely feminist plays ever staged on Broadway, nineteen-twenties, maybe early thirties, based on a real woman's real story, and it is, by any reasonable measure, not a beginner's project. A beginner directs something small. A domestic comedy. Four people in a living room arguing about a will. I chose the theatrical equivalent of trying to learn to swim by jumping into the sea near Gibraltar, which, as it happens, I can see from my window. I took this as a sign. I take most things as signs when they confirm what I have already decided to do.

What I told everyone was that I was ready. What I did not say was that I had never directed theater in my life. These two statements coexisted in



me without apparent conflict, the way they always do.

Here is what surprised me, though, and I will admit this without too much embarrassment: theater is different. Film I understand the way a mechanic understands an engine. You know which part goes where. You know the sequence. Lighting, coverage, the cut, it is mathematics, finally. Elegant mathematics, but mathematics. You can be wrong in film and you know precisely where you went wrong, the way you know which bolt you overtightened. Theater is not like this. Theater is more like, I don't know, more like the moment before you decide to say something true to someone. You feel it first. The logic comes later, or it doesn't come at all, and it doesn't matter, because by then the thing has happened and the audience is already holding their breath.

I find this terrifying. I find this the most alive I have felt directing anything.

The first scene I want to rehearse, the one I keep turning over in my head at two in the morning while Diana is asleep and I am at my desk pretending to be productive, is the opening. The main character oversleeps. Work enters her dream, literally enters it, crowds into her sleeping mind like an uninvited colleague who doesn't read the room. She wakes up afraid. She runs to the office. And there the boss proposes marriage. She says yes. She says yes because she wants to be happy, which is the most human sentence in any language, and also the beginning of the trap closing.

That is what the play is about. The machine. Not a machine you can point to, not something with gears you can photograph, the machine that is society and structure and expectation and the ten thousand small reasonable demands that add up, eventually, to the complete erasure of a person. Specifically a woman. Specifically this woman. And the play was written a hundred years ago, and I am sitting in southern Spain in



2026 reading it and thinking: nothing has been solved. We made the language politer. That is all we did.

I have been thinking about the opening image for weeks. She is asleep. Work is coming for her even there, even in the dark, even in the one place that is supposed to be hers. She cannot even dream without the machine following her in.

I mentioned this to Diana over dinner in the town, we had gone out, the two of us, the children dispatched into the general chaos of the evening, and Diana listened, which she does with a quality of attention I have spent twenty years failing to deserve, and then she said something precise and useful, as she always does, and I thought about it for a moment and said, "Yes, but I was also thinking, " and she gave me the look. The look that means: you asked, I answered, and you are now about to explain why my answer is wrong. She has a whole vocabulary in that look. I have published nothing in response to it that has ever held up.

I am a film director. I have made films about choice, about the price of freedom, about what it costs to be yourself versus what it costs to perform the self that everyone else has ordered for you. I know this territory. I thought I knew how to work.

And then I opened Machine Now and understood that I have been doing mathematics this whole time, and I didn't even know it.

The rehearsals haven't started yet. I am still in the stage where everything is possible, the most dangerous stage, because I am at my most confident here, before I have been contradicted by actual actors in an actual room. Ask me again in three months. I will be a different, smaller, more accurate version of myself.

Diana will not be surprised by that version.



She never is.



*The restaurant was Diana's idea, which I mention
not to deflect blame but simply to establish, for the
record, that I went in confident.*



CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

DUCK RENDERS ME ILLITERATE



There is a theory I have held for most of my adult life, which is that I am a man of sophisticated taste. I have eaten in restaurants in five countries. I have opinions about wine that I

deliver with great confidence and occasionally get right. I once sent back a soup in Riga on the grounds that it lacked ambition, which is the most Latvian sentence ever spoken by a human being. I am, in short, a person who knows food.

And then Diana makes her duck.

I want to be precise about this, because precision matters when you are describing something that has genuinely rearranged your understanding of what is possible. It is duck fillet, the breast, specifically, and what she does to it is not complicated, which is the most infuriating part, because if it were complicated I could dismiss it as a professional trick, a technique requiring equipment I don't own. It is not that. It comes out of our oven juicy in a way that should be physically illegal given what duck breast normally does, which is dry out while you are still optimistically calling it medium-rare. When she puts it on the table, the children go quiet. Not politely quiet. Actually quiet, the way seven-year-old Alex goes quiet when something has captured his full



attention and he forgets to be anywhere else. Theodore stops negotiating. Maya stops explaining something to Theodore. Everyone just eats.

It is better than any restaurant I know. I have said this to Diana approximately forty times and she nods with the specific expression of a woman who knew this already and is waiting for me to say something useful.

Christmas is when it becomes a whole event. She builds a table around that duck, different dishes coming out in relays, great food in every direction, and I sit at the head of this table at fifty-two years old with the sun having set an hour ago, and I feel, inconveniently, like a man who has everything he needs. It is deeply inconvenient for someone who has spent thirty years describing himself as a restless creative spirit. You cannot be a restless creative spirit and also desperately hope dinner is duck again. These things do not coexist elegantly.

The soups are their own category of problem. Turkish bean soup. Ginger soup. Chicken fillet soup. We crave them. I do not use the word crave lightly, I am a man who does not even crave things, philosophically speaking, I am above craving, I move forward, I do not look back, and yet I have caught myself thinking about Diana's ginger soup on a Tuesday afternoon while supposedly having thoughts about cinema. This is what she has done to me.

I should tell you that when we met, she could not cook. Not in the modest, self-deprecating way people say they cannot cook while actually being capable of a decent pasta. I mean she genuinely could not make an egg. I taught her. I was, for a brief window, the better cook in this relationship, which I mention only because it is the single factual advantage I held over Diana in twenty-something years together, and it lasted perhaps eighteen months before she methodically surpassed me



and kept going until I was not even visible in her rearview mirror. She did not do this competitively. She did it because she decided that cooking was how she showed love, and Diana, when she decides to do something, does it completely, without drama, without announcing it, and without ever making you feel small for being the person she has quietly left behind.

For a while, and I am genuinely not embarrassed about this, or only slightly embarrassed, I thought we should make a company. Diana's soups. A real company. I had the vision: branding, distribution, people in offices in several European cities opening containers of her ginger soup and reconsidering their life choices. I mentioned this to Diana. She gave me the look she gives me when I have said something that she will not argue with because it does not merit the energy. The soup company did not happen. The soups continue to exist only for us, which on reflection is an entirely reasonable outcome and possibly better for my self-esteem than having to explain to investors why my primary qualification is that I married the right person.

Which is, if I am honest, and I try to be honest in approximately one paragraph per chapter, the whole story. I directed films. I moved countries. I reinvented myself at regular intervals with great personal drama. Diana woke up early, cooked soup, and made a Christmas table in the south of Spain that tasted like the word home in a language I didn't know I spoke.

The duck was extraordinary. I should have sent it back on principle.



*It turns out I had confused passion for architecture
my entire adult life, which is a expensive mistake to
make in three currencies.*

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

RUBBLE I MISTOOK FOR
ROMANCE

I will tell you something that took me an embarrassing number of years to understand, which is that love is not a condition that happens to you, like a weather event, or a cold. Love is more like
a

building. And I am an idiot who kept showing up to building sites, looking at the rubble, and thinking: well, this particular rubble is simply not right for me. On to the next site.

I was wrong about most things in my forties, but I was spectacularly, world-historically wrong about this.

What I had decided, what I had, with great intellectual confidence, worked out, was that the correct relationship was the effortless one. The one where you are simply yourself, completely, at all times, no adjustments required, and the other person finds this wonderful. I believed this the way I believed I was always the cleverest person in whatever room I was standing in: totally, warmly, with zero supporting evidence.

Diana, very gently, very logically, and with a precision I found at first attractive and then occasionally infuriating and now mostly just correct, demolished this theory over several years.



The first thing she taught me, not by lecturing, Diana does not lecture, she simply looks at you with a particular expression that makes you feel you have said something a golden retriever might have said, was that you do not try to change the other person. Ever. You accept them as they are, completely. This sounds simple. This sounds, in fact, like something you could cross-stitch onto a pillow. It is not simple. Because what you discover, very quickly, is that accepting a person entirely as they are means accepting all of it: the parts you admire, the parts that challenge you, the parts that are simply different from you in ways that require you to be flexible, and that is the word I had, historically, run screaming from. Flexible. I was not flexible. I was a fifty-two-year-old man who had decided, very early, that his particular shape was the correct shape, and the world could sort itself around it.

The world, through Diana, politely declined.

Here is what the compromise actually looks like. Not the poetic version. The real one. It looks like two people with completely different rhythms, she woke up at what I can only describe as an ungodly hour and was already working while I was still horizontal, blinking at the ceiling of our house with the morning coming through the window and the vague sense that I had plans, incredible plans, which I would begin shortly, two people like this, who have somehow decided to build something together anyway. Not despite the differences. With them. Around them. The compromise is the architecture.

And what Diana understands, which took me longer, is that the only thing you cannot repair in a relationship is if one person prevents the other from growing. Everything else, the friction, the arguments, the mornings when you are each living in completely different versions of the same house, everything else is fixable, negotiable, workable. But if someone flattens you, if someone looks at your imagination and says:



please keep that somewhere I cannot see it, then that is the thing that cannot be undone.

This is not the case with us. This is the one thing I am quite sure of, which is remarkable, because I am usually sure of several wrong things simultaneously.

She supports my ideas. All of them. Including the ones that are, objectively, a little ambitious, including the screenplays and the houses and the plans we make late at evening sitting somewhere warm in southern Spain, the children somewhere nearby being loud and alive and ours, and we look at each other across these plans and we are genuinely, specifically, realizing them. Not talking about realizing them. Actually doing it. Building actual beautiful houses. Making actual films. Because this is what it turns out you can do when you are not spending all your energy managing the structural damage of the wrong relationship.

I spent years thinking freedom meant no investment. No compromise. Just pure self, moving lightly through the world, unburdened.

It turns out the best investment I ever made is the one I cannot leave, does not need me to be different, and woke up three hours before me this morning and was already working.

The return on that, I have decided, is incalculable.



The gap between incalculable return and actual liquidity is, I discovered, where personality goes to wait.



CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

JOY LEAVES THE BUILDING



The problem with waiting for money is that the joy goes first. Not the hope, the hope hangs on, irritating and persistent, like a neighbour who never quite finishes his renovation. The joy goes. The specific, clean joy of this is the film I will make, this is the scene, this is the moment the watch slides onto his wrist and the whole world stops, that joy, you spend it. You spend it in meetings that produce nothing. You spend it explaining the concept for the fourteenth time to a person who nods and then does not call back. You spend it lying awake at two in the morning calculating whether Magdalena's Land getting into a festival in February is early enough to make the financing conversation happen before whoever we need to have the conversation with goes on holiday until April, at which point the whole year is essentially gone and you are explaining the watch again to another nodding person in another room, and you are fifty-two years old, and you can feel the joy leaving your body like heat through a bad window.

This is the situation with Skydive. This is my situation, here, in the sun, which does not care about film financing and simply keeps arriving every morning, indifferent and warm and enormous over the sea.

The film is about a man who cannot jump. He is an architect, a man who draws boxes, who lives in boxes, who has organised his entire



existence into a system of right angles so that nothing wild can get inside. And then Kate comes. Kate, who has no right angles. Kate, who is all open space and no fences, which sounds wonderful until you remember that what separates beautiful from dangerous is usually a fence. She loves him in the way that certain people love, completely, recklessly, with no regard for what it costs either of them, and this love breaks something open in him. He becomes a real artist. He also becomes terrified and suffering and uncertain and alive, which is, if you ask me, pretty much the same list.

The ending is the plane. He is at the door of the plane, and he cannot jump, because he is afraid of heights and he is afraid of everything, and Kate puts her golden watch on his wrist quietly, while he is not looking, and he feels it there and he looks down at it, and the world stops. He jumps. The film ends in the jump. We do not see what happens after, and we do not need to, because what happens after is not the story. The story is the moment of deciding. That is the only story there ever is.

I believe in this film the way I believe in very few things. Which is why the waiting is particularly cruel.

Everything now depends on Magdalena's Land. End of this year, beginning of next, the festivals, the attention, the conversation that festivals produce. If that goes well, I can have the other conversation. If that conversation goes well, we can begin. If we begin, and here is the truly maddening part, I know, I know, that when we actually start shooting, when I am on set and we are building the scene and everything is real and physical and in front of me, I will not feel like I won the lottery. The lottery feeling is gone. I spent it in the waiting room. What I will feel is something better and quieter, the satisfaction of doing the work correctly, of making something beautiful and true, of earning each shot. That feeling is good. That feeling is what I am



actually working toward. But it is very far away right now and the sea is very pretty and Magdalena's Land has not gone anywhere yet.

Diana was already working when I got up this morning. This is a pattern. I sleep, she is already at her desk, and by the time I arrive in the kitchen she has done approximately four hours of things that needed doing, because someone in this arrangement has to be structured and precise, and it is not the man writing films about architects who draw boxes. She looked at me in the specific way she has, which contains, simultaneously, affection and a complete audit of all my recent decisions, and handed me coffee, and I sat with my projects and the morning, and outside was Spain, which keeps being Spain regardless of what I need it to be.

I keep telling myself: the spark is still there. This is, in fact, what the whole film is about, that fear makes you old at twenty, that people stop moving forward and call it wisdom, that the spark does not die, it just gets buried under the right angles. I believe this. I believe it about other people with complete confidence.

About myself, I am slightly less certain, though I would never say so in a meeting.



*I was thirty-seven before I understood that most of
my opinions are load-bearing.*

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

UNDERNEATH, THE
FLOOR IS CRACKED

My parents died when I was eighteen. I don't say that to make you feel something. I say it because it is the fact that runs underneath everything else, the way a crack runs under a floor you keep walking on without looking down. My mother first, then my father, and then it was just me and my brother Martin, and that was that. Eighteen years old and the house was very quiet.

What happened after that, the scrambling, the work, the projects, the countries, the films, the constant forward motion, I understood all of it eventually, through a long time in therapy, a serious amount of honest conversation with myself in hotel rooms at two in the morning. The understanding is not the problem. The understanding came. The feeling never did leave.

It lives in me like a low-frequency noise you stop noticing but that is always running. The feeling that everything can disappear. That what you love, specifically what you love, will go first. That you are operating on borrowed time with every person who matters to you, and one morning you will wake up and the borrowing will be over. I am fifty-two years old and I still have this feeling. Always. Not dramatically, not in a way that stops me from functioning, I function, clearly, sometimes too much, but it is there. It has always been there since I was



eighteen and the house was quiet.

The practical result of this is that I have no real friends. I mean this exactly. I have people I enjoy, people I argue with about cinema and politics, people I respect because they are smarter than me and I can learn from them. I have people for good times. But there is almost nobody I would call at three in the morning with the real thing, the actual thing, the thing underneath. Because to do that you have to trust that the person will still be there. And I am not built for that trust. I know this about myself. I have analyzed it in long therapy, I have named it correctly, I have understood its origins with great precision, and then I have gone home and still not called anyone at three in the morning.

What I did instead, for thirty years, was work. Work very hard. Build things that could not disappear easily, projects, companies, a reputation, a body of work. If you cannot stop the loss, you can at least construct enough that the loss has to work harder to reach you. This is not wisdom. This is just what the fear looks like when it gets dressed in the morning and goes outside.

And then there is Diana.

I have loved women before Diana in the way you love when you are young and reckless and have no idea what love actually costs. But Diana is different and the difference is specific: she is the first woman, the only woman, where I am certain, actually certain, not hopeful, not performing certainty, that she will not abandon me. Not if my mind changes. Not if I am difficult. Not if I am wrong, which I am sometimes, more than sometimes. She will argue me into the floor before she leaves. She is the most logical creature I have ever encountered, and I mean this as the highest compliment I know how to give. You cannot win a discussion with Diana. She will construct the



argument so cleanly, so precisely, that by the end you are not even sure what you originally believed. I trust her. That is the whole sentence. I trust her in a way I do not trust anyone else on earth, and at fifty-two that is not a small thing to say. It is the only thing I have that fully counterweights the noise underneath.

So the family, Diana, the children, this house in southern Spain where you can see Gibraltar and on a clear day the mountains of Morocco across the water, this is the safety net. The only real one. And I have invested in it the way other men invest in property, which is to say seriously, continuously, with full attention to what happens when you neglect the foundation. I try to be a good father. I try to be a good husband. These are not passive ambitions.

The hardest part, and I will be honest about this, is not the fear itself. The fear I have learned to carry. The hardest part is staying myself inside the ordinary days, not becoming some tired, nervous machine that moves from task to task and forgets that there is a person in there who used to stand in very dark theaters and feel something huge and true. Not losing myself to the daily chores and the children's schedules and the stress that accumulates quietly, the way water accumulates in a wall you cannot see, until one day the wall comes down.

I wake up some mornings in this house and Diana has been working for two hours already and the children are still sleeping and there is coffee and there is the sea in the distance and the light is doing what the light does here in the south, which is different from anywhere else I have lived, and for a moment everything is exactly what it is. No noise underneath. Just this.

It does not last. But it comes back. That is the whole story, really, it keeps coming back.



*There are men who weaponize silence and men who
merely inhabit it, and my brother was the second
kind, which did not make the next four days any
easier.*



CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

MY BROTHER'S MAGNIFICENT SILENCE



Martin was not sick. That is the important thing to understand before anything else. He had a cold, maybe. A slight cold. He was twelve years old and he was angry at

me about something, and because he was angry he had stopped talking, and because he had stopped talking I could not tell how sick he was, and because I could not tell how sick he was I panicked. That is the whole logic of it. That is how a boy who was not sick ended up in a room where a man died.

I was eighteen, maybe nineteen. I was his parent now, which was a sentence I still had not finished understanding. Our mother was gone. Our father was gone. Martin was mine in the way that a problem you did not ask for is yours, completely, undeniably, with no paperwork to explain how it happened. And he had stopped talking to me. Not a word. He walked through the apartment like I was furniture he had learned to navigate around, and his face was closed in the particular way twelve-year-olds have mastered since the beginning of time, that expression that says everything and admits nothing.

He had a slight cold. His nose was running. He looked pale, though maybe that was just the light, or maybe that was just how you look



when you are furious with someone and refusing to let it show in any way except your whole face and body and every room you enter.

I called my friend, a DP I was working with at the time. I told him I thought something might be wrong with Martin. My friend came over, looked at Martin, and agreed that yes, something might be wrong with Martin. Neither of us were doctors. Neither of us had any business making medical assessments. We were young men standing in an apartment looking at a twelve-year-old who would not speak, and we convinced ourselves that the silence was a symptom.

We took him to the hospital.

This was the thing about hospitals then, in Latvia in those years, they were divided. Children's ward, adult ward. Two completely separate systems, two completely separate buildings sometimes, a bureaucratic line drawn between childhood and adulthood with the same clean confidence they drew every other line. Martin was twelve. Twelve was not a child, apparently. Twelve was something else. They put him in a room with adults.

I remember standing in that corridor. The fluorescent light. The smell of the place, the floor polish and something underneath the floor polish that the floor polish was losing the argument against. A nurse explained the situation to me with the specific patience of someone explaining something to a person who is about to object and will not win. Martin was assigned a bed. He went in. The door closed.

There were three or four adults in that room. Grown men, large men, men who had arrived at this hospital by routes considerably more serious than a slight cold and a refusal to speak. Martin was twelve years old. He was the only person in that room under forty. He was not sick. He had a runny nose and an argument with his older brother and now



he was in a hospital bed in a room with strangers at night.

I went home.

I am not sure what I told myself. That it was fine, probably. That the nurses were there. That he was twelve, not six. That I had done the responsible thing, the caring thing, and now he was being cared for.

I found out later what happened in that room.

One of the men died during the night. Quietly, in a hospital bed, the way it happens, there and then not there. Another man had his legs amputated. I do not know the order of these events. I do not know if Martin was awake for them or woke to the aftermath or slept through everything and was told in the morning. I never asked him. I am not sure he would have told me even then, because we were still not talking properly, and by the time we were talking properly it had become a story, a thing that had happened, sealed over.

He was not sick. They let him come home after a few days. Absolutely not sick, the doctors confirmed. A slight cold. Nothing serious.

Martin did not say much about it afterward. He had the quality, even at twelve, of absorbing difficult things without showing you where he put them. Maybe that silence had always been there and I had just not been responsible for it long enough to notice. Maybe it got quieter after the hospital. Maybe it got louder. I was not always good at reading him.

I had been responsible for him. I had panicked and taken him somewhere and left him in a room where a man died. I had meant to protect him and I had delivered him directly into something he should never have seen.

He came home. He was fine. That is the part I have held onto all these years, not that I made the wrong call, not that a boy of twelve spent a



night beside the dying because his older brother could not sit with uncertainty, but that he came home, and he was fine, and we kept going. Because what else do you do. You keep going. You tell yourself you did what you could with what you had. Sometimes that is even true.



He was seventeen years older than me in all the ways that mattered and I have been making it up to him ever since, mostly by pretending the debt doesn't exist, which is, I recognize, also something I learned from watching adults.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

MARTIN DRIVES LEGALLY
NOW

My brother Martin never learned to drive. This is important to understand before anything else. He had been driving for a year already when this fact became relevant.

Let me explain.

Martin came to me, I was eighteen, maybe nineteen, newly promoted from brother to parent by the universe's most efficient method, which is simply killing both your parents and handing you a smaller human and walking away, and Martin needed work. He was free in the way only people who have never been sufficiently frightened can be free. Beautiful, honestly. Infuriating, also honestly. He found a job distributing electrical goods. He told them he had a driving license. He did not have a driving license. He had, at that point, approximately the same relationship to traffic law that a seagull has to parking regulations.

He drove for a year. A full year. Vans, probably. Boxes of electrical things going from one place to another place, Martin at the wheel, no license, apparently fine, apparently not dying, apparently not killing anyone either, which I want to be clear is the minimum acceptable outcome and also not something I take for granted.



Then one day Martin looked at the situation and decided, you know what, maybe I should get a license. Not because of the illegal driving. Not because of the year of illegal driving. Just because he felt like it. This is who Martin is. This is what I mean when I say no one forced him. He was self-directed in the same way a river is self-directed, technically moving toward a destination, technically following no one's instructions, technically your problem if you're standing in front of it.

Now. We were in a small town. Small towns have their own mathematics. In a small town, a problem is never just a problem, it is also a relationship, a conversation, a favor, a price. Someone knew someone who knew the police chief. The police chief, it was suggested, was a man who understood that the theory examination for a driving license was, in certain circumstances, a flexible administrative procedure. For a fee, the police chief would take the theory exam himself. On Martin's behalf. The exam would be passed. The license would materialize. Everyone would go home.

The police chief took the bribe.

The police chief failed the exam.

I want you to sit with this for a moment. The man who is supposed to know the traffic laws, the man whose entire professional identity is built on a relationship with rules and their enforcement, the man you have paid good money to pass a test for you, this man sat down, picked up the pencil, and got the questions wrong. I don't know which questions. I have imagined many possibilities and all of them are funny. Does a pedestrian have right of way? The police chief, apparently: unclear.

So now we have a corrupt police chief who is also, it turns out, incompetent. The bribe is gone. Martin still has no license. There is a



brief period, I imagine, where everyone looks at everyone else in a small room somewhere and there is a very specific kind of silence.

Martin paid for the next attempt himself. Returned the following week. Sat the exam. Passed it. Got the license.

He never did learn to drive properly, which at this point I consider almost a narrative obligation. The universe had invested too much in the joke to let it resolve into competence. But he had the paper. He had the laminated card with his photograph on it and the official stamp and all the weight of institutional legitimacy behind it, certifying that Martin was a driver, which he was, technically, already, and always had been.

He owns a factory now. Electrical things. Produces them, doesn't just distribute them anymore, he climbed the entire supply chain through the pure force of never waiting for permission. Big factory. Good career. He did it all himself, in the order he chose, on the schedule he invented, which is no schedule, which is all schedules, which is the schedule of someone who understands that the exam is the formality and the driving is what's real.

I watched him become this person and I thought: I raised him wrong and it worked perfectly.



The thing about pride is that it arrives wearing your own face, which is the most unsettling part and also, eventually, the point.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

WAX CONCEPT OF A SON

The doctor held Davis up by his legs and hit him on the bottom, and that is where I will start, because everything before that, all the breathing exercises, the encouraging whispers, the completely useless things I was told to do with my hands, was just the universe buying time before the main event. We were in the private hospital. I had insisted on the private hospital with the confidence of a man who had never been inside a delivery room and had very strong opinions about delivery rooms. Diana, who had been awake since four in the morning and was doing approximately all of the work, handed me a second cup of coffee without being asked, which was generous of her. I stood near her in a way that I believed was supportive and that was probably, in reality, about fifteen centimeters too close for seventeen hours and then suddenly two meters too far when anything actually happened. And then Davis arrived. He came out white. Not the ordinary pink-to-red of a healthy baby, not the colors you see in films where everyone cries immediately because the baby is so clearly alive and beautiful and the music swells. White. Still. Absolutely not moving, lying there like a small sculpture of a person, a wax concept of a son, and I want to tell you I was calm and steady and I want to tell you I thought rational things. I did not. I thought: this is the worst possible outcome of every decision I have ever made in my entire life, culminating, somehow, here, in this room, with this white and silent



child who was supposed to be my firstborn son Davis. The doctor, apparently, had seen this before. The doctor picked Davis up by the legs, both legs, upside down, the way you hold a rabbit you have caught in a field, and hit him on the bottom. Not apologetically. Not with professional hesitation. With intent. Davis turned red immediately. Not gradually. Red. And then he screamed. I have heard a lot of screaming in my life. I have caused, personally, a not-insignificant amount of screaming in my life. But this scream, this first, furious, upside-down scream of a tiny red person who had just been slapped into existence, I cannot explain it to you except to say that it rearranged something inside my chest that had been in the wrong place for thirty-something years. I cried. Not the polite, dignified, single-tear crying of a man who is moved but still fundamentally in control. I cried like a person who had not known until that exact second what they were actually waiting for, which, it turned out, was this: a small angry red boy, screaming at the absolute injustice of being alive, announcing himself to everyone in the room. Davis. Twenty-one years old now. Studies film direction in Tallinn. When I called him recently, I told him: the way you become a man is you carry the coffins of people you have loved, and you lose things, and you survive it. He listened. I think he was eating something. I am quite sure he was also on his phone. This is fine. He will understand eventually. The important thing is I said it. The strange thing about childbirth, and I have now participated in more of these than I initially planned, so I am something close to an expert, is that it is the exact opposite of death and it feels exactly the same in your body. Something enormous arrives. The world does not explain itself. You are just standing there, a person who was given seventeen too many opinions and not nearly enough preparation, and a doctor is holding your son upside down and hitting him, and you discover, for the first time or the fourth time, that you are capable of being broken open



completely and put back together slightly differently, all in about forty-five seconds. Maya came later, same hospital, same room possibly, same initial shock of it all, and I learned something different from her birth, something about women, about what they carry, about Diana standing in the eye of something I could only observe from the outside and never quite reach. I watched Diana during Maya's birth and I thought: I have spent a very long time believing I am the one in this relationship who understands how to survive things. I was mistaken about that. I am often mistaken about that. Davis already knew it before he could speak. He announced it on arrival, screaming, upside down, red as fury, into a room where his father was crying and had absolutely no idea what came next.



IN THE END



So there it is, the whole disorderly pile of it. I have read these pages back and I know what I was doing, even where I pretended not to. Every time I called something freedom, the roof ledge, the river, the no-budget film shot on a mountain, the move to Spain, the leaving, I was running the same errand I have been running since I was four, standing at my grandmother's window watching the road for a mother who came, when she came, in pieces. I dressed it up as art and courage. It was mostly a boy waiting, refusing to admit the waiting, and calling the refusal a life.

I would like to report that I paid the bill for all this myself, but that is not how it worked. Other people paid, the first marriage, the children hauled from country to country, the friends I frightened, a wife I tried to leave by telephone as though cowardice were a form of tact. I made disasters and handed out invitations. I do not intend to pretend, now, at the end, that I have grown wise about it. I am the same man. I have simply run out of places to hang upside down from.

And Diana. I met her in a bar and did not even know her name, and I tried to leave that night too, and could not, and I have not managed it since. She is the one argument I have never once won, and I have tried,



God knows, with all my rhetorical equipment. She stayed through every
escape I staged from a life that already contained her, which is the joke I
was too slow to get. I built worlds to feel connected to something. She
was sitting in the kitchen the whole time, making soup, being right.
That is not a moral. It is only the truth: she is the reason any of it held,
and I still can't beat her in a fight, and I have stop



BIOGRAPHY MACHINE

Not a perfect life. A perfect story.



*I made this book for those who know me,
for those who think they do,
and for those who will come later.*

*Not everything is here.
But what is here is mine.*