"I think I am in love. . . This is one of the most profound and absorbing books I've read in a long time. . . . I'll miss this book."
– Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

AUTHOR OF *WHAT I LOVED*

SIRI HUSTVEDT

THE SORROWS OF AN AMERICAN

A NOVEL

PICADOR

My sister called it "the year of secrets," but when I look back on it now, I've come to understand that it was a time not of what was there, but of what wasn't. A patient of mine once said, "There are ghosts walking around inside me, but they don't always talk. Sometimes they have nothing to say." Sarah squinted or kept her eyes closed most of the time because she was afraid the light would blind her. I think we all have ghosts inside us, and it's better when they speak than when they don't. After my father died, I couldn't talk to him in person anymore, but I didn't stop having conversations with him in my head. I didn't stop seeing him in my dreams or stop hearing his words. And yet it was what my father hadn't said that took over my life for a while—what he hadn't told us. It turned out that he wasn't the only person who had kept secrets. On January sixth, four days after his funeral, Inga and I came across the letter in his study.

We had stayed on in Minnesota with our mother to begin tackling the job of sifting through his papers. We knew that there was

a memoir he had written in the last years of his life, as well as a box containing the letters he had sent to his parents—many of them from his years as a soldier in the Pacific during World War II—but there were other things in that room we had never seen. My father's study had a particular smell, one slightly different from the rest of the house. I wondered if all the cigarettes he'd smoked and the coffee he'd drunk and the rings those endless cups had left on the desk over forty years had acted upon the atmosphere of that room to produce the unmistakable odor that hit me when I walked through the door. The house is sold now. A dental surgeon bought it and did extensive renovations, but I can still see my father's study with its wall of books, the filing cabinets, the long desk he had built himself, and the plastic organizer on it, which despite its transparency had small handwritten labels on every drawer—"Paper Clips," "Hearing Aid Batteries," "Keys to the Garage," "Erasers."

The day Inga and I began working, the weather outside was heavy. Through the large window, I looked at the thin layer of snow under an iron-colored sky. I could feel Inga standing behind me and hear her breathing. Our mother, Marit, was sleeping, and my niece, Sonia, had curled up somewhere in the house with a book. As I pulled open a file drawer, I had the abrupt thought that we were about to ransack a man's mind, dismantle an entire life, and without warning a picture of the cadaver I had dissected in medical school came to mind, its chest cavity gaping open as it lay on the table. One of my lab partners, Roger Abbot, had called the body Tweedledum, Dum Dum, or just Dum. "Erik, get a load of Dum's ventricle. Hypertrophy, man." For an instant I imagined my father's collapsed lung inside him, and then I remembered his hand squeezing mine hard before I left his small room in the nursing home the last time I saw him alive. All at once, I felt relieved he had been cremated.

Lars Davidsen's filing system was an elaborate code of letters,

numbers, and colors devised to allow for a descending hierarchy within a single category. Initial notes were subordinate to first drafts, first drafts to final drafts, and so on. It wasn't only his years of teaching and writing that were in those drawers, but every article he had written, every lecture he had given, the voluminous notes he had taken, and the letters he had received from colleagues and friends over the course of more than sixty years. My father had catalogued every tool that had ever hung in the garage, every receipt for the six used cars he had owned in his lifetime, every lawnmower, and every home appliance—the extensive documentation of a long and exceptionally frugal history. We discovered a list for itemized storage in the attic: children's skates, baby clothes, knitting materials. In a small box, I found a bunch of keys. Attached to them was a label on which my father had written in his small neat hand: "Unknown Keys."

We spent days in that room with large black garbage bags, dumping hundreds of Christmas cards, grade books, and innumerable inventories of things that no longer existed. My niece and mother mostly avoided the room. Wired to a Walkman, Sonia ambled through the house, read Wallace Stevens, and slept in the comatose slumber that comes so easily to adolescents. From time to time she would come in to us and pat her mother on the shoulder or wrap her long thin arms around Inga's shoulders to show silent support before she floated into another room. I had been worried about Sonia ever since her father died five years earlier. I remembered her standing in the hallway outside his hospital room, her face strangely impassive, her body stiffened against the wall, and her skin so white it made me think of bones. I know that Inga tried to hide her grief from Sonia, that when her daughter was at school my sister would turn on music, lie down on the floor, and wail, but I had never seen Sonia give in to sobs, and neither had her mother. Three years later, on the morning of September 11,

2001, Inga and Sonia had found themselves running north with hundreds of other people as they fled Stuyvesant High School, where Sonia was a student. They were just blocks from the burning towers, and it was only later that I discovered what Sonia had seen from her schoolroom window. From my house in Brooklyn that morning, I saw only smoke.

When she wasn't resting, our mother wandered from room to room, drifting around like a sleepwalker. Her determined but light step was no heavier than in the old days, but it had slowed. She would check on us, offer food, but she rarely crossed the threshold. The room must have reminded her of my father's last years. His worsening emphysema shrank his world in stages. Near the end, he could barely walk anymore and kept mostly to the twelve by sixteen feet of the study. Before he died, he had separated the most important papers, which were now stored in a neat row of boxes beside his desk. It was in one of these containers that Inga found the letters from women my father had known before my mother. Later, I read every word they had written to him—a trio of premarital loves—a Margaret, a June, and a Lenore, all of whom wrote fluent but tepid letters signed "Love" or "With love" or "Until next time."

Inga's hands shook when she found the bundles. It was a tremor I had been familiar with since childhood, not related to an illness but to what my sister called her wiring. She could never predict an onset. I had seen her lecture in public with quiet hands, and I had also seen her give talks when they trembled so violently she had to hide them behind her back. After withdrawing the three bunches of letters from the long-lost but once-desired Margaret, June, and Lenore, Inga pulled out a single sheet of paper, looked down at it with a puzzled expression, and without saying anything handed it to me.

The letter was dated June 27, 1937. Beneath the date, in a large childish hand, was written: "Dear Lars, I know you will never ever

say nothing about what happened. We swore it on the BIBLE. It can't matter now she's in heaven or to the ones here on earth. I believe in your promise. Lisa."

"He wanted us to find it," Inga said. "If not, he would have destroyed it. I showed you those journals with the pages torn out of them." She paused. "Have you ever heard of Lisa?"

"No," I said. "We could ask Mamma."

Inga answered me in Norwegian, as if the subject of our mother demanded that we use her first language. "*Nei, Jei vil ikke forstyrre henne med dette.*" (No, I won't bother her with this.) "I've always felt," she continued, "that there were things Pappa kept from Mamma and us, especially about his childhood. He was fifteen then. I think they'd already lost the forty acres of the farm, and unless I'm wrong, it was the year after Grandpa found out his brother David was dead." My sister looked down at the piece of pale brown paper. " 'It can't matter now she's in heaven or to the ones here on earth.' Somebody died." She swallowed loudly. "Poor Pappa, swearing on the Bible."

AFTER INGA, SONIA, and I had mailed eleven boxes of papers to New York City, most of them to my house in Brooklyn, and had returned to our respective lives, I was sitting in my study on a Sunday afternoon with my father's memoir, letters, and small leather diary on the desk in front of me, and I recalled something Auguste Comte once wrote about the brain. He called it "a device by which the dead act upon the living." The first time I held Dum's brain in my hands, I was surprised first by its weight, and then by what I had suppressed—an awareness of the once-living man, a stocky seventy-year-old who had died of heart disease. When the man was alive, I thought, it was all here—internal pictures and words, memories of the dead and the living.

Perhaps thirty seconds later, I looked through the window

and saw Miranda and Eglantine for the first time. They were crossing the street with the real estate agent, and I knew immediately that they were prospective tenants for the ground floor of my house. The two women who lived in the garden apartment were leaving for a larger place in New Jersey, and I needed to fill the vacancy. After my divorce, the house seemed to grow. Genie had taken up a lot of space, and Elmer, her spaniel; Rufus, her parrot; and Carlyle, her cat, had occupied territory as well. For a while there were fish. After Genie left me, I used the three floors for my books, thousands of volumes that I couldn't part with. My ex-wife had resentfully referred to our house as the Librarium. I had bought the brownstone as a so-called handyman special before my marriage when the market was low and have been working on it ever since. My passion for carpentry is a legacy of my father, who taught me how to build and repair just about anything. For years, I was holed up in one part of the house as I sporadically worked on the rest. The demands of my practice squeezed my leisure hours almost to nil, one of the factors that led to my joining that great legion of Western humanity known as "the divorced."

The young woman and the little girl paused on the sidewalk with Laney Buscovich from Homer Realtors. I couldn't see the woman's face, but I noticed that her posture was beautiful. Her hair was short and cut close to her head. Even from that distance, I liked her slender neck, and although she was wearing a long coat, the sight of the cloth over her breasts triggered a sudden image of her naked, and with it a wave of arousal. The sexual loneliness I had felt for some time, a feeling that had on occasion driven me to the voyeuristic pleasures of cable porn, intensified after my father's funeral, mounting inside me like a keening storm, and this postmortem blast of libido made me feel that I had returned to my life as a slobbering teenage onanist, the tall, skinny, practically hairless jerk-off king of Blooming Field Junior High School.

To interrupt the fantasy, I turned to look at the girl. She was a spindly little thing in a bulky purple coat who had clambered up onto the stoop wall and was balancing there with one thin leg out in front of her. Under the coat she was wearing what looked like a tutu, a pink concoction of tulle and net over heavy black tights that bagged at her knees. But what was most noticeable about the child was her hair, a pale brown mass of soft curls that enveloped her small head like a huge halo. The mother's skin was darker than the child's. If these two were mother and daughter, I decided, the girl's father could be white. I drew a breath as I watched her leap from the wall, but she landed easily on the ground with a little bounce in her knees. Like Tinkerbell, I thought.

looking back at our early life, the most astonishing feature must be how small our house was, my father wrote. *A kitchen, living room, and bedroom on the first floor came to 476 square feet. Two lofts on the second floor, which were used as bedrooms, provided the same amount of floor space. There were no amenities. Our plumbing consisted of an outdoor toilet and a hand-operated pump, each at its own location about 75 feet from the house. A teakettle provided hot water, as did a reservoir attached to the kitchen range. Unlike better-equipped farms we had no underground cistern to store rainwater, but we did have a large metal tank which caught rainwater during the summer. During the winter we melted snow. Kerosene lamps provided light. Although rural electrification began in the thirties, we did not "hook up" until 1949. There was no furnace. A wood-burning range warmed the kitchen and a heater cared for the living room. Except for storm windows, the house had no insulation. Only during the coldest spells was fire maintained in the heater overnight. The water in the teakettle was often frozen by morning. Father was up first. He built the fire so much of the edge was gone by the time we crawled out of bed. Even so there was shivering and huddling*

around the stoves as we got dressed. One winter in the early 1930s we ran out of wood. Not enough had been put up in the first place. If one must burn green wood, ash and maple will serve you best.

As I read, I kept waiting for a reference to Lisa, but she didn't appear. My father wrote about the refinements of piling "an honest cord of wood," plowing with Belle and Maud, the family horses, clearing the fields of dreaded weeds like Canadian thistle and quack grass, the farm arts of dragging, seeding, cross-dragging, corn planting and cutting, haying, collective shock threshing, silo filling, and gopher catching. As a boy, my father killed gophers for money, and from his later vantage point he understood the humor in this occupation. He started a paragraph with the sentence: *If you are not interested in pocket gophers or how to catch them, move on to the next paragraph.*

Every memoir is full of holes. It's obvious that there are stories that can't be told without pain to others or to oneself, that autobiography is fraught with questions of perspective, self-knowledge, repression, and outright delusion. I wasn't surprised to see that the mysterious Lisa, who had sworn my father to secrecy, was missing from his memoir. I knew there were many things I would leave out of my own story. Lars Davidsen had been a man of rigorous honesty and deep feeling, but Inga was right about his early life. Much had been hidden. Between *Not enough had been put up in the first place* and *ash and maple will serve you best* was a story untold.

It took me years to understand that although my grandparents had always been poor, the Depression had ruined them entirely. The sorry little house my father described is still standing, and the remaining twenty acres of what was once a farm are now rented to another farmer who owns hundreds upon hundreds more. My father never let the place go. As his illness progressed, he willingly decided to sell the house he had lived in with my mother and us, a lovely place built partially with wood from trees he had chopped

down himself, but the farmhouse of his childhood he gave to me, his son, the renegade doctor, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst who lives in New York City.

By the time I knew my grandfather, he was mostly silent. He sat in the small living room with the wood-burning stove in a stuffed chair. Beside the chair was a rickety table with an ashtray on it. When I was young, that object fascinated me because I found it shameful. It was a miniature black toilet with a gold seat, the only flush toilet my grandparents would ever have. The house always smelled strongly of mildew and in winter of burnt wood. We rarely went upstairs, but I don't believe we were ever told not to go there. The narrow steps led to three tiny rooms, one of which belonged to my grandfather. I don't remember when it was, but I couldn't have been more than eight. I sneaked up the stairs and walked into my grandfather's room. A pale light was shining through the small window, and I watched the dust specks dance in the air. I looked at the narrow bed, the tall stacks of yellowing newspapers, the torn wallpaper, a few dusty books on a beaten dresser, the tobacco pouches, the clothes piled in a corner, and felt a muted sense of awe. I think I had a dim idea of the man's solitary existence and of something lost—but I didn't know what. In this memory, I hear my mother behind me, telling me that I shouldn't be in the room. She seemed to know everything, my mother, seemed to sense what other people didn't. Her voice wasn't at all harsh, but it may be that her sanction made the experience memorable. I wondered if somewhere in that room was something I shouldn't have seen.

My grandfather was gentle with us, and I liked his hands, even the right one, which was missing three fingers, lost to a circle saw in 1921. He would reach out and pat me or lay his hand on my shoulder and hold it there before returning to his newspaper and spittoon, a coffee can that said "Folgers." His immigrant parents

had eight children: Anna, Brita, Solveig, Ingeborg, another Ingeborg, David, Ivar (my grandfather), and Olaf. Anna and Brita lived into adulthood, but they were dead before I was born. Solveig died of tuberculosis in 1907. The first Ingeborg died on August 19, 1884. She was sixteen months old. *Our father told me that this Ingeborg died shortly after birth and was so tiny that a cigar box was used as a coffin. Our father must have confused Ingeborg's death with some other local tale.* The second Ingeborg also came down with tuberculosis and spent time at the Mineral Springs Sanitarium, but she recovered. David fell ill with tuberculosis in 1925. He spent all of 1926 in the sanitarium. When he recovered, he disappeared. He wasn't found again until 1936, and by then he was dead. Olaf died of tuberculosis in 1914. Sibling ghosts.

My grandmother, also the daughter of Norwegian immigrants, had grown up with two healthy brothers and inherited money from her father. She was entirely different from her husband, a female spitfire, and I was a favorite of hers. Entering the house became a ritual. I would throw open the screen door, run through it, and bellow, "Grandma, my sword!" This was her cue to reach behind the kitchen cupboard and pull out a two-by-four onto which my uncle Fredrik had nailed a short crosspiece. She always laughed then, a loud cackle that sometimes made her cough. She was fat but strong, a woman who hauled heavy buckets of water and carried a bushel of apples in the folds of her skirt, who peeled potatoes with a fierce stroke of her paring knife, and overcooked every comestible that came her way. A woman of moods, she had her smiling, chatty, storytelling days and her days of gloom, when she muttered asides and squawked out dubious opinions about bankers and rich folks and sundry others who were guilty of crimes. On her worst days, she would say a terrible thing: "I never should have married Ivar." When his mother ranted, my father stiffened, my grandfather

remained quiet, my mother tried humor and negotiation, and Inga, sensitive to every emotional wind change, whose face registered pain at even the hint of a conflict, drooped. A raised voice, a retort, a sullen expression, an irritable word stuck her like needles. Her mouth tensed and her eyes filled with tears. How often I had wished in those days that she would toughen up just a little.

Despite the occasional outbursts from Grandma, we loved it there, the place my father called "out home," especially in summer, when the broad flat fields with growing corn ran to the horizon. A rusting tractor, overgrown by weeds, a permanently parked Model A, the old pump, and the stone foundation of what had once been a barn were all fixtures in our games. Except for the wind moving in the grass and trees, the sound of birds, and an occasional car passing on the road, there was little noise. I never gave a moment's thought to the fact that my sister and I were climbing, running, and inventing our stories of shipwrecked orphans in an arrested world, but at some point, the world of my grandparents, of those second-generation immigrants, had ground to a halt. I see now that the place is a scar formed over an old wound. It's odd that we're all compelled to repeat pain, but I've come to regard this as a truth. What used to be doesn't leave us. When my great-grandfather Olaf Davidsen, the youngest of six sons, left the tiny farm high on a mountain in Voss, Norway, in the spring of 1868, he already knew English and German, and he had his teaching credentials. He wrote poetry. My grandfather would finish the fifth grade.

The diary was one of those small five-year volumes with only a few lines allotted per day. My father kept it from 1937 to 1940, and there were some sporadic entries from 1942. Lars Davidsen's prose had undergone a revolution since 1937, and I puzzled over his peculiar use of the verb *to be* and his mutating prepositions.

There were several entries that simply stated, *Was to school.* It took me several minutes to realize that this odd construction was a loose translation of the Norwegian *Var på skolen*, literally "Was on school." His syntax and a number of the prepositions were English versions of the family's first language. I guessed that he had received the diary for Christmas and began writing in it on January first. He recorded visits from and to neighbors: *Masers were up for dinner. Neil was along, too. The Jacobsen boys were over in the afternoon. Was to Brekkes today. Was on a party at Bakkethuns.* Weather conditions: *There was a snowstorm today. The wind is blowing very hard. The weather was nice and melting. Today there was a hard snowstorm. From morning till now. There is a drift four feet high outside the house.* Winter illnesses: *Lotte and Fredrik were not in school, but Fredrik was up today. Was in bed all day because account of a cough.* Animal troubles: *Daddy and I was up to Clarence Brekke. He was having bad luck. 4 of his cattle was dead. Daddy was up at Clarence helping him skin the seventh cow. 4 heifers, 1 steer, 1 cow, and one calf have died for him inside a week. Jacobsen's horse, Tardy, died. Ember's dog was driven over.* On January 28, I found a mention of David. *Today is a year ago since dad was up in the cities to identify uncle David after hearing he was dead.* By spring there were several gopher entries: *I caught 6 gophers today. Caught four gophers. I caught 7 gophers in all at Otterness.* On June 1, my father wrote, *Today there was a row between Harry and Daddy.* June 3, I found the first mention of the world beyond that small rural community. *I plowed and dragged today. King Edward and Mrs. Wallis Simpson.* On the fifteenth of that same month, my father recorded an emotion. *I hoed potatoes all day. Pete Bramvold was here and wanted to hire me. I am so doggoned disgusted because I can't go.* On the day before Lisa sent the letter to my father, June twenty-sixth, I found this entry*: We plowed in the potatoes. Daddy was to town. Harry was put in jail.*

Who was Harry? When I spoke to Inga, she said she had no

idea. I agreed to write to Uncle Fredrik and ask him. Tante Lotte was beyond asking. She was in a nursing home with Alzheimer's.

THE FIRST THING Eglantine ever said to me was, "Look, Mommy, he's a giant." After opening the door for my new tenants, I was somewhat relieved that when I looked at Miranda a second time, I shook her hand without going to pieces. Her eyes were unusual. They were large, almond shaped, the color of a hazelnut, and tilted upward slightly, as if someone in the family had come from Asia, but her intense gaze was what held me during those initial seconds. She then lowered those remarkable eyes toward her daughter and said, "No, Eggy, he's not a giant. He's a tall man."

I looked down at the child and said, "Well, I come pretty close to being as tall as a giant, but I'm not like the ones in fairy tales." I bent over and smiled encouragingly, but the little girl didn't smile back. She looked at me without blinking and then narrowed her eyes as if she were weighing my comment with great seriousness. Her grave expression made me even more self-conscious about my height. I'm six feet five inches tall. Inga is six feet, and my father measured in at just a hair under six-three. My mother is the shrimp at five-nine. The Davidsen family and, on my mother's paternal side, the Nodeland family, tended toward the thin and towering. The genetic combination had been predictable, and Inga and I grew and grew and grew. We had endured the beanpole and how's-the-weather-up-there jokes throughout our lives, as well as the mistaken assumption that our jump shots were superb. Not a single seat in a movie theater, playhouse, airplane, or subway, no public toilet or sink, no sofa or chair in lobbies and waiting rooms, not one desk in the world's libraries has ever been built for the likes of me. For years, I have felt that I inhabit a

world a few sizes too small, except at home, where I raised the counters and built high cabinets that, as Goldilocks put it, are "just right."

As we sat at my kitchen table, I felt a strong reserve from Miranda Casaubon, a proud distance that I rather admired, but which made conversation difficult. She could have been anywhere between twenty-five and thirty-five, was conservatively dressed with the exception of her high boots that laced up the front and tightly followed the line of her calves. I knew from Laney that she had "a good job" as a book designer for a major publisher, could afford the rent, and had insisted on Park Slope so her daughter could attend P.S. 321, the local elementary school. There was no father in the picture. Miranda told me that she had grown up in Jamaica and left with her family when she was thirteen. Her accent had been blunted, but she retained some of the musicality of Caribbean English. Her parents and her three sisters were now all living in Brooklyn. Miranda kept her hands on the table as we spoke, one laid over the other. They were slender with long fingers, and I noticed that there was no tension in them or in the rest of her body for that matter. She was still, relaxed, and alert.

If not for Eggy, I wouldn't have discovered anything more. She had stayed silent after our greeting, and when we sat down she hugged her mother's arm, buried her face in her shoulder, and then began a game with the back of the chair. She held it with one hand and leaned outward until she could go no farther and then pulled herself back again. After this gymnastic routine, she abruptly skipped away and began to dance around the room with her arms out, pale brown curls flying. She hopped over to the bookshelves and began to sing, "Books, bookers, books, and more bookerees! Book-a-book, book-a-book. I can read today."

I turned to Miranda. "Can she read?"

Miranda smiled for the first time, and I saw her even white teeth, which protruded just slightly. The overbite sent a shudder through me and I looked away. "A little. She's in kindergarten and is learning."

Eggy leaned her head back, threw out her arms, and started to spin on the floor.

"You're getting wild," Miranda told her. "Calm down."

"I like to be wild!" She grinned at us, and her wide mouth seemed to take up the whole bottom of her small face, for a moment giving her an elfin expression.

"I mean it," Miranda said.

The little girl watched her mother, then spun again, but more slowly. After a short rebellious tap with her foot, she shook her curls and skipped over to me, eyeing her mother with a touch of resentment. She moved close to me and in a conspiratorial way said, "Do you want to hear something private?"

I looked at Miranda.

"Maybe Dr. Davidsen doesn't want to hear it," Miranda said.

"Erik," I said.

Miranda glanced at me but said nothing.

"I'm happy to hear it if it's all right with your mother," I said, striking a compromise.

Eggy regarded her mother fiercely. Miranda sighed and nodded, and then I felt the child's hand on my head as she pulled my ear toward her mouth. In a loud, excited whisper that felt like a blast of wind on my eardrum, she said, "My daddy was in a big box, and it got very sticky and wet in there, and so he dis"—she paused—"peared. 'Cause he's magic."

I wasn't sure whether Eggy believed these words were inaudible to her mother or not, but I saw Miranda grimace for a moment

and lower her eyelids. I turned to Eggy and said, "I won't tell anybody. I promise."

The young Eglantine gave me a flirtatious smile. "You have to swear and hope to die."

"I swear and hope to die," I said.

This seemed to delight her. She beamed at me, closed her eyes, and then inhaled loudly through her nose, as if we had just exchanged smells rather than words.

When I turned back to Miranda, I found her regarding me with a shrewd expression, as if she were penetrating my depths. I have a weakness for smart women, and I smiled at her. She smiled back, but then stood up, effectively ending the interview. The abrupt gesture provoked a sudden desire to learn her story, to find out all about this woman, her five-year-old, and the mysterious father the daughter had assigned to a box.

Before they walked out the door, I said, "Please let me know if you need anything or if there's anything I can do before you move in."

I watched them walk down the steps, turned around in the hallway, and heard myself say, "I'm so lonely." It shook me because this sentence had become an involuntary verbal tic. I seldom realized I was saying it or perhaps didn't know that I was speaking the words out loud. I had started to experience this unbidden mantra even while I was still married, mumbling it before sleep, in the bathroom, or even at the grocery store, but it had become more pronounced in the last year. My father had it with my mother's name. While he was sitting alone in a chair, before he dozed off, and later, in his room at the nursing home, he would utter *Marit* over and over. He did it sometimes when she was within hearing distance. If she answered the call, he seemed not to know that he had spoken. That is the strangeness of language: it crosses the boundaries of the body, is at once inside and outside,

and it sometimes happens that we don't notice the threshold has been crossed.

as widow and divorced man, Inga and I found the common ground that mutual loneliness offered us. After Genie left me, I realized that most of the dinners, parties, and events we had attended were connected to her rather than to me. My colleagues from Payne Whitney, where I worked at the time, and my fellow psychoanalysts had bored her. Inga lost friends, too, people who had been attracted to the shine of her famous husband and had accepted her as his charming second, but who then disappeared after Max was dead. Although there were many among them whom she hadn't much cared for to begin with, there were others whose precipitous absence deeply pained her. She did not, however, pursue a single one of them.

Inga met Max when she was a graduate student in philosophy at Columbia. He gave a reading at the university, and my sister was sitting in the front row. Inga was a twenty-five-year-old blond beauty, brilliant, fierce, and aware of her seductive power. She held Max Blaustein's fifth novel in her lap and listened intently to every word of his reading. When he was finished, she asked him a long complicated question about his narrative structures, which he did his best to answer, and then, when she laid her book on the table to have it signed, he wrote on the title page, "I surrender. Don't leave." In 1981, Max was forty-seven years old and had been married twice. He not only had a reputation as a major writer but was also known as a profligate seducer of young women, a carousing wild man who drank too much, smoked too much, and was, all in all, too much, and Inga knew it. She didn't leave. She stayed. She stayed until he died of stomach cancer in 1998 when he was sixty-four.

Only a month after she defended her dissertation on

Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*; Inga was pregnant. Although Max had no children from his earlier marriages and had declared himself a "nonparent," he became an almost comically enthusiastic father. He bounced Sonia and sang to her in his rasping, altogether tuneless voice. He recorded her early utterances, photographed and filmed her at every stage of her growth, taught her to play baseball, faithfully attended her school conferences, recitals, and plays, and bragged shamelessly about her poems as the verbal gems of his "wonder girl." Still, Inga did most of the everyday work, the feeding and comforting and dressing, and a good share of the nighttime reading. Between mother and daughter, I saw a tie that reminded me of the connection between Inga and our mother, an unarticulated corporeal closeness that I call an overlap. I have seen many versions of the parent-child story in my patients, people suffering from the intricacies of a narrative they are unable to recount. Max's death wrenched Inga and Sonia off course. My niece was twelve, a precarious age, an age of inner and outer revolutions, and she retreated for a while into compulsive orderliness. While my sister sank, shuffled, and wept, Sonia cleaned and straightened and studied far into the night. Like my father's labels and files, Sonia's perfectly folded sweaters organized by color, her radiant report cards, and sometimes brittle response to her mother's grief were pillars in an architecture of need, structures built to fend off the ugly truths of chaos, death, and decay.

Max was emaciated at the end. As he lay in the hospital bed, no longer conscious, his head looked like a skull with a thin covering of gray, and his arm, inert over the sheet, reminded me of a twig. By then, the morphine had carried him off into a twilight reserved for the dying. After the agonies that had gone before, I felt resigned. I'm still haunted by the image of Inga lifting the IV and crawling in beside him. She pressed her body against him and rested her head on his shoulder. "Oh, my darling, my darling, my own darling," she

repeated. I had to turn away and walk into the hallway, where my tears fell more freely than they had in a long time.

It was only after Max's death that I truly became Uncle Erik, the all-purpose fix-it man, science paper advisor, speedy pot washer, and general consultant to Inga and Sonia on matters grave and small. I had failed as a husband, but I succeeded as an uncle. Inga needed to talk about Max—to tell me about the ferocious daily stints of writing that left him limp and depleted, his nightly communing with a whiskey bottle, Camel cigarettes, and old movies on TV, his irascible moods that were followed by regrets and declarations of love. She needed to talk about the cancer, too. Again and again, she told me about the morning when he vomited and vomited, and then, white and shaking, how he had called out to her. "The toilet was full of blood. The seat was splattered red and the bowl was full of it, blood and more blood. He knew he was dying, Erik. I hoped, and I kept hoping. But later he said to me that when he saw what was coming out of him, he knew it, and he thought to himself, 'I've done a lot of work. I can go now.' "

I had always sensed that theirs had been a passionate marriage, but not an easy one. The two had been mutually dependent, a couple locked in a long love story that never became stagnant but churned and boiled until it was finally cut short. "There were two Maxes," Inga likes to say, "My Max and the one out there—the literary commodity: Mr. Genius." Writers come in every form, but Max Blaustein represented some idealized cultural notion of the dashing novelist. He was handsome, but not in an ordinary way. He had gaunt, delicate features, a full head of hair that had turned to an even white early, and signature wire-rimmed spectacles that Inga thought made him look like a Russian nihilist. The Max Blaustein *out there*, the author of fifteen novels, four screenplays, and a book of essays had inspired devotion and fanaticism in his readers and, from time to time, all-out hysteria. At a reading in

London in 1995, the author was nearly trampled to death by a hopped-up crowd that surged forward to get close to the idol. The memorial service had brought out hundreds of weeping fans, people who despite their demonstrated sorrow, pushed and shoved one another as they pressed into the hall. "He inspired adoration," Inga said, "that sometimes bordered on sickness. He always seemed bewildered by it, but I think his stories scraped on some darkness in people. I'm not sure anybody could or can explain it, Max least of all, but sometimes it frightened me—what was *in* him." I remembered these words because when Inga spoke to me, her voice broke, and I felt there was more behind them. Later, I wished I had asked her what she had meant, but at the time something had blocked me. I know that what I choose to call reserve or deference may be a form of fear—an unwillingness to listen to what comes next.

IN ORDER TO pay off the interest on his mortgaged land, my grandfather sawed lumber for a man named Rune Carlsen: *He received one dollar for each 1,000 board feet that was sawed. When they moved to a new site, there was much heavy work but no pay. The same was true if the machine broke down, and there was much of this. The rig was old. Our father worked the fields from four to six in the morning and from 7:00 p.m. until dark in the evening. The American shibboleth that hard work guaranteed success became in this case a crass lie. After some years of this, just when things began to improve, came foreclosure.*

The lost forty acres hurt my father for the rest of his life. It wasn't that he pined for the missing land but that the effort to keep it had broken something in his father. He never said this, but I've come to believe that is what happened. *A depression*, he wrote, *entails more than economic hardship, more than making do with less. That may be the least of it. People with pride find themselves beset by misfortunes they did not create; yet because of this pride, they still feel a pervasive*

sense of failure. Bill collectors earn their living by demeaning and humiliating people with pride. It is their ultimate weapon. People of character become powerless. If you have no power, all talk of justice is just so much wind. The consoling argument that everyone was in the "same boat" had only partial validity. Farmers who entered the depression free of debt may, in fact, have increased their assets by buying up cheap land and farm machinery at dumping prices. During these years farmers went up or down. We went down. Those bill collectors had faces. Perhaps there was one man in particular who took pleasure in shaming Ivar Davidsen in front of his oldest son. Perhaps Lars had watched the man badger his father repeatedly for money he didn't have, and perhaps Lars waited for his father to clench his fists and throw a left to the bastard's jaw, followed by a swift right to the gut. Those blows were never delivered, not then, not ever.

UNCLE FREDRIK'S LETTER arrived less than a week after I had written to him. His mother had mentioned Lisa, he wrote. She wasn't from one of the neighboring farms but had traveled from Blue Wing to help out at the Brekkes when their son came down with appendicitis and was then laid up for a while. The girl had disappeared, and his mother had worried that something had happened to her. Then he retold the story of the lost land.

> Before the Depression, my grandfather Olaf made a loan from Rune Carlsen and secured the loan with forty acres of land. During the Depression Rune foreclosed, and Dad, who had purchased the land from his father, lost the land to Rune. Dad suffered emotionally from this loss and often had nightmares during this period. When it happened, Mother would ask either Lottie or me to wake him up.
>
> Rune was sawing wood on the forty acres and hired Dad. This was humiliating for him. Harry Dahl also worked for

> Rune. One day, the sawmill broke, and Harry was sent to Cannon Falls to buy parts. He returned late and intoxicated to face a hostile crew at the rig. I remember Dad talking to Mother about it. He had been angry and told Harry to go jump in a lake. I don't remember Harry's time in jail. But there was a great deal of talk about Chester Haugen's drunk driving charge and arrest in Blue Wing. Had he only been more cordial to the police, he would not have received thirty days in jail. He was missed by all of us during his sentence, and when he was released, we gave him a festal reception that included small gifts.
>
> With love, from Fredrik

As I folded the neatly written letter and returned it to its envelope, I imagined the eight-year-old Fredrik standing in the tiny room with its narrow single bed. I saw him lean over his father to shake him from the dreams that made him cry out in the night.

IN THE EVENINGS, after I returned from the office and had eaten my dinner, I would go over my patient notes for the day. This had been my routine since my divorce, when the hours I spent at home grew longer, and I knew I had to fill them. As I surveyed the words I had recorded during a session, insights would sometimes come to mind unbidden, and I would make further comments or write down questions to bring to a colleague whom I might need to consult. After my father died, I began to fill another notebook, jotting down fragments of conversations that had taken place during the day, my fears about what looked like an imminent invasion of Iraq, dreams I could remember, as well as unexpected associations that arrived from the recesses of my brain. I know that my father's absence had prompted this need to document myself, but as my pen moved over the pages, I understood something else: I wanted to answer the words he had written with my own. I was

talking to a dead man. During those hours at the dining room table, I would often hear Eggy's high shrill voice and Miranda's much softer one, although I could rarely make out what they were saying. I smelled their dinners, heard their telephone ring, their music play and, from time to time, squeaky cartoon voices from their television. Those solitary winter evenings seemed to spawn fantasies. I recorded some of them. Others never found their way into the black-and-white journal I reserved for my private thoughts, but at some point Miranda began to appear as a character in this disjointed record of my life. She kept hours different from mine, and I rarely saw her. When I did, she was polite, reticent, and well-spoken, nothing more, but I began to dream that I would someday crack her coolness. Her distant eyes, her imperfect teeth, her body hidden under layers of warm clothing had become part of a life I wished for.

One night, I returned rather late after a meal with a colleague, and as I approached the house, I noticed that a shutter on the middle window of the garden apartment had swung open. A light was on, and I saw Miranda seated behind a table in the front room. She was wearing a bathrobe that had fallen open at the neck, and I saw the curve of her breasts as she leaned over a large piece of paper, her hand moving as she drew. Beside her were scissors, pens, inkpots, and chalk. At first I thought she was working on a book design, but when I glanced down, I saw a large female figure with a gaping mouth and sharp teeth like a wolf's. There were other figures, too, smaller ones, but I couldn't identify them. Afraid she would catch me spying, I walked on, but that momentary view of the bestial woman remained with me. That evening, I recalled the first time I saw *Los Caprichos* and how the pictures had made me queasy as I shuttled between fascination and repulsion. The single glimpse of Miranda's picture made me think of Goya and of monsters in general. What's frightening is not their strangeness, but

their familiarity. We recognize the forms, both human and animal, that have been twisted, contorted, elongated, or mingled together until we can't say they're one thing or the other. Monsters burst the categories. I went to sleep thinking of Mr. T., my old patient, who had been occupied by the jangling voices of the famous and infamous dead, male and female, and of poor Daniel Paul Schreber, whom Freud wrote about after reading the man's memoir. Tortured by supernatural rays that were tied to celestial bodies, Schreber suffered from "bellowing miracles" and "nerves of voluptuousness" that were filling him from head to toe and slowly turning him into a woman.

WHEN SHE WAS little, my sister had spells. Her eyes would become unfocused and then, for an instant, she would lose herself. Only once did it last long enough to frighten me. We were playing in the woods behind our house. I was the pirate who had captured her and tied her with imaginary ropes to a tree while she begged for her life. Just as I was relenting and about to invite her to become a girl pirate, she opened her mouth to speak and stopped abruptly. I saw her eyelids flutter strangely as a thin line of saliva trickled from her bottom lip. The sunlight caught the string of spit, and it gleamed like silver as I looked at her. I remember that there was some motion in the leaves above us and that I could hear the noise of the water from the creek, but otherwise everything seemed to have stopped with Inga. I don't know how long it went on, only seconds, but those seven or eight beats of waiting and watching terrified me. I imagined the game had somehow hurt her, that my villain fantasy had paralyzed my sister. After an unendurable pause, I howled her name and threw myself into her arms. All at once, she was comforting me. "Erik, are you all right? Are you hurt?"