

Frances calls one day in late April and asks if she can come by next week. That's how she puts it – *come by* – as though it's a question of stopping in for an afternoon coffee, as though they don't live on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Her voice over the phone is breathless and he can almost picture her: red cheeks, hair tousled by the wind, probably dressed in a jean jacket that's too light for the season. She explains that she's found cheap tickets to New York and emphasizes that it's a direct trip, as though he should congratulate her on the find. It's been a long time since they last saw each other. He tells her that of course he'd love to see her, and asks if she wants to stay at his place, but she says she's made arrangements with some friends already. Then there's silence, and he understands she didn't call just to schedule a coffee.

'There's something I'd like to talk to you about,' she says.

'Sure, what do you want to talk about?' he says.

'Mom.'

'Frances,' he says, but stops short of finishing the sentence; he assumes she'll understand what he's getting at by the way he says her name.

'I know, I know,' she says. 'That's why I didn't want to have this conversation over the phone.'

He can tell from her tone that she's holding her hand a small distance from her body, palm facing up, like she's waiting for him to

hand her something. This gesture – he’s always wondered if it’s something she picked up as a child at private school in France. It seems too flamboyant to be associated with the dispassionate Stockholm temperament.

‘Is she on her deathbed?’ he asks, sarcastic.

‘No.’

‘Sick?’

‘No—’

‘Okay then,’ he says. ‘I’d love for you to come by when you’re here, but I don’t want to talk about Thora.’

‘I’m worried about her.’

‘She probably wouldn’t want you to talk to me about her either.’

‘How can you be so sure of that?’

He shakes his head even though Frances can’t see it. His laptop is open on the desk but the screen has gone to sleep, and when he brings his finger to the touchpad a blank document appears. He looks at it for a few seconds and then shuts the computer.

‘You know her,’ Frances says.

‘I *knew* her.’

He hears Frances breathe, the sounds of traffic in the background. He tries to imagine her somewhere in central Stockholm, but he’s no longer sure if the places he pictures actually exist or if they’re just an amalgam of memories invoking a city suffused by a strange blue light, like on an old postcard.

‘That’s not why you’re coming, is it?’ he asks.

‘No,’ she replies.

‘Are you mad at me now?’

‘I’m not crossing the Atlantic just to discuss my mom with you.’

‘Okay. Good.’

‘Do you still want to see me?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You never know.’

He doesn't like the way she says it, but he doesn't protest.
'Get in touch when you arrive,' he says before they hang up.

It's been several years since the first time Frances rang his doorbell. Since he opened the door and Frances said:

'Hi.'

And then:

'I think you knew my dad.'

He didn't ask who her dad was. He didn't need to. He let her in.

Frances was an exchange student that year. She'd initially been staying with one of Thora's cousins, before moving into a dorm on the Upper West Side. She told him she didn't know anyone in New York. She was lonely.

He soon got accustomed to having Frances in his life. In the afternoons she'd hop on the subway downtown and camp out in his living room or kitchen, studying until the evening. She said it was easier to focus at his place than at the dorm. He gave her keys to his apartment. It was nice to come home from work and find her on the couch or at the kitchen table, surrounded by textbooks, notebooks and highlighters. In the evenings he'd get her a cab home. He'd take her out for dinner on Sundays, and on those occasions she'd eat as though she hadn't had a proper meal all week. She'd ask questions about her father which he tried his best to answer, but at that point he hadn't talked about August in many years and his answers probably weren't as exhaustive as Frances was hoping they'd be. He didn't have the nerve to ask about Thora. From throwaway comments, he was able to glean that she was married to a Frenchman with whom she had two sons. She still lived in Stockholm.

He introduced Frances to his friends and invited her whenever he hosted dinner parties. In response to their questions about her, he responded, truthfully, that she was the daughter of old college friends of his, but he didn't elaborate and they seemed content to leave it at that. His friends were all from elsewhere, many of them

from other countries, and they weren't in the habit of prying into each other's past lives. During this time he lived in a small apartment with a dining table so rickety it made every meal a balancing act, but his friends liked to get together at his place since it was conveniently situated between everyone's subway lines. Towards the end of the evening they'd crowd onto the fire escape and smoke weed while they spun loose dreams of moving somewhere else, where the buildings were less like cardboard houses threatening to collapse. He prohibited them from offering Frances weed or cigarettes. She liked to sit at the short end of his long table and listen to his friends gossip about their colleagues and bosses. Sometimes he looked at her across the table and was overwhelmed by a sucking feeling; it was like turning a kaleidoscope of memories until the patterns clicked, a tunnel through time to a place he thought he'd never see again.

When Frances's academic year ended, he helped her move out of the dorm. He drove her to the airport, trunk full of suitcases, and she went back home to Europe. He thought then that everything would go back to normal, and in some ways it did, even though she left the apartment in a new kind of silence.

Nowadays she works as a journalist. They rarely see each other but she calls him regularly to tell him about articles she's about to write, articles she wants to write and articles she can't get anyone to publish. When she writes something in Swedish she likes to read him sections before asking: Is that correct? Is that how you say it in Swedish? It makes him smile – this trilingual kid who moves between languages with casual swiftness, like she's trying on various garments and doesn't notice that her sweater is inside out before she's already out the door. He tends to respond that he's not the right person to ask, that she's one of the few people with whom he still speaks Swedish. If she keeps insisting, he'll silently try the sentence for any irregularities, though he can no longer instinctively sense details like erroneous prepositions or dangling modifiers. Answering Frances's

questions feels like trying to get his mobility back in a hand that's fallen asleep. He never lets on how uncomfortable it makes him.

Once, on his way to work, he saw Thora. Or at least he thought it was her standing on the opposite subway platform: red coat, loose hair, eyes on her phone and one hand resting on a shoulder bag. Fat rats were scurrying across the tracks, and out of the corner of his eye he could see their small grey bodies scampering about as he tried to get a better look between the beams that separated the platforms. Was it her? He broke into a cold sweat and his heart hammered in his chest while the rest of his body tensed up. He'd forgotten this feeling – or rather, how powerful a feeling could be.

It wasn't her.

It *was* her.

He waited for her to look up; all he needed was a glimpse of her face to know for sure. Then the train came shrieking into the station – and by the time it left, the woman in the red coat was gone. Over the days that followed he kept looking for her in the rush-hour crowds, raising his gaze over the masses of heads in search of a scrap of something red, something to make his heart lurch. But he didn't see her again.

Now and then he'll walk past someone on the street and catch a snippet of a conversation held in Swedish. For a few seconds he has time to wonder what language they're speaking before realizing that it's *his* language. Sometimes he'll sit at a bar or in a restaurant next to people speaking to each other in Swedish, and eavesdrop with an unassuming look. Nobody ever imagines he's anything but American, and in any case, he's never lived up to the cliché of a Scandinavian, he thinks. It happens that Americans, upon learning where he's from, scrunch up their noses as though some distinctly Nordic quality might appear if they squint. Whenever this occurs he adds that his paternal grandmother was American, and for some reason that information

tends to produce an *Ah!*, as if the US heritage explains some kind of lack in him.

Frances texts him when she arrives in New York, and they decide to meet up that weekend. It's the end of the spring semester and classes are over, but students sometimes email or show up outside his office with questions about finals and grading. On Friday night there's the traditional end-of-term celebration where the department and the students gather in a red-brick building near Washington Square Park. Officially there's only tea and coffee on the menu, but almost everyone shows up at the start of the evening already high or tipsy. He's sitting on the stairs by the entrance, surrounded by friends and colleagues. Someone touches his arm; it's not clear who, and he doesn't care. He has the sense that if he put his hands out, his palms would touch some invisible material that separates him from other people.

In the dead of night he is startled from sleep by a muscle pain that keeps him up for several hours. It's a familiar agony that always follows the same trajectory: starting as a shooting sensation in the right shoulder, then intensifying as it spreads to the left shoulder, radiates up through his neck and jaw, burrows deeper. Finally he gets out of bed and walks into the kitchen, where he lies down on the floor and stares at the ceiling while water comes to a boil so he can make himself a cup of tea. Then he abandons the tea, pours himself a glass of whisky and takes a shower instead. With the stream of hot water directed at the centre of the pain in his right shoulder, he opens his mouth in a silent moan. Afterwards he lies down on his bed, naked and still wet, and he doesn't know if he ultimately faints or just falls asleep from sheer exhaustion. When he wakes up in the morning all is back to normal again, his body a battlefield that's already been cleaned up.

There was a night when Thora mumbled a few lines from a Frederick Seidel poem in his ear. She'd complained about not being able to

sleep and he'd told her to recite something, anything. He didn't think she'd take him up on the challenge, and she lay silent for a long moment, so long that he thought she'd finally drifted off. But then she rolled over to face him, and the words came, warm and humid against his skin . . . He'd heard her repeat these lines several times before, like a song she hadn't been able to get out of her head ever since she bought the poetry collection in a Paris bookstore: *I read my way across / The awe I wrote / That you are reading now. / I can't believe that you are there / Except you are.*

How strange that English could sound so beautiful. In the mouth of an upper-class girl from Stockholm.

Frances rings his doorbell on Sunday morning. It's warm outside and her face is shiny with sweat as she enters the air-conditioned apartment.

'It gets so hot here,' she says while taking off her shoes. 'Do you really stay in town over summer?'

'Not if I can help it.'

'My friends say it's awful here in the warm months.'

'It *is* awful.'

They look at each other. She's taller than her mother and doesn't need to get on her tiptoes to hug him. They move into the kitchen which connects to the living room, making an L-shape around the long, narrow hall. Frances tells him there was a leak in the roof of the subway station in Greenpoint. He gives her a glass of water with ice. While he starts up the coffee maker, she steps into the living room and asks if he lives here alone.

'Most of the time,' he replies.

'Isn't it too big?'

'Probably. I rent it from the university.'

'You must be paid really well to be able to live like this,' Frances says when she comes back into the kitchen.

'Do you need money?'

‘What? No.’

‘I thought recent graduates were always short of cash.’

‘I don’t need your money.’ Frances sits down at the kitchen table, folds her hands and rests them on the table. ‘I know you think I’m spoiled.’

‘You’re fine,’ he says, and adds with a smile: ‘Things could have gone really badly with you.’

When he thinks of Thora and Frances, he pictures them moving above a fine mesh safety net that cushions each fall. It’s always maddened him, but he still wants them to remain safely buoyed by the freedom only money can buy.

Frances tells him about her flight – long and uncomfortable; about the apartment in Greenpoint where her friends live – run-down but pleasant; about how her younger brothers are doing – one of them in Paris, in school and in love, the other in Stockholm, where he works as a stage actor. She doesn’t bring up her mother and he keeps expecting her to do it, thinking, annoyed, that they might as well get it over with. He’s convinced she will at some point start talking about Thora, as if his previous refusal were invalid since it was communicated over the phone, and maybe she can convince him now that they’re speaking face-to-face. He *knows* this is how she reasons. But Frances doesn’t mention her mother. Instead she talks about her move to Copenhagen, what it’s like compared to Stockholm; she lists, with deliberation, the Danish words she’s learned, as if lining up a collection of small treasures found on an excursion.

Then she looks at him over the rim of her coffee cup with a serious expression, and asks: ‘Are you never coming back to Stockholm again?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But it’s your home.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘So you’re going to stay here?’

He smiles at her concerned face. He could tell her he's never loved Stockholm the way Thora and August did, but he knows that Frances, like them, is deeply attached to her native city. She is likely to take his ambivalent relationship to Stockholm as an insult, so he just shrugs in response, as though it's not a topic that interests him.

'You've fallen for the Big Apple,' she says. 'I thought you were above such clichés.'

'No, you are the one who's above them,' he says. 'Did you tell Thora that you were going to see me here?'

'Yes.'

'Does she ever talk about me?'

'Not really.'

'But?'

'There's no *but* – she doesn't . . .'

He stops himself from asking if Thora still thinks about him. How would Frances know.

The last time he ever saw Thora in Stockholm was at a café near Vasaparken; the trees in the park had just bloomed. He's replayed their conversation in his head so many times that it's like he has the scene folded up in his pocket, available to revisit whenever, though he never knows what he's looking for.

They were sitting across from each other at a small, unsteady table; he was drinking a coffee and she was eating a salad. Later, he thought about how this was probably a strategic choice on her part; it allowed her to focus on the food as she painstakingly cut the lettuce and vegetables into small pieces, chewed slowly, wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin. The few times she did look up, her gaze slipped over his face as it had done so many times before, as though there was nothing there to hold her attention. And yet he'd been there, trying in vain to catch it. He observed her eyelashes lowered against freckled skin, her earlobes adorned with a pair of small gold earrings, her perfectly straight middle parting. He rested his palms on

the table. Everything around them seemed to be falling, collapsing. Like the landscape frames of a train window, the café seemed to flicker past him, but vertically, from ceiling to floor.

‘Tell me what you want me to say,’ he said finally.

‘I can’t. That’s not how it works.’

In English, he reinvented himself. He dismantled the self that had been manhandled by forces outside of his control, and built a new one which the impersonal English language couldn’t penetrate. His experience of the world is less immediate in English. There’s no direct link between feelings and the words that label them. It’s all detour.

During Frances’s year in New York he hadn’t yet started working at the university. He was still employed by the large international organization, and spent his workdays in a grey cubicle in an office whose low ceilings were only partially compensated for by the skyscraper vista. He told Frances about the hours-long negotiations over singular words, the budget discussions and austerity, but she never listened, or maybe she just wasn’t interested. She wasn’t receptive to accounts of reality that portrayed adulthood as a matter of repetition and routine, shaped by an odd mix of stress and boredom instead of excitement and adventure. He suspected she never missed a chance to inform her roommates that she knew someone who worked at the headquarters. He explained to her that he couldn’t get her an internship, and repeated the same thing when she asked if he could at least invite her for a tour.

‘Everyone is welcome,’ he said. ‘You just need to reserve a time.’

‘It’s different when you know someone,’ she said and gave him a knowing look.

He felt she was too young for such crass awareness of the differences in access. Then he remembered the members’ clubs where Frances’s maternal grandfather would take her on his visits to New

York, her manner of talking about European cities as if the world was one verdant neighbourhood. So he didn't protest. She was right; it *was* different.

One morning he joined Frances in the line, along with the various groups of tourists and schoolchildren that waited each day by the tall fence and the flagpoles. He showed the guards his ID and access card and then he waited for Frances to pass through security. In his recollection it was a sunny fall day; bad timing for pulling the plug on Frances's optimism. She beamed at him as they walked through the revolving doors, her hands around the straps of her backpack like she was a taller version of the kids in school uniform. He showed her the conference rooms, his favourites among the paintings and sculptures in the collection, the small café on the windowless ground floor where diplomats held hushed conversations, the ostentatious reception rooms decorated by wealthy oil nations, and the terrace bar on the second floor where pass-holders gathered on Friday nights to drink wine. Frances was no stranger to this world, and she didn't move like someone expecting to be ejected at each turn. He realized, when he watched her joke with the elevator operators and play hopscotch on the chequered floor in an empty corridor, that Frances belonged to Thora's world, not August's, even if her scruffy shoes, backpack and jeans gave a different impression. She looked like August but talked and moved like Thora. It was confusing.

They go for a walk. Everyone on the street moves slowly, as if the heat has transformed the air into an object they have to push out of the way in order to advance. The humidity bears down on the skin, creating a shiny layer that brings to mind the transparent plastic sheets that cover the screens of new electronics. He rubs his hand over his arm like he wants to find the tab that will let him peel it off. People in their weekend best stream out of the churches that line the avenues, blinking, as if newly woken, when they step into the strong

sunlight that batters the city. The tables outside the restaurants abut cars and buses.

Frances asks if he'd like to go to a museum. He has grading to do but he already knows he won't be able to focus, so he says yes. They take the subway from Union Square and walk a few blocks to the museum. The stairs to the entrance are crowded with posing tourists. He's rolled up his shirtsleeves and hung his blazer over his arm. Once inside, Frances picks up a map and studies it carefully while they wait in line to pay the admission fee. The woman at the register asks if they want to buy tickets to the memorial exhibit about the pandemic. She smiles and gestures towards boxes of face masks on the counter. 'It's immersive. You have to put one of these on.'

She looks about the same age as Frances; probably too young to remember it herself. He declines, returning her smile.

As they walk up the stairs, Frances holds the map in front of her, looking like she's guiding them through a foreign city.

She takes them straight to the American wing. They pass through several hallways and rooms until she comes to a halt in front of a few portraits by Sargent. He watches her stand there in silence with her arms crossed, hands cupped around her elbows, as if the portraits are engaged in a conversation she's not sure she's welcome to join.

'Mom says Dad loved these paintings,' she says. 'Look.'

And he looks, but he doesn't say anything. He can sense the spring warmth outside, a snarling animal banging its head against the building.

Frances glances at him. 'Do you like them?'

He recognizes the portrait of the pale woman in a black dress. August had a poster of it hanging in his student apartment. A drop of sweat trickles down his neck. He wishes he could get rid of the blazer – why did he bring it?

'A bit too traditional,' he says.

'*Traditional?*'

He gives her a smile and moves on to the next room. When he

turns and looks at her through the doorway, she's back to examining the portraits.

After the museum they go for a walk in the park. The greenery is effervescent and the skyscrapers rise up behind the trees like an artificial mountain range, glass summits reflecting the sunlight. In the round pond close to Fifth Avenue, children play with model sailing boats.

They walk in silence for a while, until Frances asks: 'Would you say you're happy?'

'Frances. Come on.'

'What?'

He shakes his head. 'It's not a question you just ask like that.'

'Why not?'

'Are *you* happy?'

Frances lifts her hand to block the sun and looks at him. 'Sometimes I am.'

When he got his first office job, he got dressed each morning with a certain ironic remove. It was a game that everyone had to play to make a living. To be an adult is to sell out, but as long as there's someone to recognize the irony you bring to this game it's easier to maintain a sense of self-respect. These days there's nobody in his life who would understand that irony, and he suspects that he's transmitting his signal on a wavelength only he can hear. He knows that the outside observer will think of him as at one with his blazer and button-down shirt; there's no crack for the irony to push through and unhitch the image of an indifferent, middle-aged man. When the students look at him, what do they see? A hypocrite? Thora and August would have laughed about it.

He didn't like New York at first. Not that he disliked it either, but he'd never understood the people who came back to Europe looking like they'd been born again. It was just a city. Tall buildings and

wide streets and a decrepit subway system. Then he started taking long walks in the evenings. It was pleasant to meander aimlessly, winding his way in and out of neighbourhoods until he at some point realized that he had no idea where he was. He'd have dinner at a small restaurant he knew he wouldn't return to since he had no memory of how he'd got there. He didn't consult a map; at the end of the night he'd simply hail a cab. Reading the street names, he knew it would take hours to walk back home. Feet sore, he'd sink into the back seat of the taxi while commercials played on the TV screen mounted on the seat in front of him. He would lean his head against the window, looking out at people and shops; restaurants and cafés and construction sites; parks and bus stops. In these moments he would experience a rare sense of peace, a kind of exhaustion and repletion of impressions that made him feel dissolved, as if the boundaries between him and the city had temporarily softened. He was nobody and everyone at once. On such nights he always slept well.

They walk to a café on Amsterdam Avenue, close to the park. He gets in line for coffee and something sweet while Frances rushes to get the one free table in the back. She waves at him once he's paid.

'I used to come here all the time when I was a student,' she says.

'I know,' he says, and reminds her that she would bring pastries in a small box when she came over to study for exams; flaky Danishes that fell apart at the slightest touch and scattered buttery crumbs all over the floor, where they would lodge between the planks and attract mice at night.

The coffee is so hot it burns his mouth. He drinks it slowly, while Frances eats in silence. As soon as her plate is empty she moves it aside, clasps her hands on the table and looks seriously at him, as though this entire day has consisted of things they just had to get out of the way.

'I'm worried about Mom,' she says.

‘Yeah?’

‘She’s started getting rid of things. She’s planning to sell the big apartment in Lärkstaden.’

‘Where is she moving to?’

‘I don’t know. She won’t tell me anything about her plans. I happened to come across the sales listing, otherwise I wouldn’t even have known that she’s selling. Mom *loves* that apartment.’

‘Maybe she thinks it’s too big.’

‘But isn’t it weird? That she’s suddenly decided to sell her childhood home?’

‘I don’t know.’ He thinks about what it was like to stand in the corridor that ran the length of the apartment and look at the rectangles made by the flooding sunlight on the floor, stripes of darkness and light on the fishbone parquet. ‘Maybe.’

‘She says that she wants to be *free*.’ Frances pronounces that last word as though the idea of an old person’s freedom is laughable – preposterous in a way that a young person’s desire for freedom is not.

‘If you think I can stop her from selling—’

‘No. That’s not what I think. I just think you should know.’ She looks at him in a demanding way, as though she’s nevertheless expecting forceful action on his part. He looks back with a mild expression and wonders why she feels that he should be concerned with Thora’s real estate dealings, but he doesn’t ask. The person they’re discussing seems like a mythological creature – a being which might have existed in the real world at some point in the distant past. He can no longer imagine Thora’s everyday – what she eats for breakfast, how she dresses, what she thinks about before she falls asleep. In rare moments, he has a flash of what she’d have thought of someone or something, but it usually happens in banal contexts. He might be in a meeting with a colleague and all he can think is that Thora would have noted the bad fit of those trousers, that the shirt is too long and the shoes too casual for the office.

‘She says we don’t need her anymore, that we’re adults now, with our own lives. Sometimes I’m scared that she’ll disappear,’ Frances continues. ‘That she’s going to take off.’

‘Like I did,’ he says, because he can hear the thing she leaves unsaid.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Like you did.’

He brushes the table with his hand, collecting a neat pile of crumbs. He avoids looking into her eyes.

‘I wish I could have known Dad,’ she says.

‘Of course you do,’ he says, and tries to sound gentle, but the sentence comes out unintentionally harsh in Swedish, more nonchalant than the reply had sounded in English in his head.

Frances shifts in her chair and straightens her back, as if to adapt to the altered shape and direction of the conversation.

‘You can be hard to talk to, do you know that?’ she says.

‘No.’

‘You’re good at small talk, just like everyone here, but sometimes there’s this closed-off thing about you. Like when I try to talk to you about things that mean something.’

‘Closed-off?’

‘Yeah, like, you become distant.’

‘Just because you want to talk about something doesn’t mean that I want to talk about it,’ he says.

Frances looks at him across the table and it’s like she’s watching him from afar, and he doesn’t know if it’s because she’s moved away from him or because he’s moved away from her.

‘I’m just a faint copy of them, aren’t I?’ she says.

‘You remind me of them.’

‘When you look at me you see them.’

‘I see you too, Frances.’

‘Do you love her?’

It strikes him that these days Frances is the only person who would think to ask him such a question. Nobody else would have the

impulse to discuss love with him as anything other than a theoretical concept. *Love is a social construct*, one of his students said once during a seminar, and for a short moment he considers recycling that answer.

‘I love them both,’ he says instead, unsure what tense to use.

Frances looks surprised. Maybe she didn’t expect an answer. Her posture softens and it makes him feel strangely pleased. They’re silent for a moment, him eating his croissant, Frances rummaging through her bag. She finds a notebook and pen, tears out a piece of paper and scribbles with the book on her lap, pen cap between her lips. Then she returns both pad and pen to the bag and looks at him again.

‘It’s never too late,’ she says and slides the scrap of paper in his direction, a challenge. He looks at the numbers, recognizing the Swedish country code. It might be the most childish thing he’s ever heard her say, but he accepts the piece of paper without protest.

‘Shall we?’ Frances says.

He nods.

They walk a couple of blocks together before they part ways at an intersection. He wants to keep walking; she’s meeting some friends in another neighbourhood. He watches her cross the street through a cloud of steam from a manhole and then disappear down the subway entrance. The piece of paper she gave him burns in his pocket.

When he gets home and unlocks the door to his apartment, he momentarily expects to find Frances on the living room floor, hunched over her textbooks and notes. Time is the fourth dimension. But Frances is not in the living room, just as Thora is not in the office working on an essay, just as August is not at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Time breaks its neck. His apartment is empty, dark. He walks from room to room and turns on the lights. Then he gets the scrap with Thora’s number on it and puts it on the kitchen table. The chairs he and Frances were sitting on earlier are still pushed out,

as though it was just a moment ago that they stood up. He turns the piece of paper and reads Thora's number again. He reaches for the computer and sits down to write, maybe to her, he's not sure. By the time he's done, dawn is breaking behind the water towers on the rooftops. It's going to be a hot day.

PART TWO

Hugo

The first time I saw Thora and August together was at a dinner party hosted by Thora's parents. I had heard August's name mentioned in passing before, but I'd never met him, and my conversations with Thora had been limited to short exchanges. Whenever I was in the same room as her she would either ignore me or look at me as though she was trying to expel me with her gaze, and every time she looked at me that way I lingered for longer than I had to. Over the course of that dinner I noticed the way Thora and August's hands kept finding each other. I don't know why those discreet gestures made such an impression on me; maybe it was the contrast between the ease with which they chatted to the others around the table and the vulnerability with which they touched the backs of each other's hands. At one point I glanced across the table and locked eyes with August, and it felt as violent as if I'd flung my arm across the table and toppled over the wine bottles. August smiled. As he looked away he disentangled himself from our eye contact without effort. I was left watching him with tender eyes, as if I'd stared at the sun too long.

After that first dinner I started seeing Thora and August in various places around Stockholm: on the lawn outside the National Library, at the outdoor tables of Södermalm restaurants, in line for the nightclub under the Skanstull bridge. They were always far enough away that I didn't feel obligated to say hi. I wasn't sure if Thora would acknowledge me and I didn't want to risk embarrassing myself in front

of them. A week after the dinner August sent me a friend request, which both surprised me and made me feel uneasy. I wondered if I'd slipped and liked one of their pictures, and I scrolled through my activity log to make sure I hadn't left such clumsy tracks. Thora on the other hand never sent me a friend request but I studied her page too. They both had carefully chosen profile pictures and cover photos, but neither of them posted regular updates. I accepted August's friend request and then sat there staring at the screen, waiting for something to happen that might restructure my life. Nothing happened. I saw that I had several friends in common with August and I wondered if he was the kind of person who indiscriminately added everyone he met. For some reason that thought depressed me.

One day I saw them at the corner of Sveavägen and Odengatan. My bus was waiting for the light to turn green, and looking out the window I noticed Thora and August outside a fast-food place. Thora was searching in the pocket of her jacket while August talked and gesticulated as if he was trying to convince her of something. Finally Thora fished out a pair of sunglasses but she didn't put them on; she just held them in her hand and looked at August with an amused expression. August stopped talking, seemingly in the middle of a sentence, leaned forward and kissed her forehead before he took off his hat and put it on her head. There was a gust of wind and she used her hand to hold the hat in place. When the lights changed she looked at the street, laughing with one hand still on her head and the other around the hair that blew across her face, and for a moment she looked straight at me through the bus window. I wasn't sure if she recognized me, but in the midst of her laughter there was a small crease between her eyebrows. I resisted the impulse to duck. A few seconds later the bus moved on and I was tense in my seat with the unpleasant sense of having been caught snooping on a private moment.