

FIRST CHAPTER

In less than six months, the new US president would be elected. The prevailing mood at the conference in New York was most clearly illustrated by the fact that the American participants kept announcing that if the worst were to happen, they would move to Canada. I was on sabbatical and the only reason I was at the conference was that my friend Tim Markowich from Montreal was one of the organizers and had urged me to present a paper, and spend a few days by the St. Lawrence with him afterwards. So I updated my ever-popular work on tropical glaciers with some new data and submitted an excerpt. I had worked in the ice for many years: not only on Mount Kenya and the Kilimanjaro, but also in the Cordillera Blanca in Peru and, while there still was a glacier there, also on the Chacaltaya in Bolivia, and so I was able to draw on many years' worth of my own data and observations. I had actually planned to avoid the subject for a couple of months, which also meant not meeting up with colleagues if possible, but it was hard to refuse Tim a request. This was the first time he

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appealed to my conscience - which was out of character for him - saying with a pathos that stood in stark contrast to his usual matter-of-fact demeanor that we mustn't miss any opportunity to show the world that the eternal ice is, in fact, not eternal at all, and to point out the causes of its disappearance. Of course, there would always be die-hards beyond redemption, but since any politician with even a sliver of common sense can no longer avoid the topics of climate change and rising temperatures in their speeches, our expertise has greatly gained in value as we are viewed as the guardians of those great frozen giants threatened by extinction. This kind of attention hasn't always been good for the profession, and also at this gathering there was no shortage of prophets of doom throwing around numbers as if the end of the world was imminent within our century and illustrating their findings with horrifying images: entire countries disappeared; continents half submerged; people huddled on a few mountaintops sticking out from the water, survivors of a disaster of biblical proportions. We were always being asked for threshold values - so and so many degrees rise in temperature would mean so and so many

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centimeters rise in sea levels, which is, of course, an oversimplification. But as soon as journalists joined the conversation, there was always someone who out of sheer joy in fear-mongering liked to imagine what would happen if the polar ice caps were to melt entirely and which buildings in, say, Manhattan would still be jutting out - and at which floor - from the endlessly spreading desert of water. Numbers, however, are a tricky thing. Time once got into trouble for saying that what people talked far too little about were the really important parameters upon which everything hinges. When one interviewer followed up by asking what he considered to be the two most important global measures to protect the environment, he replied - in all seriousness, albeit a bit flippantly - drastically reducing the global population and then, equally drastically, increasing the IQ of those that were left. He became the target of protests by students of his university, who accused him of cynicism and marched outside of his institute with placards demanding a public apology.

I had met Tim in the early nineties, during a large research project on the Juneau Icefield in Alaska. We were

both young scientists back then, doing our first international field work and we spent the summer weeks in the ice together, the heat and the cold welding and freezing us permanently together. I would not go as far as saying that this kind of work attracts a specific type of personality, but the isolation of the wilderness, the monotony of days spent without the conveniences, or even just the distractions, of the city would turn anyone into a special breed. To Tim, who would sometimes be alone in the mountains for weeks, but then show a completely different side of himself when among people - acting so gregariously that it bordered on self-denial -, this truism applied in double measure. Travelling on skis behind him towards a far horizon marked only by a few jagged white lines jutting out from the endless expanse of white surrounding us, one had the impression that he was being pulled beyond the furthest visible point, and that only the demands of his work kept him from going further and further. It wasn't enough that he had conquered Mount McKinley and had other feats of mountaineering under his belt that garnered him both respect and incomprehension in equal measure; during our

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expedition he was usually the first to leave the cabin, having already checked the measuring instruments, built a fire and boiled water for the tea by the time the others got up, and was the last to return in the evening, when he sat in the descending darkness, brooding over his notes from the day. Afterwards, he always shaved - although most of the others allowed their beards to sprout - and put on an absurd white anorak with a giant red maple leaf and the word CANADA on the back, as if to demonstrate his ultimate loyalty.

Having grown up in a small village near Calgary, as soon as he heard my name he asked me about my brother, who only a few years prior to our first meeting had competed at the Olympic Games in Calgary and was close to winning gold in slalom when he made a mistake less than five seconds from the finish line, costing him his victory. As a teenager, Tim had been a competitive skier himself and one of the best in Alberta and British Columbia. Given the courage and ruthlessness with which he hurtled down the slopes, people predicted that he'd either break his neck or make his career on the World Cup slopes in Europe - until

things took a different turn. As he puts it, he knocked over a sixteen-year-old student and it was entirely his fault. Without looking first, he had jumped at full speed across a spot where visibility was particularly bad and struck the girl in the throat with the razor-sharp edge of his ski. When he turned around and looked up the hill with squinted eyes, he saw a bright red blood stain that appeared to spread in sync with the beating of his own pulse.

I was one of the few people Tim had shared this story with; most others only knew of it as a rumour. We had been surprised by bad weather in the middle of the ice field, and since the nearest cabin was too far and we were afraid of getting lost in the rising fog, we decided to wait out the storm in the bivouac. Quickly closed in by a fine August snow, we spent the next several hours talking in extremely tight quarters, beneath the nylon flapping in the storm.

The thing that probably sealed our friendship for good was that during this long afternoon, while never-ending squalls tore at our small tent and all around us the last

remaining landmarks dissolved into a uniform white, Tim talked of his childhood as if it were my own. The first snow fall of the year, the first sleigh-ride, the first time standing on skis - I had experienced all this in exactly the same way in the Tyrolian Alps as he had in the Canadian Rockies. This then became our unspoken point of reference whenever we saw each other again after a long time. Even in a place like New York, we remained two boys who had been sent out to play in the cold, left to their own devices and forced to figure things out on their own.

The evening before the conference, we met for a couple of beers near the hotel but we barely had a chance to talk. A TV was on in the diner, and before long the program turned to the election. The candidate appeared on the screen, digging himself into a hole with reckless talk, his fleshy face looking like it had just healed from a boxing match, and his bleach-blond hair combed over in all directions. The movements of his right hand, thumb up and index finger taken back, then index finger up, thumb and middle finger touching, and finally all three fingers up in the pretension of a conciliatory gesture. The sound was

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turned low and Tim jokingly dubbed the inaudible voice with his own improvised speech. He said that the myth about global warming was a thing for the weak; that in reality, the world was facing a new ice age, and rather than New York drowning in the meltwater, future generations would be able to watch the glaciers in Greenland and Alaska expand across the whole of Canada again, the ice finally moving down the Hudson Valley towards the suburbs of the metropolis and Manhattan itself. He didn't notice that his voice got louder and louder and that people at the surrounding tables were turning their heads, until a waiter came up and spoke to him in a whispered, but unequivocal, tone.

"You're disturbing the other guests, Sir," he said, with an affected politeness that seemed inappropriate for the plain ambience of the place. "I have to ask you to be quiet."

Tim apologized, but not without adding a "sir", which gave his reply a mocking tone he could not drop anymore. He added, perhaps a little too cockily, that he felt very honoured to be allowed to be there in the first place;

after all, and with due respect, this was a great country. He said this with a sorrowful expression, and while he turned back to me, thinking the conversation over, the waiter asked him what he meant by that.

"Exactly what I said," Tim said. "The land of the free."

The waiter now looked around for a co-worker.

"Sir, what do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," said Tim, but he was unable to suppress his laughter any longer and emphasized his Canadian accent as much as possible. "It's a wonderful country."

"I don't understand you, Sir."

"The land of the bravest, home of the most noble. Have you never heard about this? America the beautiful, God's own country."

The waiter asked if he should bring the bill, and we were already back out on the street when Tim was still sneering at the waiter's indignation. He was blocking the narrow sidewalk, but the passers-by who had to dodge his gesticulations and walk around him paid him no attention. The next day, when first a colleague from Minneapolis and

then one from Seattle told him, in almost identical words, that they'd move to Canada if the worst were to materialize, he looked at them with a nod that was as pitying as it was contemptuous. For him, emigrating was something different than their reveries, which in all likelihood would remain inconsequential. Soon after the war, in the early fifties, his father had more fled than emigrated from Yugoslavia. Seven times during his attempts, he was caught at the border, and seven times he was thrown in jail. The eighth time he managed to get to Italy and then on to Canada, where made a proper, high-flying career for himself: from miner and truck driver to owner of several car dealerships.

Since the last time I had seen him, Tim had become greyer, his face more distinctive, his nose as prominent as ever, his eyes and temples set deeply in his skull. In his navy blue suit, he seemed to fit even less the expectations one might have when hearing of his expeditions, let alone the escapades of his youth, which ended in tragedy. Instead, one got a sense of what the journalist may have meant who write that he had the air of a piano virtuoso who

got lost in the wrong profession. He gave his presentation on the phenomenon of glacial surges, which were remarkable for their periodic advances of several meters a day, even in periods of general retreat, and in the end he seemed tired. The three days of socializing had gotten to him. He begged out of the concluding dinner, claiming a headache, and when we met up in a bar later that night, he was in a grim mood. As I arrived, he was sitting upright in a leather chair, looking through his reflection in the mirrored wall opposite. He said he couldn't handle having to listen to yet another person that they'd move to Canada if the worst were to happen. After half a professional lifetime in Montreal, he had just received an invitation to St. John's in Newfoundland, where would take on a new professorship the following year. When he asked me, "What about you?" I didn't quite understand him at first. He looked at me across his glass and asked if I might want to join him, and why wasn't I considering emigrating.

It is true that over the years we had frequently talked of that possibility - emphatically at first, later a kind of running gag between us - about Canada as a place of

refuge, but this could hardly be a serious question anymore. Apparently, the alcohol had impacted Tim's sense of judgment to the point where he didn't know what he was saying. But he couldn't be distracted from the idea by a mere laugh, so I reminded him of my age and the fact that I had a life in Hamburg, a wife and a child, never mind the bureaucratic obstacles that would have to be tackled.

"How would I do that, Tim?" I said. "I go back home and say to Natascha, let's take Fanny out of school, pack our bags and go to Canada?"

It was conspicuous that he hadn't asked about her at all until now. Since his visit in Hamburg a few years ago, he had been - perhaps a bit too obviously - Natascha's secret admirer. He would send cards on her birthday, and kept mentioning what a wonderful time he had had with us in our summer house by the lake. In reality, he and I had spent most of the time sitting in the yard while Natascha stayed inside, writing by the open window, our conversation a continuous background noise. He liked that she was writer and pretended to be less refined and less well-read in her company than was actually the case, and automatically

included me in this club of the slightly dim-witted, for whom it was an honour to be even allowed into Natascha's presence. No matter how much irony he displayed, he was ultimately serious about it; had I not known that there was no one more inept in courting a woman than those slightly screwy hermits who aren't able to fully return to civilization after their lonely expeditions in the ice, I would have resented him. Whenever he asked Natascha in the evening what she had accomplished that day, she happily said, "nothing useful". And I stood beside them, opened a bottle of wine and wished I were in his place. He also used to protest against the fact that she had a twin sister - he insisted outright that it was impossible, at least in this world; that the existence of a copy of Natascha had to come close to proving God's existence. He'd never met Katja but had denied her existence for so long that he felt guilty when he learned about her death, and he wrote Natascha a devastated letter. I was thinking about all this as I considered what a dreamer he was, and what a realist within his dreams, while dug into me with his arguments.

"There used to be a time when the mere mention of St. John's would have been enough to get you excited, and there would have been no holding you back," he said, just when I had hoped he would finally stop. "Before longing for the actual places, it was always the names of these places you longed for, Richard. For me, it was always Dalmatia. For a long time I thought I could have a life there, not because that's where my father was from, but because of the sound of its name."

"But I'm no longer young."

"That's what I'm talking about."

"I don't have the time for dreams like that."

"Do you really want to grow old in Hamburg?"

"As if Canada could save me from old age."

"Do you want to die among Germans, Richard?"

He was now looking at me with a doubtful expression.

"The word alone. Just saying the word 'Germany' out loud once is enough. Is it possible to feel a longing for that?"

We'd once had a similar discussion, no less meandering, when I was about to move from Innsbruck to

Hamburg. Only at that time, he had asked me if I really wanted to *live* among Germans. Back then, it was still a given that the Germans were seen as a people to be against, that it would go unpunished if you were against them: the Germans were a people forever outcast, as if by some Old Testament curse, who could not help but do wrong no matter how much one they tried to do the right thing. The fact that he now fell into this again surprised me even more, given that he was trying to get me on his side, and seemingly forgetting that the situations with the Austrians wasn't any easier.

"Do you remember what you told me about your upbringing in Tyrol, back when we were on the Juneau Icefield, Richard?"

"But Tim," I said, "what's that got to do with it?"

"You said that interacting with the guests in your parents' hotel taught you everything you needed to know about life. Remember? 80 or 90% of the guests were Germans, and they behaved in the tiny mountain village like colonial masters and treated you like a half-savage."

"Did I really say that?"

"You sure did," he said. "Pathetic, small-minded people who thought they could buy anything and anyone with their silly money, even while cheating themselves, participating in lives they didn't have the slightest clue about."

It's indeed possible that back then I indulged in this kind of talk, but to be called to account for it now, years later, was different, and I defended myself.

"I wouldn't talk like that anymore."

"How then?" he asked with a laugh, as though I had just made a joke. "Do you honestly believe anything has changed?"

I didn't even get as far as saying that after all, many years had passed, since he didn't expect an answer and immediately added, impatiently, "You're not going to defend those fine people, are you?"

He had several uncles spread across half of Germany. One lived in Berlin, one in Stuttgart, one in Munich, and he silently accused them all of having fallen short when leaving Yugoslavia behind. Only his father, the oldest of the brothers, had made it across the Atlantic, because at

the time there was no legal way for him to emigrate. He actually fled his country and immigrated to Canada, the land of his dreams, rather than crossing the border later as a mere guest-worker, back and forth every summer, until settling finally, half-heartedly, in unsatisfactory circumstances among the Germans, as so many others had done. His father had made a clean break with his past, and it was in his name that Tim sat in judgment.

"Do you need me to explain the difference to you?" he asked. "In Canada, my father was a free man, while after thirty years, my uncles in Germany still believed that they had to be grateful for being allowed to do the dirty work for those fine gentlemen."

I hadn't told him that we had rented our summerhouse an hour outside Hamburg to a family from Damascus only three months earlier; and yet, everything he said after a certain point referred to this fact. The media had picked up the story, if only because of Natascha, who - as a writer - naturally attracted a lot of attention. There were mentions of it on the internet, and a TV report was even available on YouTube; Tim only had to google her name the

day before the conference to come across it. What he thought of it became clear to me when he started spitting venom, shaking his head about the people who had been on the platforms of the train stations the previous fall welcoming the arriving trainloads of refugees with applause. I didn't ask, but the more I imagined he knew of our tenants, the more uncomfortable I grew about his proposal to move to Canada. There were many things he and I had never talked about, but if what I assumed was true, and if I were to take him seriously, then his insistence might have been a sign that he thought he had to save us from ourselves. I couldn't come up with anything better than to defiantly explain once more that we were doing really well in Hamburg and that I didn't know why we'd need to leave. It sounded like an incantation I didn't quite believe in myself.

I was glad that we didn't have to continue this conversation when other participants from the conference joined us, and took the opportunity to excuse myself. Back at the hotel, I was unable to fall asleep. Since it was too early to call home and Natascha and Fanny wouldn't be awake

yet, I played around on my computer. Not long after I finished reading the latest news, I found myself researching St. John's. It's said to be the oldest city in North America, and the pictures of colourful, Nordic-style houses by a fjord and the two dominant towers of a basilica on a hill illuminated the darkness of my room. I looked up the average temperatures in January and July, found out how long a trip by car and by ferry it was from Montreal, and how long by plane. It was the point of Newfoundland that jutted out the farthest into the North Atlantic, and although the latitude was only a few hundredths of a degree away from Innsbruck, and from Hamburg it would be faster to get there than to New York, icebergs from calving glaciers in Greenland apparently traveled by in the spring time, until they broke apart further south and melted in the sea, long before they reached much warmer climes.

THE SECOND THIRTEENTH CHAPTER

A Different Ending

When I arrived in Montreal and took the escalator up to the great hall in the train station, the first thing I saw was the announcement board, on which the letters were just rattling into place; for a few moments, the only word on the board was HALIFAX, as if that was to be my fate. I had spent a week by the Hudson River. The cab driver who had driven me to my guest house, and who talked incessantly about the upcoming election, had said that he'd be curious to see who out of the know-it-alls that had announced they'd move to Canada if worse came to worst would actually keep their word - although he knew that most of the talk was only hot air, and surely hardly anyone would remember their grand plans later. He'd only have to point to the signs in the front yards, which - surrounded by bewitched Halloween figures - promoted the candidate and his running mate, and he'd have no doubt about the outcome. It was the same cab driver who had taken us to the manufacturer's house in the early summer, and any time he saw the relevant

sticker on the bumper of a car in front of him, he honked and gave the driver a thumbs-up in his or her rear-view mirror. My landlady told me that she came from a run-away family of Shakers; her ancestors had lived only a couple of miles away in new Lebanon. Up to their escape from the community, he had believed in Mother Ann, whom they revered as a female incarnation of Christ - which, however, was something completely different from having a woman being president of God's Own Country. All around her house, there were portraits of ghostlike figures with hollow, famished faces, and the ghost sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch holding the Star-Spangled Banner in its hand looked as if she had made it her mission to establish it once and for all as a prototype of this austere ancestral portrait gallery.

Once again, I had spent my days wandering around the area. During one of my excursions, I had met a woman, who'd invited me to her house, and whom I hadn't been able to get out of my mind since. I was strolling through the woods when I found her sitting by a creek, in her lace-trimmed little dress that was closer to a nightgown, much too

lightly dressed for the season, her hands submerged in the water, and I asked her if everything was alright. She was my age, perhaps a couple of years older, and on a whim - and to make myself more interesting - I claimed to be a writer. I gave myself the name of an Austrian author who Natascha kept insisting I resembled in some uncanny way, which I immediately denied, always with the request to please come up with a more original way to insult me. At least the name seemed to have some effect on the woman, and when she showed up for our date the next morning, she could name half a dozen titles she had found on the internet, and wanted to know if I had really written all the books myself and if the stories were true or merely invented.

It was an unusual time for a rendezvous, nine in the morning, and it became even more unusual given the fact that when she pulled her car up to the curb and let me in, she was wearing an evening gown, sleeveless and without straps. She had applied thick layers of rouge and eye shadow, and her skin was burnt by either the sun or a tanning bed. The white house she lived in was between the train tracks and the cemetery, just a few hundred meters

away. When I asked her if she wasn't afraid of inviting in a stranger she knew nothing about, she replied that she knew enough; I wasn't a stranger to her, she had seen in a dream that I'd come to her.

She led me into the kitchen, didn't offer me a seat and, standing at the sink, said that the morning probably wasn't the right time for alcohol. I should have contradicted her but I agreed, and when she made tea she forgot to fill my cup. She showed me her house, which was in a depressing state: paint peeling off the walls; a living room suite covered in burn holes piled with newspapers and books; the two bedrooms on the second floor cold and empty except for a futon on the raw wooden floor, and on the wooden staircase leading down to the garden several stinking garbage bags filled to bursting. Her phone rang and she answered it. When she'd finished the call, she explained that it had been her younger coworkers from the café where she was helping out; they wanted to know how our date was going and to make sure that she was okay.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" she said. "All I did was invite you for a glass of wine. Young people can't

understand that. They only ever think about one thing. What do you think is on their minds?"

"I don't know."

"All young people think about is sex."

She now stood across from me again, in her kitchen. Across her right clavicle there was a scar as if caused by the claws of a giant bird. Her evening gown had a long slit on one side, which revealed her unstockinged leg whenever she moved.

"It might be a little early for a glass of wine," she said again. Her fingers with their peeling nail polish held her tea cup tightly and she looked at me with her black-rimmed eyes. "You probably make a lot of money with your books. Are you a rich man? C'mon, tell me."

"Well," I said. "I can live."

"Your writing probably needs to be juicier," she said. "I could tell you stories... I've had a life that would make your ears fall off. I had a husband, blah-blah-blah. I had a large house in New York. I had it all. What do you write about?"

"About love."

"I still have ten good years."

She put her tea cup down on the counter and ran both her hands through her almost shoulder-length hair, lifted it, as if to present herself in the most flattering light, took a kind of dance step, swing her hip a little, turned around halfway into the room and suddenly stopped.

"I want to see Morocco. I want to see Argentina. Can you imagine dying without ever having been to Greece? I've never been to Italy, *mais je parle un peu italiano*. Ten more good years, then they can banish me to a fucking wheelchair, it'll be fine with me."

At that exact moment, a shrill howl like a drawn-out cry came from outside announcing a train, at which moment she lifted her index finger as if to say "quiet". While the cars of the train rattled by one by one directly behind the window, making the whole house shake, she took a bottle of white wine from the fridge and filled two glasses. She lifted her glass to me in a toast and spun around in the noise with her eyes closed. When the noise stopped, she took up her monologue once more, enumerating all the

things she used to have, except this time she added a "blah-blah-blah" to everything, which sounded lurid.

"I had a life, blah-blah-blah. I had a husband and a large house in New York, blah-blah-blah. I've had it all, blah-blah-blah."

She emptied her glass in one gulp and filled it up again.

"Ten more fucking years," she said. "I want to go back to Paris once more. Imagine the illuminated boulevards at night. *Paris dans la nuit*. I want to walk along the Seine in the rain. I want to eat oysters on the Champs-Élysées before I fall into the wheelchair."

When the phone rang again, it was her coworkers from the café again, and I heard her tell them in an exalted sing-song voice that everything was going great, we were having a glass of wine and I hadn't killer her yet.

"You're not going to kill me, are you," she said after hanging up, actually seeming to expect an answer. "I told them you're an author, but young people can't imagine what that is."

"Of course not."

"Authors don't go around killing people."

"No."

"In the minds of young people, things can only ever end in sex or in murder. But I'm not scared. I have ten more years left and I don't intend to spend them being dead but being very much alive."

She held her hands up to her temples.

"Ten more fucking years."

I got the sense she'd forgotten I was there and stopped noticing me. So, when she started spinning around again with her eyes closed, holding her wine glass in her hand and humming a melody I didn't know but could have been a children's song, I used the moment to get out. When entering the house, I hadn't paid attention to the street signs at the corner where her house was, but when I stepped outside I noticed them all the more clearly: Cemetery Lane and Maiden Lane, as if someone had played an obnoxious joke on her - in any case, a good reason to go mad. In the remaining days I avoided her house. I saw her car parked in front of the café where she worked and on a stormy afternoon when the wind blew the leaves in clusters from

the trees only to blow them back up from the ground and high into the air, I saw her tumbling out of her door and spin out into the roundabout traffic with her arms up. A truck that had just turned into the roundabout stopped right in front of her with screeching breaks and a horn like that of a ship, and she called up to the vibrating cabin far above her that she was looking for someone to dance the tango with her, before blowing the driver - who was shaking his fist at her - a kiss.

When I departed, I saw her at the train station. I didn't remember having told her the date, but there was only one train to Canada per day, and when I had told her that's where I wanted to go, she claimed to have grown up on Lake Ontario, on both sides of the border, and felt like coming with me. The thought that she might have come to the platform every day startled me. Now she was standing at the station in a navy blue dress suit and a bag, as if she were about to travel herself. I spoke to her, but she pretended not to know me, staying where she was, and only when the train started moving and I made my way to the window, did

she lift her hand and walk along for a few steps beside the car, before finally staying back, waving.

For the whole trip I tried to imagine what she'd be doing for the rest of the day. She had clearly been dressed for travel, but like a character in a film. Perhaps she had been waiting for me to ask her to join me, and then got scared I wouldn't ask; or that I would ask her and she wouldn't know what to do, and so she'd pretended I was a stranger. Neither of these scenarios was very likely, but it still reminded me of a situation three years ago, when after a high school reunion I would up in front of the house of a girl who had sat beside me for a few months in first grade, and whom I hadn't seen since, as she'd left the school and we lost contact.

I had inquired about her whereabouts, and, since the house she lived in was only a short walk away, I made my way there the next day. She was married to a carpenter. On my way to the house I decided to imagine that he was a coffin maker, from whom I'd have to free her before he finished the coffin intended for her, which he'd surely been working on for years, with the greatest precision.

Naturally, I was in love with her back then and, equally naturally, I had hardly spoken a word to her, but to be standing outside her house now was nothing but sentimental foolishness.

At least I remained sober enough not to ring the doorbell. But while I stood there, lost in thought, suddenly a car, which I hadn't heard coming, stopped in front of the garage and a woman, barely 25, got out. She was exactly as blond and wore the exact same blunt bob as the girl who had sat beside me in school, but of course she was far too young to be that girl. The explanation seemed pretty obvious, but while I tried very hard not to stare at her, a child jumped out of the car, pre-school age, with the same blond, the same shoulder-length hair, the same bangs, the same smile. She noticed me immediately; I had just placed a finger to my lips and started slowly backing away when she began to scream loudly and point at me, as though I was a clear threat to her life.

The story about the woman and her ten-more-fucking-years appeared more and more like a dream to me the further north the train moved. The car was almost empty and I kept

switching back and forth between the two sides, depending on the view outside, water and forest, and more water and forest, always the same and yet always different. The more of it that stretched along the tracks ahead of me, the more calming and yet more frightening it became. I went to the bistro car, bought two small bottles of wine, and took out my notes for the presentation Tim had asked me to give the day after my arrival. He wanted me to attend his seminar and speak about my work, but he also wanted me to speak about glaciers in a way that would interest a more general audience, ideally peppered with anecdotes. He had made the joke of announcing me as a direct descendant of the world-famous "Similaun Man", who bore the same name as my parents' hotel, and whose mummified body had been found after five thousand years, in perfect condition, in the ice of a glacier close to the village where I had grown up. Tim had also proposed the theme for the presentation, namely that our generation was the first to be directly affected by the consequences of global warming and climate change and, that the same time, was the last one that might still be able to do something to avert the impending disaster. It

would be hard to counter these facts with a few fun anecdotes, so I decided to discard everything I had already prepared and to stay true to the facts instead. After all, anyone could read in the newspapers that the ice in the Antarctic had cracks hundreds of kilometers long, or that enormous planes of ice the size of half a country were about to break off or had already broken off and were floating out into the ocean - ice blocks that stored so much drinking water that it could satisfy the demand of a city of a million inhabitants for several thousand years. I had made notes of the exact numbers, but in my previous presentations I had noticed that, in attention to the terror, the greater and more terrible the numbers, the more satisfaction they seemed to cause in the audience. The individual listener, a body of barely seventy or eighty kilograms and often puny brain mass, could do little in the face of such masses drifting off. The thought that the end of the world would indeed affect all of us, and that, as ever half-intelligent person should know by now, there as ultimately no difference between Noah's Ark and the

Titanic, had an anaesthetizing and comforting effect on people.

In matters of such nature, there is hardly a greater pathos than the pathos of truth, which is why I decided to change at least the beginning of my presentation, and to start with the story of the son who finds his missing father, many years later, dead in the ice. According to a legend people tell each other almost everywhere in the world where there are glaciers, the story goes that not only is the son at that point older than the father was at the time of his death; he is so old that he could be his own father's father. He was only a child when the man now lying in front of him had left the house one morning, announcing he'd be back by the evening, only to never return. Now he himself is at the threshold of old age and looks into a still youthful face, which hasn't changed, except that it is now the face of a dead man.

The train stopped at the border and two officers with dogs patrolled through the cars. Afterwards, they stood back to back not far outside my window, smoking, and not exchanging a single word. I watched the other passengers

who had gotten off the train to move their legs, before getting off myself to take a few steps with stiff joints in the already cooler air. There was a police car parked beside the train station, the driver and the passenger door open, on its roof the licking beams of the blue light that would only reach its farther destination at night. A black limousine approached speedily, honking its horn; the man who jumped out barely waiting until the car had stopped. Wearing a suit and tie under his fur-lined jacket and waving with one hand, a briefcase in the other, he now ran towards the tracks, making me think that we had been waiting only for him, and that he would later force an emergency stop in the middle of nowhere, for him to run into the wilderness in his delicate dress shoes. Then the train moved in for a short while and stopped again, this time at a band in the tracks, the angle of which didn't seem to justify the slow chugging with which we had been approaching. For a few minutes, someone waited for some kind of green light or order, and as the train started to move at a walking pace, we reached Canadian soil soon after. Given the whole procedure, we could as well have

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entered a long-gone country in Europe's darkest east,
complete with its smell of iron, sulphur and resin.

Tired from the wine, I was fast asleep upon our arrival in Montreal. In my dream, I saw our house and the frozen, snow-covered lake in the winter, with a huge swam crossing its entire length on foot before taking off into the air with its angel-like wings. I was wearing headphones and didn't hear the announcement, but when the conductor touched my shoulder, I got off. Not only had I missed the moment when we had crossed the St. Lawrence River, I must have been sitting on the stopped train for several minutes, which must have emptied very quickly, and now I was running late. Hastily, I grabbed my stuff, my coat, travel bag and computer bag. Then I rushed along the platform and up the escalator. When I reached the top, I could already see the announcement board with tis rattling, flapping letters. The only word I was able to read was HALIFAX, at the very top, and then the H, the A, the L and the I started to slide down and to swirl around wildly, and what was left was merely the meaningless FAX. I had to sit down, and that's how Tim found me: sitting on the floor in the train

station's hall, staring at black surface in constant motion above me, on which there seemed to be no place and no destination for me, while passers-by rushed past me, and a young woman who was bending down over me kept asking if I could hear her, and if she should call an ambulance. I only shook my head and looked into her gentle face and had to resist asking her if she'd already made plans for the rest of the afternoon, the evening, the following day and all the days after that, for the rest of her life, or she'd want to go to St. John's with me, St. John's in Newfoundland.

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