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Written by Joakim Zander

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THE SWIMMER

JOAKIM ZANDER



UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT
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Around us, the madness of empires continues.

Jane Hirshfield

July 1980
Damascus, Syria

Every time I hold you is the last time I hold you. I've known that since the very first time. And when you came back, and I held our child in my sleepless arms, all I could think was, this is the last time.

You look at me, eyes as pure as the promise of rain, and I know you know. That you've known as long as I have. My betrayal. Tonight it's so close that we can both feel its stinking breath, the pounding, irregular rhythm of its heart.

The baby whimpers in the crib. You stand up, but I get there first and lift the child up. Hold her against my chest. Feel her breathing, feel her heart racing through the thin, light-blue blanket your mother knitted. This heart is my heart, and there is no convincing way to explain abandoning your own heart. Just disguises to assume. Just varying levels of lies to tell. Both of which I, if anyone, can master.

The city is beyond hot. After two months of relentless dryness, it glows like lava. When evening finally comes, the city ceases being gray or beige, becomes transparent, quivering like jelly. No one thinks clearly here. Everything smells like trash. Trash, exhaust, garlic, and cumin. But I only smell my child. I close my eyes and breathe in deeply, my nose pressed against the top of her almost hairless head. And the baby is still hot. Way too hot. The fever refuses to break.

You tell me this is the third day. I can hear you rummaging through drawers looking for aspirin or whatever you can find. This heat. It drives us insane. We both know I don't have anything like that here, in my apartment, in my mirage. Why are we even here?

"Give me the car keys," you say.

You wave your hand, like a vendor in the bazaar asking for money. And when I hesitate:

"Give me your goddamn keys."

Your voice is an octave higher, a shade more desperate.

"No, wait... isn't it better if I..." I begin.

The baby is completely still against my shoulder. Breathing so weakly, it's almost imperceptible.

"And how the hell do you plan on getting into the embassy? Well? Surely you can see we need something to stop the fever?"

I reluctantly grab the keys in my pocket. Balancing the child against my chest, I lose hold of them, and they land with a dull clatter on the marble floor of the hallway. The heat even muffles sound, I think. Delays it, slows it down. We both bend down to pick up the keys. For a moment our fingers brush against one another, our eyes. Then you snatch the keys, stand up and disappear into the echoing stairwell. You leave behind only the muffled sound of a slamming door.

I stand with the baby in the sliver of shade on the balcony facing the street. The memory of a breeze floats across my face. The heat makes it difficult to breathe. In the air: exhaust, cumin. What happened to the jasmine? Once this city smelled like jasmine.

The locket you gave me, before everything turned to heat, fever, and flight, burns against my chest. The one that once belonged to your grandmother, your mother. I'm thinking about leaving it here. I'm thinking of leaving it on the sideboard in the hallway, the one with inlays of mother-of-pearl and rosewood that we bought together in the bazaar when this bond had been growing for less than a week. I don't feel like I have the right to take the locket with me. It doesn't belong to me anymore. If it ever did.

I know everything there is to know about surviving. I know every street in this city, every café. I know every mustachioed antique store owner with shady business contacts, every gossipy carpet dealer, the boy who sells tea out of the huge samovar he carries on his back. I've sipped imported whisky with the president in smoky rooms, together with the leaders of organizations he officially repudiates. The president knows my name. One of my names. I've been handling the money. Making sure it ends up in

hands that benefit the interests I've been sent here to protect. If you meet me, I speak your language better than you do.

At the same time: move me somewhere else. Drop me in the jungle, on the steppes, in the lobby of the Savoy Hotel. Give me a minute. I'll become a lizard, a yellowed blade of grass, a pinstriped young banker with hair that's a little too long and a motley but privileged past. I know your friends from university, vaguely, through others. They never remember me.

You don't know it, but I am so much better than you. I change faster. Fit in better. I have hazier outlines and a harder core. I keep my bonds loose. If they tighten, I cut them. And now? I lost my concentration and let them grow beyond my control, let them harden, coagulate. Blood bonds.

The game is forever, but this round is over. I hold the child tighter against my chest and shuffle impatiently on the concrete. When images of death sweep through me, I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. Whisper to myself. "No, no, no..."

The swollen face in the open sewer out by the motorway to the airport. Those staring eyes. The flies in the heat. The flies.

"No, no, no..."

Why didn't I just let him be? I already knew everything. Why did I persuade Firas to have another meeting when the trail was already red hot, glowing? But it was too inconsistent, too hard to believe. I had to hear it again. Look into Firas's nervous eyes one more time to see if something was hiding there. See if a shadow passed over his face when he reluctantly repeated the details one last time. See if his nervous tics had escalated or disappeared completely. All of those signs. All those little nuances. All those things that make up the almost imperceptible line between truth and lies, life and death. I close my eyes and shake my head while anxiety and guilt wash over me. I should have known better.

And now there's no time to waste. One of my contacts has rented a car, and it's parked around the corner. A backpack with clothes, money, and a new passport is waiting in the trunk. The escape route is activated, tattooed across the inside of my eyelids. It's the only solution now. To become mist and then just air. To

become part of cumin, garlic, garbage, exhaust. And perhaps on a good day, jasmine.

I hold the baby up in front of me. I'm relieved to see she has your eyes. It'll be easier that way. What kind of a man leaves his own child? Even if it's to protect her. Betrayal after betrayal. Lie after lie. For how long can relativity save a person's soul?

The sounds from the street. Slower, more indolent in the heat. Traces of voices that barely reach me on the third floor. Cars crawling forward – dehydrated, racked – over the scalding concrete.

And then, a car gasping as its ignition refuses to bite. A key is being turned, but the spark plugs don't respond. Once:

"Aaaaannnnnanananananananan."

I move out into the sun, up to the balcony rail, shielding the child. It feels like slipping into a bath that is much too hot. The sweat runs down my cheeks, my armpits; my back and my chest are already completely soaked. I bend over the railing, my gaze finds the rusty, old green Renault. Across the street. Thoughts run through my head. How happy I was to find that particular parking spot. How I thought it would end up being parked there for weeks, months. How maybe one day you'd finally find the keys and move it. But why would you care about the car?

The reflection of the sun flashes off the driver's side window. But when I squint, I see you. Your beautiful, blond hair, flat and greasy from sleepless nights, water shortages. Bent forward, your face contorted with irritation, headaches, all your worry, your mind racing. I think you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and this is the last time I'll see you.

You turn the key in the ignition once more:

"Aaaaannnnnanananananananan."

It's the sign. One of the signs. One of the thousands of signs I've learned to recognize for my own survival. And I know it's too late. The realization rushes through me. Fear of death, hopelessness, guilt, guilt, guilt. All in the amount of time it takes for a nerve to respond to pain.

By the time the explosion tears my eardrums to pieces, I'm already lying on the balcony floor. The explosion isn't muffled,

not muted by the heat. It's awful, majestic. It's a whole battle compressed into one moment. I feel thousands of small, very light, very sharp particles cover me like ashes. Glass and what might be chunks of the concrete facade, bits of metal.

Afterwards, it's completely silent. I seem to be lying under a blanket of glass, a blanket of cheap concrete, rusty steel. I think I must be bleeding. I think, if I'm thinking I must be alive. I think, my arms must be here somewhere, I can feel them under the concrete. I think, what am I holding, what am I lying on top of? I manage to roll onto my side. Concrete and glass crunch, clatter around me. I start to sit up carefully, lean on an elbow that seems to be responding to my nervous system.

The child is lying under me, my hands pressed tightly against its ears. The child blinks at me, takes a thin, feverish breath. Not even one sliver of glass has reached her.

December 8, 2013
Uppsala, Sweden

Mahmoud Shammosh wasn't what you'd call paranoid. On the contrary. If someone were to ask, he'd describe himself as the exact opposite. Rational. Academic. And above all else: stable.

Mahmoud had never believed in the claims of alienation or the conspiracies that had been so common in the Stockholm projects of his youth. That was for teenagers, jihadists, and foil-hats. He hadn't fought his way out of suburban concrete and hopelessness, through all that and more, making it all the way to a PhD program at Uppsala University, by finding excuses. If there was anything he was sure of, it was that in nine cases out of ten the simplest explanation was the right one. Paranoia was for losers.

With a little jerk, he pulled his rusty Crescent bike free from the bike stand in front of the Carolina Rediviva library. It'd been bright blue long ago. But only freshmen had nice bikes in Uppsala. Old hands knew they'd be stolen in the first week. Mahmoud's bike balanced on that fine line between perfect camouflage and complete inoperability.

He stomped a few times on the pedals and then let the slope down to the city do the rest. After nearly seven years in Uppsala, he still loved racing down Drottninggatan with the wind in his face. The air was cold as ice against his knuckles. He threw an unwilling glance over his shoulder. The electric lights on the hill leading up to the library glowed, lonely and melancholy, in the early December darkness. No one was following him.

The reception desk at the Faculty of Law on Gamla Torget square sparkled with Christmas decorations. Even on a Sunday, they kept the Christmas tree and Advent candles lit, but the hallway on the third floor was dark and quiet. He unlocked the door to his small, cluttered office, walked in, turned on the desk lamp, and started his computer.

With his back to the window, he sat down at his chair, moving away two books on the privatization of state functions and human rights. Soon, if all went as planned, he too would be the proud author of a book on the same subject. *The Privatization of War*. That was the title of his dissertation. He'd written about half of it.

What he'd written so far was actually quite traditional. It probably contained more fieldwork than the usual doctoral thesis in law. But that was the idea: something modern, interdisciplinary. He'd interviewed fifty employees in various American and British companies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Companies who performed functions that used to be carried out by armies, everything from transport and supply to different types of guard duty and even actual combat.

Initially, he'd hoped for a scoop, an Abu Ghraib or a My Lai. To be the academic who revealed the great, terrible crimes. And his background had been an advantage, he knew that. But he hadn't discovered anything spectacular. Just done a good enough job of surveying and cataloging the companies and the rules to publish an article in the *European Journal of International Law* and a summary in *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's largest daily. And after that there came an unexpected interview with CNN in Kabul, which led to invitations to international conferences and symposiums. It wasn't a scoop, but it was the sweet, sweet taste of imminent success.

Until the message came, that is.

Mahmoud lifted up a fifty-page thick stack of papers from his desk and sighed: his latest chapter. Already the first page was covered with comments scribbled in red. His army reserve officer turned academic advisor saw through any attempt at taking shortcuts with the material. Mahmoud felt his heart sink and put down the stack. Emails first.

The old computer grumbled when Mahmoud tried to open up his email program, as if protesting against working on a Sunday. The department's hardware was far from new. But that was a status symbol. You didn't come to this department for its modern

facilities. You came for the opposite: five hundred years of tradition.

Mahmoud glanced at the December darkness outside his window. His office might be small, but it had one of the best views in Uppsala. In the foreground was the Fyris river and the house Ingmar Bergman used in *Fanny and Alexander*. What was it called? The Academy Mill? Behind it, the way the cathedral and the castle were lit, they looked almost ghostly in all of their immaculate academic high bourgeoisie.

Finally, the computer gave in and allowed Mahmoud to access his messages. Only one new email, with no subject. Not surprising, since he'd checked his email only fifteen minutes ago in the library. He was about to delete it as spam, when he saw the return address. Trooper00@hotmail.com.

He felt his heart begin to pound. This was the second message he'd received from that address. The first came just after his most recent trip to Afghanistan, and it was the reason for his last few weeks of reluctant paranoia.

The message had been brief, in Swedish, and obviously sent by someone who was on the ground in Afghanistan:

Shammosh,

I saw you on CNN a few days ago. Looks like you're real serious these days. Can we meet in Kabul? I have information that's of interest to us both. Be careful, you're being watched.

Determination, courage, and endurance.

That intimate tone. "Determination, courage, and endurance." Familiar words from another time. It was obviously someone who knew him.

And the ending, "You're being watched." Mahmoud had dismissed it. Laughed at it. It had to be from a friend. Someone was just joking around. Soon he'd get a new message: "LOL! Gotcha!" There were aspects of his background that were unique within his current social circles, and sometimes that was the source of jokes among his new friends. But nothing else arrived. He slowly became more aware of his surroundings. Just to be on

the safe side. Old routines and processes reactivating, taking over his system. Methods once practiced until automatic. It surprised him that they were still there, latent, waiting.

And then that very evening, he'd seen it. An ordinary Volvo V70. Bureaucrat gray. Parked under an unlit streetlight in front of his small studio apartment in the Luthagen part of town. And later that week, he saw it again while coming out of the campus gym after his weekly basketball game. It had been enough for him to memorize the registration number without even actively thinking about it.

He turned towards the computer and opened the new message. Would the joke be revealed now? He'd never admit to the jokester that he'd been somewhat affected by it.

The message was in Swedish:

Shammosh,
I'll contact you in Brussels. We have to meet.
Determination, courage, and endurance.

Mahmoud felt his heart pound even harder. Surely only his advisor knew that he'd accepted an invitation to speak at a conference organized by the International Crisis Group on Thursday. Maybe it was still a joke after all? The Volvo was just in his imagination? Still... Somewhere inside he felt a familiar sense of excitement, a small, barely perceptible surge of adrenaline.

He shook his head. Perhaps he should just wait and see if someone approached him in Brussels. But he had one more thing left to do before he left the office, a message he had to write. Someone who'd been waiting a long time to hear from him.

Klara Walldéen had appeared in his life suddenly and from a completely unexpected direction. One day she was just there with her arms around him, with her head on his shoulder, with her hands in his ever-longer hair. It had been such a tumultuous period in his life. He'd been empty and confused, exhausted and sleepless. Utterly, utterly alone. And then, one day, she was just there in the doorway of his bleak, unfurnished apartment.

"I've seen you at lectures," she had said. "You're the only one who looks even lonelier than I feel. So I followed you. Crazy, right?"

Then, without saying another word, she'd stepped over his threshold and laid her loneliness down next to his. And Mahmoud left his loneliness there, until they began to merge, until they grew together. Until they were not lonely anymore. It was a relief that they often didn't even need to talk. That they could just lie there on his Spartan mattress or in Klara's narrow, hard bed on Rackarberget listening to her worn-out portable record player play one of those crackling soul singles she bought at flea markets.

There still wasn't a day that went by that he didn't think about it. About how they used to breathe as lightly as they could to avoid injuring the fragile membrane that enveloped them, how their heartbeats would harmonize to the rhythm of Prince Philip Mitchell's *I'm So Happy*.

Still, he'd known from the beginning it wasn't going to work out. That there was something inside him that wasn't enough, something inconsistent with what he and Klara were creating. Something he kept to himself, deep down in the most hidden corner of his heart. When Klara had been admitted to a Master's program at the London School of Economics at the end of law school, they solemnly swore that they'd commute, that they'd make it work, that distance was irrelevant to a relationship as strong as theirs. But Mahmoud had already known it was the end. Inside of him the light he'd struggled so long to stamp out blazed with a new, resolute flame.

He would never forget Klara's eyes as they stood at the airport, as he stammered through his memorized speech. That he thought it might be good to take a break. They'd be a burden to one another. They shouldn't see this as an ending, but as an opportunity. All of which were good reasons, but not the truth. She said nothing. Not a single word. And she never looked away. When he was finished, or when words finally failed him, all love, all tenderness had left her eyes. She looked at him with a contempt so merciless that tears began to stream down his cheeks. Then she picked up her bags and walked to the check-in desk without

turning around. That was three years ago. He hadn't spoken to her since.

Mahmoud bent over his computer and opened a new message. He drummed on the keyboard. It was the only thing he'd thought about since he'd been invited to that conference in Brussels: he should contact Klara. But he hadn't. He hadn't been able to bring himself to write to her.

"Come on, man!" he said out loud to himself. "Come on!"

It took him almost a half-hour to write a message of only five lines. It took yet another fifteen minutes to erase whatever might be construed as ambiguity, desperation, references to a history that he no longer had access to. Finally, he took a deep breath and hit: "send."

The first thing he saw when he left the building twenty minutes later was the gray Volvo, sitting in a dark parking lot down by river. When he unlocked his bike, he heard the engine start, saw the headlights turn on, a ghostly cone of light lit up the old metal railing along the Fyris river. For the first time in a very long time, he actually felt afraid.

December 8, 2013
Sankt Anna's archipelago, Sweden

The silence that followed was almost as deafening as the two ear-splitting explosions of the shotgun. The only sounds were ducks quacking on their way over the bay and the dog struggling against its leash, whimpering weakly. Anxiously. Everything was gray. Cliffs and sea. Bare trees and bushes. The wind rustled in the faded reeds at the water's edge.

"You missed," said the old man holding the binoculars.

"Not a chance," replied the young woman at his side. She was still resting the shotgun against her shoulder. The cherry wood of its butt felt cool against her cheek.

"Maybe the first round, but no way I missed on the second," she said. "Let Albert go, and then we'll see."

The old man bent forward and unhooked the leash from the spaniel's collar. The dog bolted with a shrill bark, out through the reeds and up towards the cliffs in the same direction as the gun was shot.

"You missed both times. Believe me. You've gone soft, Klara."

He shook his head in disappointment. The shadow of a smile flashed across the young woman's lips.

"You always say that when I come out here, grandpa. You say I missed. That I've gone soft."

She mimicked the old man's worried expression.

"And every time Albert comes back with our Sunday dinner in his mouth."

The man shook his head.

"I just say what I see in the binoculars, that's all," he muttered.

He took a thermos and two cups out of the worn backpack leaning against a rock at his feet.

"A cup of coffee, and then we go home and wake up grandma," he said.

They heard a short bark followed by wild splashing down by

the shore. Klara smiled and patted her grandfather on the cheek.

"Gone soft, huh? Was that what you said?"

The man winked one of his ice-blue eyes at her, poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. Fumbling with his other hand, he took a small flask out of a hidden pocket.

"Would you like a little bit of lightning to celebrate your triumph, big game hunter?" he said.

"What? You brought booze? Do you know what time it is? You know I'm going to have to tell grandma about this."

Klara shook her head sternly, but let her grandfather pour a little drop of moonshine into her cup. Before she could take a sip, her phone started ringing deep inside one of the pockets of her oilskin coat. She sighed and handed the cup to her grandfather.

"You can't hide from the devil," her grandfather said with a crooked smile.

Klara fished out her Blackberry. She wasn't surprised to see the name Eva-Karin flash across the display. Her boss. Social Democratic dinosaur and member of the European Parliament: Eva-Karin Boman.

"Ugg," she moaned before answering.

"Hello Eva-Karin," she said in a voice an octave higher and considerably faster than usual.

"Klara, darling, how lucky I am to catch you! Things are really getting tight, if you know what I mean. Glennys just called me and asked what our position was on the IT security report. And I haven't even had time to open it yet, as you know. There's just been so much going on with..."

Her voice disappeared for a moment. Klara threw a quick glance at her watch. Just before nine. Eva-Karin was probably on the express train to Arlanda airport. Klara's gaze swept over the gray, windblown cliffs. It felt absurd to talk to Eva-Karin out here in the archipelago. Eva-Karin's voice felt like an intruder into her only refuge.

"... so if you could get a summary to me by – what time shall we say? By five o'clock today, okay? So I can look through it before the meeting tomorrow? You'll have plenty of time, right? You're an angel, darling. "

"Of course," Klara said. "Actually, Eva-Karin, maybe you don't remember, but I'm in Sweden right now and won't be flying back to Brussels until two this afternoon. I'm not sure I can have that to you by five o'clock. "

"Klara, of course I know you're in Sweden," Eva-Karin interrupted in a voice that brooked no further discussion. "But you can work while you're traveling, can't you? I mean, for goodness sake, you've already had the whole weekend free, right?"

Klara squatted down in the wet moss and buried her head in her hands. It was Sunday morning. She'd only had Saturday free. It was as if all zest for life was being sucked out of her.

"Klara? Klara? Are you still there?"

Eva-Karin's voice sounded in her ear.

Klara cleared her throat and shook her head. Took a deep breath and tensed her voice, forcing it to sound alert, forward, and willing to serve.

"Absolutely, Eva-Karin," she said. "No problem. I'll email the summary before five o'clock tonight."

Half an hour later, Klara Walldéen was back in the room she grew up in, surrounded by the pink wallpaper with the floral trim that she'd begged for when she was ten years old. The smooth, worn floorboards beneath her bare feet. Outside her window the Baltic Sea glimmered through the bare trees. She could see the whitecaps on the sea. A storm would be blowing in before the day was over. They had to hurry up. Her childhood friend Bo Bengtsson, who lived further out in the bay, was going to bring her in to Norrköping by boat and car. Then she'd take the train to the airport and a flight down to her regular life in Brussels.

She pulled the pilling Helly Hansen shirt over her shoulders, and replaced it with a light, tight top and an asymmetrical cardigan. She replaced the worn-out corduroy pants, which were actually her grandmother's, with jeans of Japanese denim. She stepped into a pair of limited edition Nikes, foregoing the insulated rubber boots she'd worn on the morning hunt. Applied a little bit of smoky makeup around her eyes. A few strokes of a brush

through her jet-black hair. She looked like a different person in the mirror above the small white dressing table. The floorboards creaked as she moved.

Klara rose from her chair and opened the door to a crawl space. Carefully, with much practice, she leaned into the darkness and pulled out an old, worn shoebox from which she took out a pile of photographs. She spread them out on the floor and crouched down in front of them.

"Are you looking at those old photos again, Klara?"

Klara turned around. Her grandmother seemed almost translucent in the pale light streaming in through the small attic windows. Her body was so brittle and fragile. If you'd hadn't seen it for yourself, you'd never believe she could still hoist herself up to the top of the gnarled apple trees to beat the birds to the last of the fruit.

She had the same ice blue eyes as Grandpa. They could have been siblings –

but that was no joking matter out here in the archipelago. Her face had a few lines but no wrinkles. No make up, just sun, laughter, and salt water, she used to say. She didn't look a day over sixty, but she was turning seventy-five in a couple of months

"I just wanted to take a look, you know," replied Klara.

"Why don't you take them to Brussels with you? I've never understood why you don't. What good are they doing here?"

Grandma shook her head. Something sad and lonely flashed through the blue of her eyes. For a moment it looked as if she wanted to say something, but changed her mind.

"I don't know," Klara said. "That's just the way it has to be. They belong here. So tell me, are there any saffron buns left?"

She collected the photographs and put them gently back into the shoebox, before following her grandmother down the creaking stairs.

"Oh, there she is! She's got her city slicker clothes on and everything!"

Bo Bengtsson was already waiting on the dock when Klara walked down the path from his parents' faded archipelago home.

As she had so many times before. It was as if her feet found their own way. As if her brain or spine weren't needed to avoid the roots, rocks, puddles.

"Quit it, Bosse. You sound like Grandpa," Klara said.

They hugged each other awkwardly. Bosse was a few years older than her, and they'd pretty much grown up together out on the island. He was like a brother to her. Two siblings with opposite appearances and personalities.

They were an odd couple. Klara was small and slight, always top of her class, but so good at soccer that she'd played on Österviking's boy's team for a while. Bo liked fishing and – when he got a little older – hunting, drinking and fighting. She was always on her way out of there. He would never even consider leaving the archipelago. But they had gone to school together day in and day out. During the warmer half of the year they took the school boat, and in the winter they travelled by hovercraft. Things like that create a bond stronger than most.

Klara jumped on board and lifted the battered fenders of Bosse's old workhorse of a boat, while he maneuvered away from the dock. When she was done, she joined him in the small wheelhouse. The waves were rising outside the dirty portholes, their peaks were white and purposeful.

"There'll be a storm tonight," Bosse said.

"That's what they say," Klara replied.

December 17, 2013
Brussels, Belgium

The small park looked bare, icy, and nasty from George Lööw's panoramic window on the seventh floor of the office building of Merchant & Taylor – the world's largest PR firm – situated next to the Square de Meeus in Brussels. George Lööw hated December. Above all, he hated Christmas. He could see the Christmas decorations along the Rue Luxembourg that led down to the European Parliament, and they filled him with irritation. And it wouldn't be over even when December finally came to an end, because the lazy goddamn municipal workers would leave that shit up until February.

Just a few more weeks until he'd be forced to go home to his family's huge apartment on Rådmansgatan and give the annual accounting of his life. The apartment would be decorated with candles and an Elsa Beskow tree. The tasteful Advent stars would be lit, his old man's desserts table would groan under all the marzipan, the toffee made by his new wife, Ellen, and the absurdly expensive chocolate George brought home from Brussels every year that they dutifully, and not without some embarrassment, added to the table.

His family, stuffed and bulging with Christmas food, would sit scattered around on classic Svenskt Tenn sofas with steaming cups of homemade mulled wine in their hands. Full of their pathos and their bloody hypocrisy, they'd exchange condescending glances while asking George about his job as a "lobbyist," a word they pronounced like it was "excrement" or "parvenu."

"Assholes," hissed George to his empty office.

The little coffeemaker sputtered and filled his Nespresso cup halfway. It was his third espresso this morning, and it wasn't even 10 o'clock yet. He was uncharacteristically nervous about his morning meeting with a new client calling themselves Digital

Solutions. George's boss, the American CEO of the European division, Richard Appleby, said they had specifically asked for George. That was good in and of itself. Word had apparently started to spread about him. That he was a man who got things done in Brussels. That he could change which way the wind was blowing.

But it was uncomfortable as hell not to know anything about them. There were literally thousands of firms named Digital Solutions. Impossible to know what this one actually did. There was no way to prepare. He would just have to use his charm and drive. As long as they paid his generous fee there was nothing to worry about. Merchant & Taylor had no scruples. *You pay, you play* was the unofficial motto. Chemicals, weapons, tobacco. Go right ahead. Hadn't Appleby even represented North Korea for a while back in the early nineties? Or was that just a rumor? Whatever. But George preferred to know who he would be sitting across from before a meeting began.

He was still sweating from an early squash game at the gym. The light blue Turnbull & Asser shirt stuck to his back. Hope it stops before the meeting, he thought. This coffee probably probably wouldn't help matters.

He knocked back the espresso with a grimace. George drank his coffee like an Italian. Just a quick espresso on the go. Sophisticated. Stylish. Even when he was alone in his office, he took his coffee standing. It was important to never drop the attitude.

Nine fifty-five. He gathered a stack of papers, a pad, and a pen. The papers had nothing to do with Digital Solutions. But the client didn't need to know that. He didn't want to look like a goddamn intern, going into a meeting with just a pen.

George had loved the conference room on the corner of the seventh floor since joining Merchant & Taylor, and always booked it when it was available. The corner room's two glass walls faced the interior of the office floor, where George himself had begun his career. If you pressed a button next to the power switch behind the door, the glass walls instantly frosted over,

becoming as opaque as thick ice. The first few weeks on the job, when George sat in front of his computer working on uninteresting business analyses for customers in the sugar industry, auto industry, polymer industry, whatever, and writing brain-dead newsletters, he thought those glass walls were the coolest thing he'd ever seen. He loved to watch the more experienced consultants float across the wooden floor in their handmade Italian leather shoes and disappear into the ice cube. Epic.

Nowadays George was the one gliding across the floor on his way to the ice cube. He felt their eyes. Looks just like the ones he used to throw when he was sitting there on the floor. Many of the people he'd started working with were still there. Not all of them had had the same rocket career trajectory as George, and maybe not all of the eyes following him were entirely adoring. But everyone put on a good face. Waved. Smiled. Played the game.

It still felt like a fluke that he'd managed to land this job after resigning from Gottlieb, a Swedish law firm, three years ago. The fact that he was working at Gottlieb with something as crude as corporate law and mergers and acquisitions had been difficult for the old man to accept. In the Lööw family if you became a lawyer in private practice, you practiced criminal law. Big principles, right and wrong. Nothing as *dirty* as business transactions and money. That was for upstarts" without ancestry, habits, or wit," as the old man used to say. At least he wasn't aware of the actual circumstances surrounding George's resignation.

Though the old man had been somewhat appeased when George, after his sojourn at the law firm, had been accepted into a prestigious post-graduate program at the College d'Europe in Bruges. A bona fide elite school in the French mold with a fast-track into the EU crème de la crème in Brussels. They'd finally make something out of the kid. Maybe he'd end up at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs? Or the European Commission in Brussels? Something proper.

George knew that a career in Sweden was out of the question after his short stint at Gottlieb, so with his recent EU law degree in hand Brussels was the natural place to start looking for a job.

He dismissed the idea of working at a law firm immediately. He was finished with boxes full of dry annual reports and endless nights of searching through hard drives for contracts and more or less fishy settlements.

PR-firms proved to be something else entirely. Lavish offices. Hot chicks from all over the world in slim suits and high heels. Refrigerators stocked with free soda and beer. Espresso machines instead of filtered coffee.

To go from the gray, dirty sidewalks of Brussels into the cool and softly lit glass and wood office building of Merchant & Taylor, with its silent elevators and overall whisper noise-level, was heaven. Sure, the starting salary wasn't as good as at the American law firms, but there was the possibility of really big money. After a few years they gave you a company car. And not just any old crappy car, but an Audi, a BMW, maybe even a Jag.

The huge English and American PR firms were the mercenaries of Brussels. They sold veneer, information, and influence to the highest bidder, regardless of ideological or moral convictions. A lot of people looked down on lobbyists. George loved them unconditionally from the first second. He was in his element. These were his people. His old man and the rest of the family could think whatever the hell they wanted to.

George stepped into the cube and closed the door behind him. It bothered him that his client was already sitting in one of the bright leather seats. The secretaries were instructed to have visitors wait in the reception area if they were early. But George didn't let the client see his annoyance; he just casually frosted the glass with the twist of a button.

"Mr. Reiper! Welcome to Merchant & Taylor!" he said as he slapped on his widest, most self-assured smile, and held out a well-manicured hand to a man, around the age of sixty, who was sitting slumped in his chair, in a position that seemed unaware of, or in direct opposition to, everything that might be considered ergonomic.

Reiper looked like he lived a profoundly unhealthy life. He wasn't exactly fat, more half-inflated, with the loose outline of a

neglected helium balloon. He was almost completely bald, and around the sides of his head ran an unruly wreath of slush-gray hair. His face was sallow, as though he rarely went outdoors. A thick white scar ran from his left temple down to the corner of his mouth. He wore a shabby black polo shirt with a pair of dry-cleaned, pleated khakis, and had holsters for an iPhone and a flashlight in his belt. A dirty notebook and a blue Georgetown Hoyas cap were lying on the shiny glass surface of the conference table. His position in the chair, the slow movement of his finger on the screen of his phone, the way he didn't even look up when George entered the room gave Mr. Reiper an aura of authority that seemed as obvious as it was ruthless. George felt the hairs on his forearms stand up: a purely primal response to the feelings of discomfort and disadvantage that his new client evoked. He knew instinctively that he never, ever wanted to hear the story behind Mr Reiper's scar.

"Good morning, Mr. Lööw. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me," said Reiper, finally taking George's outstretched hand.

The pronunciation of his surname was almost perfect. Unusual for an American, George thought. His voice was throaty and a little sluggish. Maybe Southern?

"Have you had coffee? I apologize, our receptionist is brand new. I'm sure you know how it is. "

Reiper gave a quick shake of his head and looked around the room.

"I like your office, Mr. Lööw. The detail of the frosted glass is, well, spectacular."

They sat down across from each other, and George carefully arranged his completely irrelevant papers into a rough semicircle around his notebook.

"So, what can we help Digital Solutions with?" George said and switched on yet another smile that he considered worth every cent of the 350 euros he cost per hour.

Reiper leaned back and returned George's smile. There was something about that smile, something about how it faltered because of the scar that made George want to look away. And

there was something about Reiper's eyes. In the warm light of the conference room's meticulously positioned spotlights they sometimes looked green, sometimes brown. Cool and expectant, they seemed to change color at random. Combined with the fact that he never seemed to blink, it gave Reiper the lazily ironic, utterly lethal expression of a reptile.

"So this is the deal," Reiper said and slid a couple of stapled documents across the table at George.

"I know you're very proud of your discretion here at Merchant & Taylor, but then I also know you sing like canaries when the tide turns. Purely a formality, of course."

George picked up the document and flipped through it quickly. It was a classic non-disclosure agreement between him and Digital Solutions. He couldn't reveal anything of what they discussed in their meetings. He couldn't even mention to anyone that he worked for Digital Solutions or was aware of their existence. If he were to do so, he could be liable for an almost astronomical amount, depending on the severity of his slip up. Nothing out of the ordinary, really. Many clients were concerned about their anonymity and were not always willing to be associated with a public relations firm known for being as ruthless as Merchant & Taylor.

"It says that it was signed in Washington, DC," George said at last. "But we're in Brussels."

"Yes," replied Reiper, somewhat absently. He appeared to be reading something on his iPhone. "Our lawyers think that would make it easier to avoid what they call a forum dispute if that become necessary."

He shrugged and looked up from his phone.

"But I'm sure you know more about *non-disclosure agreements* than I do?"

There was a new sharpness in his voice. Something like interest flickered in his otherwise dead eyes. George felt ill at ease. Sure, he'd signed a series of similar contracts during his time at Merchant & Taylor. However, there was something about how Reiper had said it, something more complicated. George pushed the thought away. It was impossible. No one could know anything

about that. Reiper's allusion must just be a coincidence.

George pulled his Montblanc out of his breast pocket, signed the contract with a quick flourish, and pushed it back across the table to Reiper.

"There you go," he said, anxious to get the meeting started. "Maybe now we can get started?"

"Excellent," Reiper replied absently. Without looking up from his iPhone, he folded the agreement carelessly and jammed it into the inside pocket of his worn jacket. Finally, he slid the phone into its holster with care and met George's eyes.

"We need help with a translation," he said. "To start with."