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Norwegian by Night

Written by Derek B. Miller

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Norwegian by Night

Derek B. Miller



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For my son

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PART I

The 59th Parallel

CHAPTER 1

IT IS SUMMER AND luminous. Sheldon Horowitz sits on a folding director's chair, high above the picnic and out of reach of the food, in a shaded enclave in Oslo's Frogner Park. There is a half-eaten *karbonade* sandwich that he doesn't like on the paper plate cradled in his lap. With his right index finger, he's playing with the condensation on a bottle of beer that he started to drink but lost interest in some time ago. His feet twitch back and forth like a schoolboy's, but they twitch slower now at the age of eighty-two. They achieve a smaller arc. Sheldon will not admit it to Rhea and Lars—never, of course not—but he can't help wondering what he's doing here and what he's going to do about it before the wonderment passes.

Sheldon is an arm's length from his granddaughter, Rhea, and her new husband, Lars, who is just now taking a long pull on his own beer and is looking so cheerful, so kind, so *peppy*, that Sheldon wants to take the hot dog from his hand and insert it up his nose. Rhea, who looks oddly pale today, would not respond well to this, and it might condemn Sheldon to further *socializing excursions* ("so

you can adjust”), and in a world filled with fairness Sheldon would not deserve them—nor Lars the hot-dog maneuver. But it had been Rhea’s idea to move them from New York to Norway, and Sheldon—widowed, old, impatient, impertinent—saw in Lars’s countenance a suppressed desire to gloat.

None of which was fair.

“Do you know why hot dogs are called hot dogs?”

Sheldon says this aloud from his commanding position. If he had a cane he would wave it, but he walks without one.

Lars looks up in attention. Rhea, however, silently sighs.

“World War I. We were angry at the Germans, so we punished them by renaming their food. Better than the War on Terror,” he continued. “We’re angry at the terrorists, so we punish the French by renaming our own food.”

“What do you mean?” asks Lars.

Sheldon sees Rhea tap Lars on the leg and raise her eyebrows, implying—with the intensity of a hot poker—that he is not supposed to be encouraging these sorts of rants, these outbursts, these diversions from the here and now. Anything that might contribute to the hotly debated dementia.

Sheldon was not supposed to see this poke, but does, and redoubles his conviction.

“Freedom fries! I’m talking about Freedom fries. Goodbye French fry, hello Freedom fry. An act of Congress actually concocted this harebrained idea. And my granddaughter thinks I’m the one losing my mind. Let me tell you something, young lady. I’m not crossing the aisle of sanity. The aisle is crossing me.”

Sheldon looks around the park. There is not the ebb and flow of random strangers one finds in any American metropolis, the kind who are not only strangers to us but to each other as well. He is among tall, homogeneous, acquainted, well-meaning, smiling people all dressed in the same transgenerational clothing, and no matter how hard he tries, he just can’t draw a bead on them.

Rhea. The name of a Titan. The daughter of Uranus and Gaia, heaven and earth, Cronos’s wife, mother of the gods. Zeus himself

suckled at her breast, and from her body came the known world. Sheldon's son—Saul, dead now—named her that to raise her above the banality that he steamed through in Vietnam with the Navy in 1973 and '74. He came home from the Riverine Force for one month of rest and relaxation before heading out for a second tour. It was a September. The leaves were out on the Hudson and in the Berkshires. According to his Mabel—vanished now, but once privy to such things—Saul and his girlfriend made love only one time on that return visit, and Rhea was conceived. The next morning, Saul had a conversation with Sheldon that transformed them both, and then he went back to Vietnam where, two months after he landed, a Vietcong booby trap blew off his legs while he was looking for a downed pilot on a routine search-and-rescue. Saul bled to death on the boat before reaching the hospital.

"Name her *Rhea*," Saul wrote in his last letter from Saigon, when Saigon was still Saigon, and Saul was still Saul. Maybe he remembered his mythology from high school, and chose her name for all the right reasons. Or maybe he fell in love with that doomed character from Stanislaw Lem's book, which he read under his woolen blanket when the other soldiers had faded off to sleep.

It took a Polish author to inspire this American Jew, who named his daughter for a Greek Titan before being killed by a Vietnamese mine in an effort to please his Marine father, who was once a sniper in Korea—and was undoubtedly still being pursued by the North Koreans across the wilderness of Scandinavia. Yes, even here, amid the green of Frogner Park on a sunny day in July, with so little time left to atone for all that he has done.

"Rhea." It means nothing here. It is the Swedish word for a sale at the department store. And, so easily, all is undone.

"Papa?" says Rhea.

"What?"

"So what do you think?"

"Of what?"

"You know. The area. The park. The neighborhood. This is

where we're moving to when we sell the place in Tøyen. I realize it isn't Gramercy Park."

Sheldon doesn't answer, so she raises her eyebrows and opens her palms as if to conjure up a response. "Oslo," she summarizes. "Norway. The light. This life."

"This life? You want my views on this life?"

Lars is silent. Sheldon looks to him for camaraderie, but Lars is away. There is eye contact, but no engagement of his mental faculties in the moment. Lars is captive to an alien cultural performance between grandfather and granddaughter—a verbal duel for which he is ill equipped, and which he knows it would be rude to interrupt.

And yet there is pity here, too. On Lars's face is one of the few universal expressions known to men everywhere. It reads, *I-just-married-into-this-conversation-so-don't-look-at-me*. In this Sheldon finds a hint of the familiar in him. But Sheldon senses something distinctly Norwegian about it, too. Something so *nonjudgmental* that it immediately grates on his nerves.

Sheldon looks back to Rhea, to this woman whom Lars managed to marry. Her hair is raven black and pulled into a silky ponytail. Her blue eyes sparkle like the Sea of Japan before battle.

Sheldon thinks her gaze has grown deeper because of the pregnancy.

This life? If he were to reach out to touch her face at this moment, run his fingers over her cheekbones, and rub his thumb over her lower lip to wipe off an errant tear from a strong breeze, he would surely break into sobs and grab her, hold her next to him, and press her head against his shoulder. There is life *on the way*. That is all that matters.

She is waiting for an answer to her question, and it isn't coming. He is staring at her. Perhaps he has forgotten the question. She becomes disappointed.

The sun will not set until after ten o'clock. Children are out everywhere, and people have come home early from work to enjoy the stretch of summer that lies before them as the reward for the dark-

ness of the winter months. Parents order open-faced sandwiches, and feed little bits to their kids as fathers return plastic baby bottles to expensive prams with exotic names.

Quinny. Stokke. Bugaboo. Peg Perego. Maxi-Cosi.

This life? She should already know that this life is the product of so many deaths. Mario. Bill. Rhea's grandmother Mabel, who died eight months ago, prompting Sheldon's move here.

There is no calculating the trajectory caused by Saul's death.

Mabel's funeral was held in New York, though originally she and Sheldon came from different parts of the country. He was born in New England and she in Chicago. Eventually, both settled in New York, first as visitors, then as residents, and possibly, after many years, as New Yorkers.

After the funeral service and reception, Sheldon went alone to a coffee shop in Gramercy, close to their home. It was midafternoon. The lunch hour was over. The mourners had dispersed. Sheldon should have been sitting *shiva*, allowing his community to care for him, feed him, and keep him company for seven days, as was the custom. Instead he sat at the 71 Irving Place Coffee and Tea Bar, near 19th Street, eating a blueberry muffin and sipping black coffee. Rhea had flown in for the service without Lars, and noticed Sheldon's escape from the reception. She found him a few blocks away, and took the seat across from him.

She was wearing a fine black suit, and her hair was down to her shoulders. She was thirty-two years old and had a determined look on her face. Sheldon misread its cause, thinking she was going to reprimand him for skipping out on *shiva*. When she spoke her mind, he nearly spit a blueberry across the table.

"Come with us to Norway," she said.

"Get stuffed," said Sheldon.

"I'm serious."

"Me too."

"The area is called Frogner. It's wonderful. The building has a

separate entrance to the basement apartment. You'd have complete autonomy. We're not in it yet, but we will be by winter."

"You should rent it to trolls. They have trolls there, right? Or is that Iceland?"

"We don't want to rent it out. It feels weird knowing strange people are under your feet all the time."

"That's because you don't have kids. You get used to that feeling."

"I think you should come. What's here for you?"

"Other than the blueberry muffins?"

"For example."

"One wonders how much more there needs to be at my age."

"Don't dismiss this."

"What am I going to do there? I'm an American. I'm a Jew. I'm eighty-two. I'm a retired widower. A Marine. A watch repairman. It takes me an hour to pee. Is there a club there I'm unaware of?"

"I don't want you to die alone."

"For heaven's sake, Rhea."

"I'm pregnant. It's very early, but it's true."

At this, on this day of days, Sheldon took her hand and touched it to his lips, closed his eyes, and tried to feel a new life in her pulse.

Rhea and Lars had been living in Oslo for almost a year by the time Mabel died and Sheldon decided to go. Lars had a good job designing video games, and Rhea was settling into life as an architect. Her degree from Cooper Union in New York was already coming in handy, and, as the population of Oslo pushed ever outward and into mountain cabins, she decided to stay.

Lars, being Lars, was overjoyed and encouraging and optimistic about her ability to adapt and join the pod. Norwegians, true to their nature, prefer to spawn in their native waters. Consequently Oslo is peopled by Norwegians married to a shadow population of displaced souls who all carry the look of tourists being led like children through the House of Wax.

With his parents' help, Lars had bought a split-level three-

bedroom flat in Tøyen back in 1992 that was now worth almost three and a half million kroner. This was rather a lot for the part of town that Sheldon associated with the Bronx. Together they'd saved up five hundred thousand in cash, and with the necessary mortgage—which was a stretch, but not a terrible stretch—they were looking at a three-bedroom place in Frogner, which to Sheldon was the local Central Park West. It was a slightly stuffy area, but Lars and Rhea were growing tired of waiting for Tøyen to gentrify, and the influx of immigrants was moving the money out to other areas and affecting the quality of the schools. There was a growing population from Pakistan and the Balkans. Somalis had moved into the local park for khat-chewing sessions, the local council in its wisdom had moved a methadone treatment facility into the shopping center across the road that attracted heroin addicts, and all the while Rhea and Lars tried to explain that the area had “character.” But Sheldon saw only menace.

Luckily, though, there were no North Koreans, those slanty-eyed little bastards. And if there were any, they would stand out. Hiding a North Korean in Norway is hard. Hiding one in New York is like hiding a tree in a forest. They're on every street corner, selling flowers and running grocery stores, their beady eyes glaring at you as you walk down the street, sending coded messages back to Pyongyang by telegraph, letting them know your whereabouts.

They'd been tracking him since 1951—he was sure of it. You don't kill twelve men named Kim from the top of a seawall at Incheon and think they're going to forgive and forget. Not the Koreans. They have Chinese patience, but an Italian-style vendetta streak. And they blend. Oh! It took Sheldon years to learn how to spot them, feel their presence, evade them, deceive them.

Not here, though. Here they stood out in a crowd. Each evil-hearted one of them. Each brainwashed manic nutter who was under the surveillance of the next brainwashed manic nutter, in case the first one started to suffer from freethinking.

"I have news for you bastards!" he wants to yell to them. "You started the war! And when you learn this, you will owe me a serious apology."

But Sheldon, even now, believes the deceived are not responsible for their actions.

Mabel never understood his aversion to Koreans. She said he was slipping, that his doctor also suspected it, and that it was time he listened to reason and accepted that he'd never been a romanticized sniper, but rather a pedestrian clerk in Pusan, and that the North Koreans were not following him. He'd never shot anybody. Never fired a gun in anger.

She was going on about this only a few months before she died.

"You're going senile, Donny."

"Am not."

"You're changing. I see it."

"You're sick, Mabel. How isn't that going to affect me? Besides, you've been saying this since 1976. And maybe I'm not changing. Maybe it's you. You're just growing immune to my charms."

"It's not an accusation. You're over eighty years old. Rhea told me that at eighty-five, over twenty percent of us get Alzheimer's. It's something we need to discuss."

"Is not!"

"You need to eat more fish."

"Do not!"

In retrospect, this was a rather childish response, but it was also a tried-and-tested rebuttal.

His memories were just becoming more vivid with age. Time was folding in a new way. Without a future, the mind turned back in on itself. That's not dementia. One might even say it's the only rational response to the inevitable.

Besides, what accounts for such memories?

He'd gotten lost in Korea in early September 1950. Through a series of events that only made sense at the time, he was picked up on the coast by the Australian ship HMAS *Bataan*, part of Task Force 91, whose job was to set up and maintain a blockade and pro-

vide cover for the American troops landing on the beach, of which Sheldon was supposed to be one, but wasn't because he was on the *Bataan*. Sheldon, who was called Donny then, was supposed to be with the Fifth Marine Regimental Combat Team that was hitting Red Beach, but he got lost during the reassignment, because armies lose things.

He was too young to fight when World War II came around. All he could think when Korea popped up five years later was that he wasn't going to miss *this* war, too, and he enlisted immediately, only to end up—at the moment of truth—surrounded by a bunch of outback hillbillies who wouldn't let him borrow their rowboat so he could get to shore and shoot people, like he was supposed to.

"Sorry, mate. Could need that. Only got four. Little ship, big guns, bullets flying around. You understand, right?"

So he decided to borrow without permission—he refused to use the word "steal"—a rowboat from his Australian hosts. It wasn't completely unreasonable, he realized, their wanting to keep the emergency gear during a massive amphibious assault mission, but people have different needs sometimes, and choices have to be made.

Donny Horowitz was twenty-two years old then. He had a clear mind, a steady hand, and a chip on his Jewish shoulder the size and shape of Germany. For the Army, it was only a matter of assigning him to the proper role and then tasking him with the right job. The role was scout-sniper. The task was Inchon.

Inchon was a tactically challenging mission. The North Koreans had weakened themselves against the Pusan Perimeter for almost a month and a half, and General MacArthur decided now was the time to flank them by taking Korea's western port city of Inchon. But the site had poor beaches and shallow approaches, and it restricted invasion options to the rhythm of the moon's tidal pull.

The naval bombardment had been going on for two days, weakening Inchon's defenses. There wasn't a man there who wasn't thinking of D-Day. Nor a man there not thinking about what happened at Omaha Beach when American bombers missed their

targets and the DD tanks sank to the bottom of the sea during their approach, giving the Americans no armor on the ground to provide cover and firepower. No bomb craters to use as foxholes.

Donny would be damned if he wasn't going to be at the front of that invasion.

That morning, amid the smoke and the artillery fire, with birds flying wildly amid the noise, the Third and Fifth Marine regiments were advancing toward Green Beach in LSTs, with Pershing tanks in their bellies. Donny eased the borrowed rowboat down the side of the *Bataan*, slid down after it with his rifle, and rowed face-forward into the artillery fire directed at the naval craft.

On Red Beach, the North Koreans were defending a high seawall that the South Korean Marines were scaling on ladders. A row of sharpshooters on the top of the wall were trying to pick off Americans, South Koreans, and everyone else fighting under the UN flag. Missiles arced overhead. The North Koreans were firing green tracer bullets supplied by their Chinese allies, which crossed with the Allied red ones.

They started firing at Donny directly. The bullets came in slowly at first and then sped past him, splaying into the water or puncturing the rowboat.

Sheldon often wondered what the Koreans, a superstitious lot, were thinking when they saw a lone soldier standing face-forward in the water, illuminated by the reds, greens, oranges, and yellows of combat reflecting off the water and clouds of the morning sky. A diminutive, blue-eyed demon impervious to their defenses.

One barrage hit Donny's boat hard. Four bullets punctured the prow, and then the deck. Water started coming in, and ran around his boots. The Marines had already touched the beach and were advancing toward the wall. The green tracers were tracking low into his regiment.

Having come this far, and being a bad swimmer—from four hundred yards offshore, and with two feet in his watery grave—Sheldon decided to use his ammunition, *goddamn it*, rather than drown with it.

He had such soft hands for a boy. Five feet seven inches tall, he'd never done physical labor or heavy lifting. He added up the figures in his father's cobbler shop, and dreamed of hitting one deep into left field over the Green Monster for the Red Sox. The first time his fingers touched the bottoms of Mabel's breasts—under the wire of her bra during a Bogart movie with Bacall—she said his fingers were so soft it was like the touch of a girl. This confession had made him more sexually ravenous than any picture show he'd ever seen.

When he'd enlisted, they'd chosen him as a sniper. They could see he was even-tempered. Quiet. Smart. Wiry, but rugged. He had a lot of anger, but a capacity to direct it through reason.

We think of guns as brutal things used by heavy men. But the art of the rifle demands the most subtle feel—the touch of a lover or a watchmaker. There is an understanding between the finger and trigger. The breath is kept under disciplined control. Every muscle is used to provide only stillness. The direction of the wind on the cheek finds expression in the rise of the barrel, lifted lightly as from the heat of a warm blueberry pie on a winter afternoon.

And now, with his feet in the water, Donny focused on the distant objects above the wall, flickering in the fog. The artillery fire did not unnerve him. The water in his boots was just a sensation with no meaning. The bird that flew into his upper thigh, in the confusion of noise and smoke, was only a feeling. He was withdrawn, and to this day he remembers the event with music. What he heard, and hears even now in his memories, is Bach's unaccompanied Cello Suite no. 1 in G Major.

At this moment of deepest calm, of the most complete peace, he lost the anger of his youth. The venom against the Nazis was bled from his veins by the music, the fog, the water.

Now, in this moment of grace, Donny killed.

Through the business end of an unusually straight-shooting .30-caliber M-1 Garand, Donny emptied three clips of armor-piercing 168-grain ammunition in under thirty seconds. He killed twelve men, clearing them off the high wall from a distance of four hundred yards, allowing the first U.S. Marines to assault the peak

without loss of life while he bled from a surface bullet wound to his left leg.

His action was the smallest of gestures, like dropping a pebble into a still pool of water and disturbing the image of the night sky.

He didn't tell Mabel any of this until much later, of course. So late, in fact, that she never came to believe it. They had a son to think about, and heroism was a private matter for Sheldon. He said he'd been a logistics officer, far south on much safer ground. The wound? The wound was caused by carelessly walking into a toolshed, where he was punctured by a rake. He made it a joke.

Compared to me, it was the sharpest tool in the shed.

Sheldon was, as he recalls, awarded the Navy Commendation Medal and the Purple Heart for his part in the invasion. The question is, however, where had he put them? He ran an antique and watch-repair shop. They could be anywhere, in any crevice. They were the only tangible proof that he still had his marbles. And now the shop is gone, its contents sold off. Everything once so carefully assembled is scattered now. Back in the world, they will be assembled into new collections by new collectors, and then scattered again as the collectors return to the mist.

This life. What a question! No one really wants to know the answer to this.

In this life, my body has become a withered twig, where once I stood tall. I distantly remember the lush earth and beech forests of New England—outside my bedroom window as a child—growing in kingdoms. My parents near me.

In this life, I hobble like an old man, when once I could fly over doubts and contradictions.

In this life, my memories are the smoke I choke on, burning my eyes.

In this life, I remember hungers that will never return. When I was once a lover with the bluest eyes she had ever seen—deeper than Paul Newman's, darker than Frank Sinatra's.

This life! This life is coming to an end without any explanation or apology, and where every sense of my soul or ray of light through a cloud promises to be my end.

This life was an abrupt and tragic dream that seized me during the wee hours of a Saturday morning as the sunrise reflected off the mirror above her vanity table, leaving me speechless just as the world faded to white.

And even if they did want to know, who is there left to tell?