

## THE SECOND AMERICA

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Father and I usually had the Hotel Seestern to ourselves during our end-of-the year stay, so we were surprised to see a pile of luggage at the end of the hallway when we arrived. A tanned girl guarded the bags.

“Guten Tag,” she said when I was about to unlock our door. “I’m Kaitlyn. Just Kay, since we’re neighbors, kind of.” She spoke German with an English accent. We shook hands. Her fingers felt warm and bony.

Since she used her first name, I played along.

“Daniela Zimmer,” I said. “And this is my Father, Max Zimmer.”

She turned towards Father and froze.

Father wore his mountain-man face. That’s what I called it as a girl. He kept his face as still as a stone mask. He looked as if life had disappointed him so profoundly he’d given up on it. It always passed, but Kay didn’t know that. She looked at me for help.

I patted Father’s shoulder. He blinked and gave Kay a broad smile. “It’s a pleasure.” He shook her hand for a long time.

Rain splattered against the windows. It would turn to ice in the afternoon. During the summer, Jörkum’s Northern Sea climate attracted families and asthma-patients. Now it lay deserted. The village huddled behind the dunes. Snow and rain chased each other.

“You’re traveling alone?” I asked.

She shook her head. “With my family. They’re keen on the climate. And the famous Jörkum New Year’s Dip.”

I’d never heard of it.

Back in our room, Father folded his arms behind his back and started pacing. I unpacked and went to the bathroom to make sure everything was in order. The same plastic shower curtain rustled in the tub, stiff with traces of decade-old lime. I plugged in Father’s electric toothbrush and put my mechanical one next to it. In the

main room, chemical scent rose from the carpet. Starched linen covered the two parallel beds.

He had brought new language CD's, covers marked with the appropriate flags: Learn Swedish in Two Weeks. Advanced French—The Conversational Method! You, too, will speak Hindi. He loved to ingest new languages although he didn't know any native speakers. He spoke to the foreign voices inside his headphones.

"I remember her," he said.

"Who?"

"The Girl. She reminds me of someone." He pursed his lips.

"Take it easy," I said. "I'll make some tea."

"Those tea bags are so old there's dust in them."

"You never complained."

"I do now." He resumed pacing.

The Seestern had been Father's secret. For as long as me, my brothers, and my sister could remember, he'd spent New Year's Eve alone. He disappeared. We waited for the sound of his car and his steps in the hallway, numb to firecrackers and popping champagne corks. A week into January he returned with pink cheeks and smelling of salt.

After his heart attack, he started to live with my siblings and me, alternating among us with the seasons. We joked about having him to ourselves for once. We outdid each other speculating about his former escape. A drilling island on the Norway coast! A cottage in Finland! A hammock on Aruba! He clutched the bedding with his fists and disclosed his destination: Jörkum with its leaden beach and perpetually closed cafés.

"One of you has to take me, it seems." He looked at me.

That Father expected me—the unmarried daughter and self-declared loner—to be his travel companion didn't surprise us. It seemed fair that I, who refused the burden of husband and children, was now assigned the extra responsibility of being Father's caretaker between the years.

I loved Jörkum, because the island was a model in dodging intrusion. Sand-caked and inert, it withstood time and maintenance. The train from the ferry to the village center chug-chugged along with the regularity of a breathing machine. Most local faces looked

bored but saturated with healthiness. Miniature golf seemed to be the sport of choice, but no one played during the winter.

When everything was in its place, I poured water in the kettle and plugged it in. We sat down in front of the window, a table between us, to take in the dim sunset.

He exhaled. "Made it through another year."

Next door, someone yelled, "No!"

We flinched.

A woman cursed in English. A man countered with sarcastic German ha-ha-ha's. The duet continued for a couple of minutes, then a door slammed and steps hurried past our door.

Father pinched his nose. "That was the girl."

I waited for whispered apologies or continued accusations of whoever had stayed behind in the room next door. Water rumbled at the bottom of the kettle.

Father let go of his nose. His eyes widened. "Of course," he said.

"What?"

He pressed his fingertip against his thigh as if to pinpoint his memory. "Kay reminds me of Mary."

I unplugged the kettle. The water quieted down. I held it up until the last tremors had gone.

"Mary was a married woman," I said. "Kay is a girl. A child."

He put a teabag into his mug, and held it towards me. I poured him hot water.

"You have to look at the essence," he said. "A girl. A woman. A man. A place. It doesn't matter."

Mary from America had been our housekeeper for two or three years when I had been around ten. Her German husband, Leo, worked in the management of a chemical plant.

Father had introduced her that way. He sat us down on the sofa and knelt in front of us. "Mary is from America," he said. He drew out the second syllable, "A-meh-rica," as if he were referring to a magic kingdom instead of a real country.

At first we were disappointed at how normal Mary looked. She wore knitted pullovers with block and stripe patterns. Her hair was

straight and blonde and parted in the middle. But she had Kay's accent, which made her sound as if she had her own funny secret. And like Kay, she had an almost metallic tan, as if she came from another dimension where everything was more real.

She did alien things. We loved it. The house smelled like the new foods she introduced us to: apple crumble, cereal, macaroni and cheese, chocolate chip cookies. Even a conventional dinner could be exciting, because Mary had a fondness for food colorings. Once, we ate green pasta and pretended we were sheep.

She pushed the dining table from the wall into the middle of the room. She opened closed doors and pulled curtains aside.

She used a reward system to make us tidy up our rooms. When she was satisfied, she drew a checkmark behind our names on the whiteboard, which was on public display in the hallway. Five checkmarks meant extra money for the weekend, but we didn't care about that. We were fascinated with the ritual itself. We held our breath when she opened the door to our rooms, and relaxed when she checked off our names with two vigorous strokes.

For weeks at a time I would forget that she was paid for what she did. But then Leo would join us for dinner and talk about job opportunities and going back to the States with Mary.

He slapped her thigh and said, "What do you think, Schatz? Florida?"

She never said that she wanted to stay. For that I resented her. She was temporary. She was plotting her departure while she crawled on the living room carpet on all fours, my sister on her back.

Mary cleaned our house. She wore her apron like an accessory and made mopping part of a game. The mop became a bear for us to chase, a jellyfish stinging the tiles. "Ouch," she said, wiping. "Go away, nasty thing! Go to the next tile, it's dirtier than me!"

In the afternoon, she sat at the kitchen table and read palm-sized Reclam paperbacks with yellow and orange covers: *Don Carlos*, the German translation of Cicero's *Epistolae ad Atticum*. She bent the pages with her big hands. She spoke English to Father, German to us. Father took over cooking when she immersed herself in her books. Once he prepared fruit salad. The pieces of or-

ange, melon, and pineapple matched the spines of Mary's books stacked next to her elbow. He whistled a tune, and she smiled.

The Seestern staff put up a breakfast buffet in the restaurant the next morning, since there were guests besides Father and me.

Father scanned the empty room. He'd combed his hair and shaved.

"What's the use of tables without table service?" he said.

"What do you want? I'll get it for you. They have muesli."

"Eggs and Ham. Tea."

Kay came downstairs with a couple. The woman wore the same pink hooded sweater as Kay, but she was rounder. Both women took fruit salad and tea. The man poured himself a coffee. When Kay was done filling her plate, she came towards us and put her plate on our table. "Mind if I join you?"

Maybe she was still battling her family. I didn't want her to sit with us. But she had asked Father.

Father slurped his tea. "You can sit here if you don't shout or make a scene."

"Shout?" She sat down. "No scenes this morning. Not awake enough."

The man and the woman stood in the middle of the room with their full plates, looking back and forth between our table and the empty table next to us.

"Are you going to ask your parents to sit with us?" I asked Kay.

This made her notice me. Her blonde eyebrows lifted a tad.

"Your parents," I said.

"They're not my parents," she said.

So it was that kind of family. Arguments and drama and unclear relationships. The couple retreated and sat down at a faraway table. She dug around in her fruit salad and shot angry glances at Kay's back. He poured milk into his coffee, apparently indifferent.

After some minutes of gulping silence, Father decided to speak. "Do you want to share your relationship to the people at the other table?"

"Well," Kay said. "Mel's my older sister. She's married to Klaus. I'm visiting them."

“Where do you normally live?” Father asked.

“With my parents in L.A. They can do without me for a while, I guess.” She stirred her tea. Oh yes, a dreary crisis lurked not far beneath the surface, I could tell.

Father said, “Your German is very good.”

She jerked back her shoulders and switched on a movie-starlet smile. “I speak many languages. Can you guess what this is?” She unleashed a string of alien syllables.

Father said, “Ah.” He answered her in the same strain of gibberish, and turned to me. “Danish,” he said. “Kay asked us whether we want to join her and her family for the midnight dip on New Year’s Eve.”

“Well done!” Kay called.

“Bathing in ice water in the middle of the night,” I said. “Delightful.”

Kay ignored my comment. She turned back to Father. The old man who spoke Danish seemed to excite her. Her cheeks shone. She said something in French, and Father answered. She laughed. She became younger when she laughed, her gestures sloppy but enthusiastic. She seemed to have forgotten about Mel and Klaus at the next table.

“Now wait,” Father said. “I bet I can say this in Italian. I’m a bit rusty, if you’ll excuse me. Here goes.” He said something that sounded Italian enough to me.

She answered, calm now, her hands folded under her chin. Their conversation ceased to be an experiment. It became a serious exchange.

At one point, Mel and Klaus left, leaving their trays with dirty dishes on the deserted bar. I waved back as they passed by. Why didn’t I have the guts to get up and follow them? We could form a triangle of mediocrity.

Father and I took a walk on the beach. Flurries blurred the horizon. We wore red rain jackets and rubber boots, our Jörkum attire.

“A bit obnoxious, the girl,” I said.

“No. She’s very interesting.” He contemplated this for a moment, and shook himself out of his thoughts by stomping after a

seagull. The bird waddled and took off. A maimed crab stayed behind, shears dangling in the wind.

“Don’t forget your food,” he called. His teeth looked whiter than I remembered them. He prodded the crab with his foot.

We walked on along the curved beach. Three people emerged in the distance. The sand and snow obliterated them when the wind picked up, but when we got closer we recognized Kay and her family. Mel and Klaus held hands. Kay walked slightly behind them, hands buried in the pockets of her tight blue jacket.

Father made a little jump. “Hello!” He called.

They walked on. Mel and Klaus’s interlinked hands swung back and forth.

He made a funnel with his gloved hands. “Hello! Wait!” His voice boomed, but there was a strained moist sound underneath.

“Wait,” he called again. He coughed. Threads of spittle stuck to his gloves.

“The wind’s too strong.” I patted his back.

He shook his head and coughed some more. He drew a deep breath as if he wanted to call for them again.

“Leave her alone,” I said.

He exhaled. “Her?”

“Young, impertinent, can’t stick to one language? The girl.”

“Is she a girl? I told you, I don’t care.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“I don’t care if Mary was a woman, either,” he said. “With some people, you don’t care.”

“You do care. You shout after her.”

“After it,” he said.

We walked on in silence.

“What?” I said.

He made a circle with his arms. “It.”

I wondered whether my father and Mary had an affair. I couldn’t remember an instant of them embracing or even touching, but after she and Leo went to Florida, Father changed. He brooded. He became interested in what he termed our success in life. He raised us as if we were a task assigned to him. He strode ahead,

his black coat floating behind him, while my siblings and I tried to pick up the morsels he dropped for us: books, discussion questions for long study evenings, applications for academic summer camps and contests. We should have risen to his challenges, but we crouched under them. We became accountants, teachers, homemakers.

In a bout of frustration, he called us “potatoes”—serviceable material, but bland.

We couldn’t compensate for Mary. She sent him birthday cards. I saw a few on his old paper stack. Sometimes, one of us mentioned her. He put on his mountain man face. So we dropped it.

Now she had reappeared to him on the island where time stood still.

Kay ate breakfast with us the next morning. Mel and Klaus came down later and smiled a greeting, which father returned. Everyone appeared to agree that Kay was our responsibility this morning, not theirs.

Kay and Father talked with the ease of old friends.

“I used to be a dentist,” he said. “I caused pain.”

“I hate all your colleagues.”

“Why, you have good teeth.”

“They’re false.”

I tried to estimate her age. At times, she slouched like a teenager. Her pink gums and lineless face looked childlike. But when she didn’t speak, she looked older, like a university student in her first year.

“I want to be an interpreter, I guess,” she said. “One of these people with a headset who translate at important meetings. Except they have to drink milk with honey all the time so they can talk for hours. Like worker bees. Not sure whether I’m up for that yet.”

Father contemplated this for a moment. Then he said something in Foreign.

“I don’t know,” Kay said, and glanced at me. “I really hate it though.”

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“I see,” I said. “I have to read this book. Saying Nothing in A Thousand Languages.”

“Tell me whether it’s any good,” he said.

Back in our room, I filled the kettle with water.

He said, “Only a cup for me. Kay and me will meet for tea this afternoon.”

“For tea.”

“Milk with honey, mainly. I’ll prove to her it’s good. It would be a shame if her misconceptions about milk and honey kept her from a job she’s perfect for.” He leaned back in his chair. I knew from experience that he didn’t need to speak to me, or anyone. He could be silent for days.

I said, “I worry about you.”

“Don’t.”

“What do you want from her?”

He put a teabag in his cup. “I meant it when I said don’t worry. I only want some time with her. Give her some career advice, if you will. That’s all.”

I plugged in the kettle. “Perhaps you want to come here alone next time. I would. Maybe you don’t believe me. But I love being alone.”

We didn’t say anything for a while. The water started boiling.

Father picked up his cup and held it towards me. I lifted the kettle.

“I wouldn’t mind coming alone, either,” He said. “I hate being old. I thought now that my children are all grown up I could make my own decisions, but no. I’m still stuck with you.”

My hand twitched to the left. The boiling water poured over Father’s hand. He dropped the cup and clutched his wrist with the left hand. I ran to the bathroom and fetched a paper cup with cold water.

Father sucked back spit, rocking his torso back and forth. He didn’t open his eyes or acknowledge my role in his pain in any way. I pushed the paper cup against the growing blister.

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I walked along the beach, now a snowfield. Ice stuck to my lashes. The lights of the village dissolved. My only landmark, a bright red rope fencing off the seal breeding area where the island curved back, flickered on and off. The frost crept through each zipper and buttonhole.

I bowed my head. Maybe there had been warmth between Father and me—the two of us walking on that same beach in silence, next to each other, lost in our own contemplations, but in each other's sight. Perhaps this wordless companionship was as close as we could get. Not much of a competition for Mary or Kay or It.

When we arrived in Florida, Mary greeted us with a forced smile. She wiped her hands on her jeans. She apologized for the laundry on the sofa and the green carpet Leo had promised to remove since they moved in. Still, it took us less than an hour to undo the months of separation. Mary's German was still the same. We played with her, and Father started dinner. When Leo came home, Mary chased Father out of the kitchen.

At night, Mary tucked us in like she used to. The four of us shared two guest beds. She knelt between the two beds and dimmed the light. The orange lampshade made her face look bloated.

"Tonight, a slithering thing from out of space will come to eat you," she said. "It has green teeth and its skin is covered in acid, and it's very, very angry. And it's so hungry. It eats small children, because their meat is so tender." She smacked her lips together. "Yum, yum, yum."

We huddled together although we knew that she always ended her ghost stories with survival tips. And indeed: "You can defeat it," she said. "Pull out its antennae, like this." She twisted her fists in the air and pulled the imaginary antennae towards her. We imitated her gesture in the dark after she was gone.

I woke up early and went down to the kitchen. I recognized Father and Mary's voices. I saw only Mary's back and her naked arms supporting her against the kitchen sink.

Father whispered tumbling syllables. Mary's arms remained firm on the sink. "No," she said, and, at one point, "that's preposterous." And Father whispered again. In the end, Mary's hand let

go of the sink and moved where Father must have been standing. “Max,” she said. “You have children.”

Silence.

Her voice again, muffled—perhaps she embraced him and her lips pressed against his shoulder: “I know. But Leo is my man.”

After a silent breakfast, we left. Mary waved goodbye, standing in the front door of her house, which looked like all the other houses in the street. Leo clutched her shoulder. Father didn’t wave. He gripped the steering wheel and hit the accelerator. He drove as if we hadn’t stopped in hours, as if the visit hadn’t happened.

In the village, simple Christmas decorations illuminated the playground. A seagull stood on one leg atop a lantern. The cold stung. I covered my ears with my mittens and inhaled the scent of wet wool.

I found Kay and Father in the café closest to the train stop. They sat at a window table. I crouched behind a car. They couldn’t see me in the dark. The sleeves of Kay’s pink sweater flew with her gestures. She laughed. Father propped his chin on his bandaged hand and watched her. Between them stood a pot of coffee and a bowl with whipped cream.

Father said something. She leaned back in her chair, let her hands drop into her lap in capitulation, and shook her head in mock outrage. She spooned whipped cream out of the bowl and dropped it into her cup.

A waiter appeared, carrying a tall glass of milk. Father directed the waiter to the girl, and he put the glass in front of her with that impassive dignity waiters have. She dragged a finger along the rim and looked up at Father. He nodded at her. She shook her head. He nodded. They went back and forth like that for a while, and in the end, she grabbed the glass and drank it empty.

She leaned over the table, her brow almost hitting the cream bowl. I thought she would throw up, but then she leaned back in her seat, and I saw she laughed, a big, relieved laugh. Father clapped.

Crouching in the dark, I grew afraid.

After Florida, I expected him to disappear. Mary had refused

him by pointing out his obligations to his children. I knew he would leave. Maybe I thought so because that's what I would have done. Maybe I thought so because a part of him had already left. Whenever he returned in the evening or appeared for breakfast in the morning, I was grateful. He hadn't abandoned his potatoes.

I wanted to go into the café and join them. But I didn't. We, his children, owed him this night, and the other nights he might want for himself. He was free to disappear now, free to abandon us in favor of "it"—a fleeting beauty that opened windows and beckoned him to follow.

This generous insight came easy to me as new snow trickled on my coat. It was harder to accept that I didn't like to be alone as much as I'd claimed. I didn't like to sit outside while others were safe and warm. Sometimes, I liked to be safe and warm, too. But I couldn't ask this warmth of my father anymore. I had outgrown that claim long ago. And there was no one else to ask.

He returned when I was already asleep. The creaking door woke me. He undressed in the dark. I smelled snow and candle smoke. He suppressed his groans when he bent down to untie his shoes. When he was done, he walked to his bed. Before lying down, he patted my foot through the blanket. I smiled into my pillow. Once more, he had decided to return.

Someone knocked on our door. The alarm said 23.30. Thirty minutes left of the old year. I switched on the light on my nightstand.

"Hello?" someone called. "Are you in there?" I recognized the voice. Kay.

I opened the door. "What is it?"

She wore a pink pajama under her bathrobe and hugged a folded towel against her chest. Mel and Klaus stood behind her.

"We wanted to invite you to the famous Jörkum New Year's dip," Mel said. "They prepared everything in the spa downstairs."

Father grunted. I could hear him sit up. "What kind of esoteric nonsense is this?"

"The midnight swim," Kay said. "You said it sounded intriguing."

Father grunted again.

“Come on, Max,” Kay said.

Father’s expression softened at the sound of his name. He scratched the back of his head. “We didn’t bring swimming gear,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mel said, nudging Klaus. “We’ll all be naked!”

Father looked at me. He didn’t know what to do. He waited for me to answer the excited family, who huddled in the doorway like a bunch of happy squirrels.

“We have to try that,” I said.

Mel squeaked and clapped her hands. “Yes!”

We undressed in the sitting area outside of the sauna. The ochre-tiled room brimmed with heat. Two Seestern staffers were busy heating up the sauna and preparing warm towels for us. Eucalyptus scent filled the room.

“The trick is to not get cold once you’re in the water,” one of them said. “You stay in there as long as your inner thermostat keeps you warm and cozy. A minute or two. And you run back as fast as you can, and heat up again!”

Mel and Klaus cheered. Kay undressed calmly. Naked she looked more like a child than ever, all lines and bones. The sea sloshed nearby, eating into the frost-caked beach illuminated by the outside lights.

A narrow hallway connected the inner door to the exit door. A staffer went ahead, unlocked the door, and came running back shivering. “Enjoy, guys,” he said. “And come back soon.”

The inner door closed behind us, and we stood in the dark, five people breathing. When none of us moved, Father walked ahead and opened the exit door, and even though he was naked, I could see his black coat floating around him.

Wind blew into the corridor. Snowflakes danced around us. We stood shocked for a moment, until Kay broke the spell, and cried “run,” and disappeared into the darkness.

We followed, white flesh quivering, breath puffing out of our mouths like locomotive steam. Mel and Klaus ran hand in hand, Mel’s buttocks bouncing, her blond hair flying behind her. Father caught up with Kay, a small round man running next to a pale wisp of a girl. He jumped over a pile of algae to stay by her side, but she

was faster and broke away, solitary, without a husband or anyone else grabbing her—my father’s second Mary, a girl strong enough to shoulder all the symbolism we sad old people could throw on her, because she could shrug it off whenever she pleased.

The sand under my feet became cold and wet. I spread my arms and ran on, right into the surf. My heart beat very fast. I blew up my cheeks and swam until I felt warm. The smell of salt rose from the water. Something soft bumped into me. Father. He swam in place, breathing slowly, his chin up high. The idea of cold tingled in my limbs. I should jump up and down to keep the thermostat running, but his stillness was contagious. We floated up and down with the small waves.

Further down the beach, Kay, Mel, and Klaus got out of the water and ran back to the door in the awkward run of shivering people.

“Come,” they called over their shoulders, but they were too cold to stop. The golden hallway swallowed them one by one.

Father didn’t stir next to me. Inside my chest, I still felt the heat of the run. My emergency thermostat would hold out for a little while longer. He and I floated next to each other without touching, our breath clouds around our faces.