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What You Can See From Here

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It's not the size of the stone I lift—it's the reason I lift it.

—**HUGO GIRARD** (World Muscle Power champion, 2004)

PROLOGUE

When you stare at something that is brightly lit for a long time and then close your eyes, your inner eye sees the same thing again as a static afterimage: what had actually been light is now dark and what had been dark appears light. If, for example, you watch a man walking down the street who repeatedly turns back to wave one last, one very last, one very, very last time, and then you close your eyes, on the inside of your eyelids you'll see the frozen movement of his very, very last wave, his frozen smile, and the man's dark hair will be light and his light-colored eyes will be very dark.

If what you were staring at was important, Selma says, something that upended the entire expanse of your life in a single movement, then its afterimage will resurface again and again. Even decades later, it will suddenly reappear, no matter what you were looking at just before you closed your eyes. The afterimage of the man waving for the very, very last time suddenly appears when, say, a mosquito flies into your eye as you're cleaning out the gutter. It appears when

you briefly rest your eyes after staring for a long time at a surcharge on a bill that you don't understand. When you're sitting at the side of a child's bed to tell her a story and can't remember the princess's name or the story's happy ending because you're so very tired yourself. When you close your eyes because you're kissing someone. When you're stretched out on the forest floor, on a doctor's examination table, in a strange bed, in your own. When you close your eyes because you're lifting something very heavy. When you've been running around all day and stop just to retie your loose shoelaces and, with your head lowered, notice only then that you haven't stopped once the entire day. It appears when someone says, "Close your eyes," because they have a surprise for you. When you lean against the changing room wall because not even the very last pair of the pants you've been trying on fits. When you close your eyes just before you finally let something important slip out, such as: "I love you," or "But I don't love you." When you're frying potatoes at night. When you close your eyes because there is someone at the door you absolutely don't want to let in. When you close your eyes because some great worry has suddenly lifted—you've just found someone or something you'd lost: a letter, some hope, an earring, a runaway dog, your voice, or a child who found a perfect hiding place. Again and again, this afterimage suddenly reappears, this one particular image—it resurfaces like your life's screen saver, and often when you're not expecting it at all.

PART ONE

MEADOW, MEADOW

When Selma told us she had dreamed of an okapi the night before, we all knew that one of us was going to die in the next twenty-four hours. We were almost right. It took twenty-nine. Death arrived a bit late and very literally: he came in through the door. Maybe he was delayed because he had put it off for a long time, even past the last possible moment.

Selma had dreamed of an okapi three times in her life, and each time someone had then died. That's why we were convinced her dreams of an okapi were directly connected to death. That's how the mind works. It can draw connections between completely unrelated things in an instant. Coffeepots and shoelaces, for example, or deposit bottles and fir trees.

The optician had a mind especially adept in this. You could name two things that had absolutely nothing to do with each other, and right off the bat he would explain how they were closely related. And yet it was the optician of all people assuring us this latest okapi dream most certainly

would not cause anyone's death, that death and Selma's dream were completely and absolutely not connected. But we knew that the optician, like us, believed they were. The optician more than anyone.

My father claimed it was complete and utter nonsense and that our delusion came from the fact that we allowed too little of the world into our lives. He was always saying: "You've got to let more of the world in."

Previously he would say this decisively and primarily to Selma. Afterward he said it only rarely.

The okapi is an incongruous animal, much more incongruous than death. It looks utterly disjointed, with its zebra shanks, its tapir haunches, its giraffe-like rust-red torso, its doe eyes and mouse ears. An okapi is completely implausible, every bit as implausible, in fact, as the sinister dreams of a woman from the Westerwald.

The okapi was officially discovered in Africa only eighty-two years ago. It's the last large mammal to be discovered by man, at least that is the consensus. In any case, no mammal could top it. No doubt someone unofficially discovered the okapi much earlier, but at the sight of it may have thought he was dreaming or had lost his mind, because an okapi, especially a sudden and unexpected one, looks completely invented.

An okapi does not look remotely sinister. It couldn't possibly, even if it tried very hard to, which, as far as anyone knows, it rarely does. Even if crows and screech owls had been fluttering around its head in Selma's dream—to a fully sinister effect—the okapi still would have made a very mild impression.

In Selma's dream the okapi stood in a meadow near the edge of the forest, in a group of fields and meadows that together are called the Uhlheck—the owl forest. People from the Westerwald often call things by a different or shorter name because they like to get any talking over with quickly. The okapi in the dream looked exactly as okapis do in real life, and Selma, too, looked exactly as she did in real life, namely like Rudi Carrell.

Surprisingly, we had never noticed Selma's perfect resemblance to the Dutch television host Rudi Carrell; it took someone from outside to come and point it out to us years later. But then the resemblance hit us with full force. Selma's long, slender body, her posture, her eyes, her nose, her mouth and hair: from head to toe, Selma resembled Rudi Carrell so perfectly that, from then on, in our eyes, he was nothing more than a poor copy of Selma.

In the dream, Selma and the okapi stood in the Uhlheck without moving. The okapi turned its head to the right, toward the forest. Selma stood a few steps away. As in each of these dreams, she was wearing the very same nightgown she was sleeping in; sometimes her nightgown was green, sometimes blue or white, but always ankle-length and always flowered. Her head lowered, she looked at her toes in the grass, long and old and crooked just like in real life. She glanced at the okapi now and then from the corner of her eye, looking up at it from below, the way you look at someone you love far more than you're prepared to admit.

Neither moved, neither made a sound, even the wind that always blows across the Uhlheck was still. Then Selma raised her head and the okapi turned toward her so that they were looking directly at each other. The okapi gazed at her with eyes that were very gentle, very black, very wet, and

very large. It gave Selma a friendly look as if it wanted to ask her something, as if it were sorry that okapis can't ask any questions—even in dreams. This scene lasted a long time with the image of Selma and the okapi looking into each other's eyes.

Then the image disappeared, Selma woke up, and the dream was over, just as some life nearby would soon be over.

The following morning—it was April 18, 1983—Selma wanted to play down her dream of the okapi, so she put on an emphatically cheery front. She was about as slick in feigning cheerfulness as an okapi and believed the best way to show high spirits was to sashay around. And so, the morning after her dream, Selma sashayed into the kitchen wearing a crooked smile and I didn't notice that she looked just like Rudi Carrell when, in the opening of *Rudi's Daily Show*, he stepped out of a very large globe, a globe with light blue oceans, golden landmasses, and sliding doors.

My mother was still asleep in our apartment above Selma's. My father was already at his medical office. I was tired. I'd had trouble falling asleep the night before and Selma had stayed at my bedside for a long time. Maybe something in me had sensed what Selma would dream about and so wanted to keep her up.

Whenever I slept downstairs at Selma's she would tell me bedtime stories with happy endings. When I was little, after each story I would take hold of her wrist, lay my thumb on her pulse, and imagine that the whole world followed the rhythm of Selma's heartbeat. I pictured the optician grinding lenses, Martin lifting a heavy weight, Elsbeth trimming her hedges, the shopkeeper stacking cartons of juice, my mother

layering fir branches, my father writing out prescriptions, all exactly to the beat of Selma's heart. This had always reliably put me to sleep, but now that I was ten years old, Selma felt I was too old for it.

As Selma sashayed into the kitchen, I was sitting at the table copying my completed geography assignment into Martin's notebook. I was surprised that instead of scolding me for doing Martin's homework for him yet again, she said, "Well, hello there," and poked me merrily in the ribs. Not once before in her life had Selma said, "Well, hello there," nor had she ever poked anyone merrily in the ribs.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing," Selma warbled, and opened the refrigerator. She took out a package of sliced cheese and some liverwurst and waved them both in the air. "What will it be for your snack at school today?" she warbled. "My little mouse," she added, and now the warbling and the *little mouse* were truly alarming.

"Cheese, please," I said. "What's going on with you?"

"Like I said: nothing," she warbled. She spread butter on a piece of bread, and because she was still sashaying around, her wrist knocked the cheese off the counter.

Selma stopped moving and looked down at the package of cheese as if it were something valuable that had smashed into a thousand pieces.

I went over to her and picked up the cheese. I looked into her eyes from far below. Selma was even taller than most other grown-ups and was around sixty at the time: as high as a tower and as old as the hills, from my perspective. To me she seemed so tall that you could see far beyond the next village from her head, and so old that she had helped invent the world.

Even from down there, a meter from her eyes, I could see that something sinister had played out behind Selma's eyelids the night before.

Selma cleared her throat. "Don't tell anyone," she said softly, "but I'm afraid I dreamed of an okapi."

I was instantly wide awake. "Are you absolutely sure it was really an okapi?"

"What else would it have been?" Selma asked, adding that you can hardly mistake an okapi for another animal.

"Yes, you can," I said, and suggested that it might have been a misshapen cow, a badly assembled giraffe, a freak of nature, and besides, the stripes and reddish color are hard to see at night.

"Nonsense," Selma said, and rubbed her forehead, "I'm afraid that's just nonsense, Luisa."

She placed a slice of cheese on the bread, put the other piece of bread on top, and slipped it in my lunch box.

"Do you know exactly when you had the dream?"

"Around three," Selma said. She had woken with a start after the image of the okapi slipped away. She'd sat bolt upright in bed and had gasped at her nightgown, the same one she had been wearing just now standing in the Uhlheck in her dream, then at her alarm clock. Three o'clock.

"We probably shouldn't take it too seriously," Selma said, but like a TV detective who is not taking an anonymous letter too seriously.

Selma packed the lunch box into my schoolbag. I considered asking if I could stay home under the circumstances.

"Obviously you're still going to school today," said Selma, who always knew what I was thinking as if my thoughts hung in garlands of letters over my head, "You're not going to let a random dream stop you from doing anything."

"Can I tell Martin?" I asked.

Selma thought it over. "Fine," she decided. "But absolutely no one other than Martin."

Our village was too small to have a train station. It was also too small to have a school. Every morning, Martin and I took the bus to the small station in the next village and then caught the local train to the county seat, where we went to school.

While we waited for the train, Martin practiced lifting me. Martin had been training to be a weight lifter since kindergarten, and I was the only weight that was always at hand and never objected to being lifted. The twins from the upper village only let him lift them if he paid twenty pfennig each, grown-ups and calves were still too heavy for him, and everything else that might have been an adequate challenge—saplings, half-grown pigs—was either firmly rooted to the spot or would run away.

Martin and I were the same height. He would crouch down, grab me by the hips, and lift. He was at the point where he could hold me in the air for almost a minute. I only touched the ground if I stretched my toes down as far as I could. When Martin lifted me a second time, I said, "Last night my grandmother dreamed about an okapi."

I looked at Martin's part. His father had combed his blond hair with a wet comb and a few strands were still dark.

Martin's mouth was at the level of my belly button. "So is somebody going to die?" he asked into my sweater.

Maybe your father will be the one, I thought, but naturally didn't say it out loud, because fathers aren't supposed to die, no matter how bad they are. Martin put me down and exhaled.

"Do you believe in it?" he asked.

"No," I said.

The red-and-white crossing signal dropped with a clatter.

"Downright windy today," Martin said, even though it wasn't remotely true.

While Martin and I were on the train, Selma told her sister-in-law Elsbeth over the phone that she had dreamed of an okapi. She made Elsbeth promise to keep her lips sealed. Elsbeth then called the mayor's wife, actually just to talk over plans for the coming May Festival, but when the mayor's wife asked, "So, anything new?" the seal on Elsbeth's lips broke very quickly and in the blink of an eye the entire village knew about Selma's dream. Word spread so fast that Martin and I were still on the train to school when everyone in the village had heard.

The train ride lasted fifteen minutes, there were no intermediate stops. From our very first train ride, we always played the same game. We stood with our backs to the windows in facing doors; Martin closed his eyes and I looked out the window in the door behind him. In first grade, I had listed for Martin everything I saw during the ride and he tried to learn it all by heart. It worked so well that by second grade I no longer had to list anything, and Martin, with his back to the window and his eyes closed, could recite almost everything I was seeing through the foggy window: "Wire factory," he would say at the very moment we passed the wire factory. "Now field. Meadow. Crazy Hassel's farmhouse. Pasture. Forest. Forest. Hunting blind one. Field. Forest.

Pasture. Meadow, meadow. Tire factory. Village. Meadow. Field. Hunting blind two. Woodland. Farm. Field. Forest. Hunting blind three. Village."

In the beginning, Martin made careless mistakes. He would say "meadow" when we were actually passing a field or didn't call out the landscape fast enough when the train accelerated in the middle of the stretch. But before long he got everything exactly right. He said "field" when I saw a field, he said "farm" when the farm rushed past.

Now, in fourth grade, Martin could recite it all flawlessly, with precisely the right intervals, forward and backward. In winter, when the snow made the fields and pastures indistinguishable, Martin recited what the uneven white surface I saw rushing past actually was: field, forest, pasture, meadow, meadow.

Except for Selma's sister-in-law Elsbeth, people in the village were for the most part not superstitious. They blithely broke all of superstition's rules: They sat calmly under wall clocks even though the superstitious can die from it. They slept with their heads toward the door, though superstition claimed they'd soon be carried out that very door feetfirst. They hung laundry to dry between Christmas and New Year's, which, according to superstition, Elsbeth would remind them, amounts to suicide or accessory to murder. They were not frightened when owls hooted, when a horse in the stall broke into a heavy sweat, when a dog howled in the night with its head lowered.

Yet Selma's dreams did have an effect. When an okapi appeared to her in a dream, Death made an appearance in life. And everyone acted as if Death had appeared by surprise, as

if he'd sashayed in unexpectedly and hadn't always been in the general vicinity, like a godmother sending you gifts small and large your entire life long.

The villagers were unsettled, you could tell, even though most of them tried not to let anything show. That morning, a few hours after Selma's dream, everyone moved through the village as if black ice had formed beneath their feet, not only outside, but inside their homes as well, black ice in their kitchens and living rooms. They moved as if their own bodies suddenly felt foreign to them, as if all their joints were inflamed and all the objects they handled were highly flammable. All day long, they eyed their lives suspiciously and, as far as possible, the lives of others as well. They kept looking around to check if someone filled with bloodlust were about to pounce—someone who had lost his reason and had nothing much to lose—and then they quickly looked straight ahead again because anyone who was out of his mind could very well attack from the front. They looked up to rule out falling roof tiles, branches, or heavy light fixtures. They avoided all animals because they believed animals were even more likely to lose it than their fellow humans. They kept clear of the good-natured cows who, they believed, might go berserk that day. They avoided all dogs, even the very old ones who could barely stand. On such days anything was possible, a senile dachshund could bite clean through one's throat, something which, in the end, was no more incongruous than an okapi.

Everyone was worried, but apart from Friedhelm, the shopkeeper's brother, no one was terrified, because being terrified usually requires some level of certainty. Friedhelm

was as terrified as if the okapi in Selma's dream had whispered his name. He ran off stumbling through the forest, screaming and trembling, until the optician caught him and brought him to my father. My father was a doctor and gave Friedhelm a shot that made him so happy that he spent the rest of the day waltzing through the village singing, *Oh, you lovely Westerwald*, and getting on everyone's nerves.

The villagers also kept a suspicious eye on their hearts, which, unused to getting so much attention, raced at a disturbing pace. They remembered that the onset of a heart attack is accompanied by a tingling in the arm, but couldn't remember which one, so the villagers felt tingling in both arms. They kept a watchful eye on their state of mind, and these minds, also unused to so much attention, were set racing at a disturbing pace as well. They wondered, as they stepped into their cars, picked up a pitchfork, or took a pot of boiling water off the stove, if they might not lose their minds just then—be overcome by a bottomless despair and with it an urge to drive full speed into a tree, fall onto the pitchfork, or pour the boiling water over their heads. Or, if not to harm themselves, they might feel the urge to douse with boiling water, to stab with a pitchfork, or to run over someone close to them: their neighbor, their brother-in-law, their wife.

Some of the villagers avoided all activity the entire day; some even longer. Elsbeth once told Martin and me that years earlier, on the day after one of Selma's dreams, the retired mailman had stopped moving altogether. He was convinced that any movement could mean death; he remained convinced for days, even months after Selma's dream, long

after someone had in fact died in accordance with the dream's dictate, the shoemaker's mother. The mailman simply stayed in his chair. His immobile joints became inflamed, his blood became clotted and finally came to a standstill halfway through his body at the very moment that his mistrusted heart stopped beating. The retired mailman lost his life from fear of losing it.

A few people felt it was high time to air hidden truths. They wrote unusually wordy letters with talk of *always* and *never*. They felt one should bring truthfulness to life—at least at the very last minute. And hidden truths, these people believed, are the most truthful of all. Left untouched, they harden over the years and, being kept secret and confined to immobility, these truths grow bulkier with time. Even truth itself wants out in extremis. Anyone holding a secret truth risks an especially agonizing end, a lengthy tug-of-war with Death pulling on one side and the bloated, hidden truth on the other. A secret truth does not want to perish in hiding. Having spent its life buried, it wants to be released, even if only for a short time, either to spread its fetid stink and appall everyone, or to show that, exposed to the light of day, it isn't so terrible or fearsome after all. Just before the supposed end, a hidden truth urgently wants a second opinion.

The only one who was happy about Selma's dream was old Farmer Häubel, a man who had lived so long he was almost transparent. When his great-grandson told him about Selma's dream, Farmer Häubel stood up from the breakfast table, nodded at his great-grandson, and climbed the stairs to his

room in the attic. He lay down on his bed and watched the door like a birthday boy awoken early with excitement waiting impatiently for his parents to finally bring in the cake.

Farmer Häubel was sure that Death would be polite, just as he had been himself for his entire life. He was sure that Death would not wrench life away from him but would remove it gently. He pictured Death knocking softly, opening the door just a crack, and asking, "May I?" to which Farmer Häubel would naturally answer in the affirmative. "Of course," Farmer Häubel would say, "please come in," and Death would enter. He would stand next to Farmer Häubel's bed and ask: "Is this a good time? If not, I can always come back later." Farmer Häubel would sit up and say, "No, no, this is a very good time. Let's not put it off, who knows when you'll be able to arrange it again." And Death would sit on the chair placed and ready for him at the head of the bed. He would apologize in advance for his cold hands, which Farmer Häubel knew would not bother him at all, and then Death would lay a hand on Farmer Häubel's eyes.

That's how Farmer Häubel imagined it. He stood up one more time because he'd forgotten to open the roof hatch so his soul could fly right out.