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One Of Those Nights

Novel

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I

The plane is in position at the beginning of the runway and seems to want to lift off from standing; it's shaking with restrained energy, its wings seesawing. The cabin lights are off. A moment of concentrated readiness in the expectant darkness. Emma would have a sense for it, but there's someone sat there disrupting. Sitting disruptively. This American, this sex tourist. Surely a sex tourist. Just the type, big, overweight, sparse red hair, yellow polo shirt straining across his stomach, a money belt beneath the shirt, dark green shorts, sneakers. He was already attracting attention in the departure area. Walked up and down between the gates, constantly speaking into his mobile phone. Others also spoke into their phones, but not so incessantly or loudly. You could hear him from a distance. Of course, he had to end up sitting in the same row of seats as Emma, if not right next to her. She's sitting by the window, the middle seat is empty, the American is sitting in the aisle seat. But here, of all places, with all the rows of seats that a Boeing 777 has. You can't even say it was a stupid coincidence. It's not a coincidence. It was bound to happen. If you find someone irritating and watch them for a long time, then you'll end up with them. You should not fixate on anyone in the departure area. There were hundreds of people, sitting and also lying on the floor; the American tripped over their stretched-out legs while pacing back and forth. Always the American. Let's take ourselves out of the picture, Emma had told herself. If you don't want to see something any more, then take yourself out of the picture. There was still time. She had taken the escalator back up to the shops to look around and buy a Coke to counteract her light-headedness. Terribly long trip. Started in the early afternoon in Denpasar in Bali, and night

fell again here in Bangkok Suvarnabhumi International Airport. The Thai night, the East Asian night. Whatever that might be. An unspecific, noncommittal darkness behind the panes of concave glass. At least you got a glimpse of the red sunset during the approach. And of the Bangkok skyline. Red flashing lights in the red sky on the antennae of skyscrapers, but apart from that, you can give Bangkok a miss. Probably all completely Americanised, a poor imitation of other poor imitations, no point in that. While Emma took the escalator up to the shops in the unspecific Thai night, she saw a gold pagoda in the middle of an endless corridor. Japanese tourists were taking pictures of it. So much for Bangkok. Emma had bought a Coke and sat down next to an Indian family. She tried to doze, but it didn't work, music was playing nearby, Thai songs, more like pop songs really. Red bars with plush upholstery, Emma thought, on the fortieth floor of the skyscrapers, that's the right setting for them - on a round stage edged with reflective mirror segments in the middle of the room, two sisters from Udon Thani would sing this nasal song of lost love. Or of the lost Thai night. Udon Thani, the name had been displayed on a board somewhere. No idea where it is. Somewhere, lost in the Thai night. Then a phone rang nearby and instead of an Indian family, there was a Chinese family sitting next to her now. She had fallen asleep after all. The Chinese father is screaming into the phone. Had she missed her flight. It would be, Emma thought, a sign of guilt. She tried to see what time it was, but the battery on her phone was empty. So, would it be a trip to Bangkok after all, hotel and rebooking, costing an arm and a leg, let's hope they factor in the existing ticket, where is the information desk, are they even open at this time of night, and then out into the Thai night, a taxi, price agreed in advance, into Bangkok, the Americanised city. Past suburbs lit here and there by a lamp, past placards with this winding ornate lettering but this is no help against Americanisation either. Nor against the forlornness of the Thai night. Emma went, without hurrying, if it's too late, then it's too late, down to the gate. Everyone was still sitting and lying around. She'd only slept for a short while. And of course, she immediately spotted the pacing American with the phone by his ear.

His name is Bill. Hi, I'm Bill, nice to meet you. Can't be avoided with Americans. Hello, I'm Emma. And all right, nice to meet you. But not another word, silence all the way to Zurich, not a problem. On the contrary, this night is meant to be a chance to think through the Bali story. What happened in Bali.

That was earlier, when the plane was still on the apron.

Now, here at the beginning of the runway in the twitching plane, Bill doesn't feel much like talking either. He just says, a dark fucking night. Speaking to himself. He has his eyes closed, is breathing heavily, his collar is dripping with sweat. And now he goes on to say, N.T., thy will be done, twelve hours and then another twelve, a whole goddamn day, a whole fucking day. I can't move, if I could I'd pull out my handkerchief, but you're not supposed to move at moments like these. On a night like this. One of these nights. And I have to sit next to an empty seat of all things. And that one sitting by the window is going to be a hard nut to crack. In her black cardigan.

Let him talk. Emma looks out into the darkness. Shouldn't there be runway lights out there somewhere. There's nothing there, just the flashing light at the end of the wing.

A dark fucking night, Bill says with his eyes closed.

Cabin crew, two minutes to take off.

The Japanese family in the row behind, father, mother, daughter, sit up even straighter.

The boy in the same row as Bill and Emma, but on the other side of the aisle, writes **two minutes to take off** on his iPad, which glows in the dark.

Stefan and Michael in the front row, aisle seat and middle seat, hold hands, Stefan says in Swiss German, come on, hurry up, I'm on duty tomorrow, which Michael is grateful for, not for the duty, the duty issue really pisses him off, but that's irrelevant now.

Walter in the window seat next to them looks at the screen in the backrest of the seat in front, distance to destination 9300 km, ground speed 0 km/h, altitude 0 m. It had to be two gays, he thinks. He doesn't want to think it, he wants to think of something other than political incorrectness in his possible last moment on earth, but he can't think of anything. Yes, Irina, Irina.

The light of the screen is reflected flickering in his glasses, then it goes off. Something's not right, Walter thinks, I hope the captain knows about it.

Shit, says Michael, why had the thing gone off. He splays his fingers to make the sign to ward off evil with his right hand towards the ground. It would be better with the left, but Stefan is holding that hand. Stefan says, what does it matter, we can do it ourselves, nine thousand three hundred plus zero plus zero.

The boy with the iPad writes **the Japanese chick is sitting without touching her seat half a minute to take off**. He writes in English, he's American too.

Bill still has his eyes closed, but he's noticed the change in light. N.T., he says, the screen is broken, goddamn it. Sweat is pouring from his chin to his shirt.

Emma is still looking out of the window. She notices the darkening of the screen from the corner of her eye. She thinks, a mistake, the trip was a mistake.

The screens come back on, the engines crank up at the same time.

Now.

The Boeing starts to roll and accelerates to two-hundred and fifty kilometres per hour in twenty seconds. It pushes them all back in their seats, even the Japanese.

Distance to destination 8950 km, ground speed 780 km/h, altitude 5000m.

We get the ascent over and done with in silence. Six-thousand metres, seven-thousand metres, Kanchan Aburi beneath us, eight-thousand metres, nine-thousand metres. Beneath us the border to Burma.

Ten-thousand metres, the plane has reached its cruising altitude, beneath us the Bay of Bengal. The captain switches off the fasten seat belt sign.

Bill rings for the stewardess. He says, what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.

A quote. Where was it from again. Memory lapses at the age of forty-four. No, Emma thinks in relief, Hamlet. Of course. This impossible Bill clearly thinks he can impress us with his school-boy knowledge. Or he has to assuage his need to talk. Let his quote the whole of Hamlet. Don't react to anything, keep silent all the way to Zurich. No problem, as I said.

Across the empty seat Bill says to Emma, have you ever been to the Bay of Tonkin.

Emma says nothing.

Have you ever been to the Bay of Tonkin.

Americans do have a low inhibition threshold, especially those with a glass of whiskey in their hand. A Mekong whiskey, in honour of your goddamn country Bill had said to the stewardess he'd rung for. She didn't bat an eyelid. He complained about the slow service. You guys, you need ages to serve the food, I know.

But you can tell a few nice stories during the wait, you should. Even if you don't want to tell me if you've ever been to the Bay of Tonkin, I can tell you some pretty good stories.

Whatever else. He's a right so-and-so, Emma thinks, he has no inhibitions, not even with a woman. He wants to talk about his sexual adventures. His adventures in skyscrapers in the red plush bars edged with segments of reflective mirror, with the sisters from Udon Thani, after their performance.

O.k. let's make ourselves clear. I'm sorry, I'm very tired.

Good, the more tired, the better. You know, I grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota, but now live in Elgin near Chicago, flying back to Chicago via Zurich. Don't forget this. It is one of those nights. Dark as your arse. You don't know which direction you're flying in in this arse darkness, as far as I'm concerned, it could be Laos or the Gulf of Tonkin down there. Have you ever been to the Gulf of Tonkin, just tell me.

No.

I've never been to the Gulf of Tonkin either, but I know a story about it. Does the Tonkin incident mean anything to you, August 1964. No, probably not. No one remembers it anymore, it was the beginning of the Vietnam War, that's to say our deployment in Vietnam, one of our destroyers, the Maddox, entered the Gulf, was attacked by Vietnamese boats that night, which started the war, the next day we bombed North Vietnam. Later it all turned out to be a hoax, Johnson and his defence secretary, McNamara, needed an excuse for the war. You probably don't remember the Pentagon Papers either, that's where it all came to light, that guy Ellsberg, working in the Pentagon at the time, slipped them to the newspapers.

Ellsberg, something to do with Watergate, Emma said. It slipped out. She can't understand it. Maybe because she made the connection in time. Alright, just this one story, and that's it then. If only Bill didn't shout so much.

Thanks for joining in. It's better this way, believe me. I mean it's better on a night like this. Yes, Nixon had someone break into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office, but that was later, and the thing with the Pentagon Papers was too late, 1971. A massive scandal. I was lucky enough to only be seven at the time when it all started, and it stopped just in time, just in time for me, up until then God knows how many poor idiots had croaked it. Three million Vietnamese, around sixty thousand of us.

Bill takes a sip of his Mekong whisky.

Maybe this is the moment to exit the conversation.

Dear Martha, I have you to thank for all this, all the crap.

He takes another sip.

Who's Martha, not only Emma, but also Walter, Michael, Stefan in the row in front and the boy with the iPad on the left of the other side of the aisle ask themselves. Bill's thunderous voice. He doesn't seem to care if everyone around him hears him.

who is Martha

Martha, just in case you were wondering, is my beloved drink here. I call all my drinks Martha. I like talking to her, she knows my entire history,

right, Martha. But even if you've already heard this story, Martha, listen to it again, it's much better now, with more details.

Professor Angelfield in Mississauga and Professor Löwy in Vienna will vouch for its authenticity, I have the letters to prove it, on paper, not some lousy emails. Where did you grow up.

Emma says nothing.

Where did you grow up.

What are you going to do. Classic blackmail. He's going to keep asking, thinks Emma, until to reply with two words seems like the lesser evil.

In Switzerland.

In Switzerland, Martha, did you hear, Holy Mother of God.

He's choked on his whisky, is coughing furiously.

Hopefully that's the end of the storytelling.

I grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota. When the Vietnam War broke out, on the 5th August 1964, I was sitting on the aspen tree behind our house. Grandfather financed the house for us, he was a watchmaker and cabaret performer from Slovakia, Joe M. Kovacsics, actually a Serbian name, remember it. The aspen tree was close to the house, my mother wanted to have it chopped down, my father said, if you say that one more time, you can pack your bags and go. She had it chopped down after his death. I haven't spoken to her since, probably because she's not alive any more. My brother hasn't spoken to her either. We almost never talk to each other either, hardly ever see each other. Martha, we don't talk. Let me take a sip. So, the aspen had a branch that reached all the way to the kitchen window, and that's where I was sitting at around eleven on the 5th August 1964. And listened to my ancestors and the descendants. Aspen leaves have flat stalks, the leaves move in the slightest puff of wind and vibrate against each other, which results in a sort of whispering sound, and I knew, those were the ancestors and descendants talking to me. I couldn't understand what they were whispering, but I thought if I listen long enough, at some point I'd understand. I could have throttled my mother when she turned on the radio at eleven and the voice of the damned newsreader drowned out the sound of the leaves. And then she kept repeating oh my God over the voice on the radio. For barely had the Vietnam War begun, that's what the newsreader was talking about, it had already become public knowledge the night before but we'd been at the Joachymchiks for a barbecue, and the women

had sat together gossiping the whole time, so, it was only now that she really understood what was going on and she was already the first victim of the Vietnam War. She pictured herself as a war widow, my father would be conscripted and would be killed, and what would become of her, with two small children, and would the widow's pension be enough, she couldn't take on any menial tasks, it wouldn't be possible with two small children, let's hope Joe remembers to sign over the house to her before he goes to war. She really said it that way, before he goes to war. I heard it with my own ears, as she was on the phone to her friend Greta. I had climbed down from the aspen tree. There was a terrible racket in the house, the radio was still on in the kitchen, she had the television on in the living room, and in order to make herself heard over all this, she was shouting into the receiver. For a while she shouted, no, I can't do it, and she was almost crying. Greta was probably making practical suggestions, she should get another qualification, learn to type or do shorthand or try door-to-door selling of the Encyclopedia Americana, or whatever. Then she really cried when she hung up, and wanted to hug me, I was standing in the doorway of the living room - to probably say things like, my poor boy, what's going to become of us, but I ran out. Hang on a moment, let me just take a look to see if these flight girls are coming with the food at last. No. I said they'd take ages, I'm going to complain to the airline. They bustle around in their aprons in the galley, but I have no idea what they actually get up to. And we've been in the air for nearly an hour. The first damned hour is almost over, well yes, at the beginning you have no real sense of time, two stories have to be told before dinner, and a bit of music is also called for, right, Martha. The melting ice cubes didn't do you any good, goddamn it. The whole thing is sloppy, the stewardesses are swanning around, but that's all.

Is he going to carry on moaning like this for the whole flight, says Michael to Stefan.

Bill takes a sip, Emma decides to stop listening. She's hungry too, but what's the point of kicking off about it. She looks out of the window, the light on the end of the wing seems to be blinking at a band of fog, but that's probably just the contrast between the light and the dense darkness. Where are we. Emma looks at the screen, the aeroplane symbol is still over the Bay of Bengal, distance to destination 8300 km, altitude 9500m, isn't that almost stratosphere, shouldn't the stars be visible here. No, nothing, just darkness.

No stars tonight, Bill says near Emma's ear. He has released his seatbelt, raised his armrest, is hanging across the empty seat, looking past her out of the window. Excuse me, Emma says and presses herself against the side of the plane. Bill heaves himself back into his seat with some difficulty, refastens his seat belt.

Sorry, he says. So, we have the Gulf of Tonkin beneath us, beneath us or above us too, in this damned darkness we could just as well be flying through the earth's interior. Listen to me. Don't fall asleep, listen to the story. Unless the story makes you want to heave. Then Bill's tumultuous life ends here.

How do you mean, Emma asks? He's got her attention now. Well, yes. But it is a bit embarrassing to be such a sucker.

Well, Bill said, it ended with me running out onto the street outside our house in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Did I mention that I ran out because my crying mother wanted to hug me. The way she saw it, my father was as good as dead already. Actually, the street was a mistake, because my mother could see me through the window. She opened the front door and called me back in, how can you leave me alone at a time like this, or something like that. I ran away, but not very far, because she was crying after me, that does affect you. In the end I went back in through the back garden. It wasn't easy, because I didn't know whether she was still standing at one of the windows. I had to make my way to the side wall of our house, which had no windows. For a while I lay behind a hedge, hiding, two doors down, then I ran straight across the Kershaws' front garden and threw myself beneath their hedge. From there it was just a short jump to our side wall. I pressed myself against the wall, if my mother was in the kitchen I wouldn't be able to get to the aspen tree without her noticing. That's what I wanted, to get back on the aspen tree, that was the only safe place. Then I heard the front door open and not close again, I would have heard if the screen door had shut. My mother was probably looking out for me or one of the neighbours, to talk about the issue of the widow's pension. But the neighbours weren't around, they were all in their kitchens at this time of day. I ran over to the aspen tree and climbed up. Higher up, I had a lookout further up, a branch that I was only allowed to sit on on Sundays, I'd made that rule for myself, the particularly holy branch. I could see the horizon from here, across the roofs to the prairie and the horizon. It was Wednesday, but I still climbed up, because my mother couldn't see me up there, whereas I could see

the street as well. It was empty, I already said that the women were in the kitchen and most children in summer camp or elsewhere, also my little brother, who usually rode up and down the street on his tricycle in the mornings, was with our grandparents in Topeka, Kansas. Sometimes I heard voices, but they came from the back gardens, and still the noise from the damned radio in the kitchen. It was hellishly hot that day, the sun was beating down on my head up there, I was sweating like mad. I need another drink. I have to call the girl over.

Can I help you, Sir.

You could, but I don't even want to know what's taking you so long. Bring me a whisky, a proper one this time, Johnnie Walker, you have that don't you.

Bill sits, waits, says nothing.

Why has he stopped talking. Oh no, actually we're happy that he's stopped talking.

Here you go, Sir.

Thanks, Martha, says Bill, you're much better as Johnnie Walker. So, hellishly hot up there, much more of it, and I would have got heat stroke and fallen head first, as the second victim of the Vietnam War so to speak, would have saved myself quite a bit of trouble, right, Martha. Luckily my father arrived, my father came down the street, from work. He worked as a typographer three streets down. I climbed down, when I got to the kitchen window branch, my mother actually called out to me, why aren't you with me at a time like this. I ran around the house towards my father and saw, how he raised his hat outside the Joachymchiks' house, his Panama, he had a Panama, Mrs Joachymchik was probably standing in the doorway. I ran over to him, and we walked back to our house together. My mother cried out when we came in, and then she off she goes again with oh my God. Oh my God, you frightened me. You can picture the scene, my father, who doesn't know what's the matter with her at first, then gets really angry because there is no food on the table, my mother hadn't cooked, I don't know what she'd been doing the entire time, not lunch, that's for sure. My father grabbed things out of the fridge and threw them on the kitchen table, this got my mother going, she wanted to prepare something, place slices of cheese between slices of bread or whatever, but my

father took the things from her hands, maybe it was a knife that she wanted to use to spread peanut butter or something like that. He said, go to hell, Rosie.

The stewardesses started placing the food trays into the trolleys in the galley. The Japanese mother in the row behind passed her husband and daughter wet wipes from a wet wipe pack.

It's about time, Bill says, we need to get a move on, Martha. Yes, so he, I mean, my father, sits down in the living room with his sandwich, because there was that damned Johnson on television again, a local TV station was showing the whole damned speech again that he'd made the evening before, my fellow men, as President and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces I am obliged to report to the American people that renewed enemy action against US ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin force me to give the American troops the order to take counteraction, the whole goddamn swindle. Martha, do you hear, I'm talking to you, the whole Johnson thing was a swindle, someone should have put a bullet in his head at some point, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, it's the only thing that works. I told you everything, Martha, I don't want to step on anyone's toes. My mother went to church on Sundays with white cotton gloves, Martha.

The flight attendants push the trolley down the aisle, start to hand out the trays. Bill holds the whisky glass above his head.

Look, Martha, dinner, we need to pull a stunt so the second funny story fits in, there are supposed to be two stories told, it's already the beginning of the second story, beneath us still the Gulf of Tonkin, which is big, and anyway in this damned darkness, you don't know whether you're flying around in a circle. The second story is an addendum to the first. Do you want to say anything, he asks Emma.

Emma says nothing.

Do you want to say anything.

What does he want. Is he going to ask this question until you finally utter a few words. What exactly does he mean.

How do you mean.

The listener can also say something in between two stories.

No.

What's the point, first story, second story. Surely, he's not going to want to tell a second story, the food is coming up there in the front. Look

expectantly to the front, then hopefully he'll realise it's enough now. His childhood in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Where is that anyway. Somewhere lost in the north of America.

Or do you want to tell the second story, Bill asks.

Emma says nothing.

You can be the one to tell the second story. Doesn't have to be me.

What does he mean, how would Emma manage to do it, and anyway, what sort of story.

What sort of story.

Anything. Ideally something from your life.

What is he thinking. She's not going to tell a stranger things about her life. Definitely not a sex tourist, for God's sake. Why does she allow herself to get distracted all the time. This is meant to be the flight, the long trip to Zurich, for the Bali story. The trip was a mistake, but the few funny moments should actually be told. The American and the chicken claws. This American on Bali, this Holly person, who behaved like a native, I have been here since 1981, how she held out a bag of dried chicken claws to Emma like challenge, my preferred snack, have some. Naturally she expected Emma to turn away in disgust, but Emma took some, thank God for her Hungarian mother's chicken claw soup. That would be the moment, as long as one's head was not yet befuddled by all the flying, to put everything into perspective. What happened in Bali. The evening in Kuta Beach. But what did that have to do with this Bill guy. Don't tell him anything else.

From my life, no.

Pity, you could have talked about your trip, which wasn't great.

How do you know.

I can see it. You seem uptight. I thought as much when I saw you at the gate. Why don't you tell me about it. It would help.

Emma says nothing.

All right, we'll leave it. Big Bill doesn't want to force anyone, wouldn't have time anyway, the stewardesses are coming along with their plastic food.

Quite right, no more time, thinks Emma.

But, says Bill, there is time, you'll see. It's probably best I start straight away. The thing is, my father did actually die in Vietnam, very soon in fact. My mother hadn't been wrong, she was left with two small children. My father

didn't have to enlist, there was an exemption for fathers, but he signed up voluntarily. And he was killed. Sad story. Do you want to hear it. Ha, ha, definitely not, you're waiting for the food, you've folded down your table, don't want to hear any more.

It depends, says Emma.

She's just playing with fire, he has no chance of telling another story. The stewardesses are already there with their trolleys.

It shouldn't depend on me, says Bill. Thank you, I really appreciate your confidence. Martha also appreciates it, and she likes to hear this story time and again. Let me take a sip first. My father wrote me a letter from Vietnam. My dying father, I mean. Ha ha, I can see that you're flinching. Although you're making a sympathetic face, you're flinching inside, I can see it. You think something sentimental is coming now, he's going to tell the sob story about his dying father. That's what you think. But it could get even worse, I could read you the letter, I have it with me all the time, here under my shirt, right, Martha, says Bill and pats the palm of his hand against the money belt under his shirt. I read it but, he says, only to Martha, don't you worry. However, the story is actually quite cheesy, you'll have to live with it. My wounded father is lying in the Gulf of Tonkin in a more or less abandoned village in a dark hut and by torchlight writes, ha ha, a letter to his oldest son. My dear Bill. That's what he writes. Joey, my brother, could not read at the time. I wasn't a good reader at the time either, to be honest. He does write that I should keep the letter and read it again when I'm bigger. But it wasn't necessary, I mean, the letter only arrived when I was bigger, in spring 1974, when I was seventeen. It was only delivered then, nine years after his death, I don't know why. Probably letters left behind at first in the whole mess. And then I find this letter in the post box at the end of April 1974. Luckily it was my job to empty it, my mother would have got rid of the letter, you can bet on that. The Japanese cherry tree was in blossom in the Kershaws' front garden. I only really noticed it when I stood on the pavement by the post box with the letter in my hand. Then I noticed all the illegible stamps, all stamped on top of each other. And the handwriting on the envelope, I noticed that too, somehow spidery, not like my father's usual handwriting, but on the back, it had the sender's name, Sergeant Joseph Kovacsics, that was him all right. He was just injured. He says so in the first line, he was suffering from traumatic fever and was writing laboriously by

the light of a torch in a dark hut. They'd put him there and more or less disappeared. He wrote that it seemed to him as if he'd been alone for a long time. What's going to happen to me. When I read that line, out on the prairie - I wasn't stupid enough to read the letter under my mother's and my stupid brother Joey's nose, I'd cycled out to the prairie on my bike - when I read that sentence, I thought of the Kershaws' pink-red cherry tree. I said that the story was cheesy. The line appears twice in the letter. Maybe my father doesn't know that he's going to die, maybe he thinks that something is going to be done for him. But just in case, he's writing this letter to his son Bill, he's got a feeling that it's the last one. The first and the last, to be precise. It bothers him that it's dark. When he thinks about the next line he wants to write, it is completely dark around him, because he switches off the torch to save the battery. And that bothers him, that absolutely nothing is appearing in the darkness, even after his eyes have grown accustomed to it. It's simply a jungle night out there, he sometimes hears a sound, like a bullet hopping across a wooden board, that's all. What sort of slop is this. I mean the stuff they're handing out. I don't know if you can see it, green curry and roast beef or something, goddamn it. We're not having it, right, Martha. So, before they start breathing down our neck, a brief summary: part of the letter consists of complaints against Rosie, my mother. Strange things, but the man was running a fever. He occasionally forgets that Rosie is his wife and writes mother. He'd been ill advised with the mother. I should be careful, she was attempting to keep us away from life. He had seen and heard how she'd said to my little brother who was asleep, not you. Three times. Not you, not you, not you. That was the curse that rested on Joey's life, and he hoped that she hadn't cursed me too. He was praying for me. He had switched off the torch and prayed for me in this darkness. When he came home, he'd lift mother's curse, he wrote mother again, he knew how that worked now. He had learned it from a healer in this jungle rat hole. He explained to me what that was. One who is able to connect to spirits in the air and beneath the earth and under water. They knew how to break down the walls that someone had put up around themselves. A pity that he hadn't already known that when he'd been with us. Rosie hadn't been able to harm him, but at the time, he hadn't had a remedy against her manipulation of me and Joey in particular. A strong spell was required, but he was in the process of learning it, as true as his name was Joseph F. Kovacsics. This is followed by

emptiness, I mean, in the letter there is an empty section, then it continues on the next page, in better handwriting. He complains about the darkness again, but then he writes, a door suddenly opened, and the sunlight from outside had blinded him. Initially he hadn't been able to see who had come in. The voice of a young boy had said in broken English, they come see if you need something. They, that was the healer. He'd said he needed a battery for his torch, but they didn't have that. The village was almost abandoned after father's unit left. The pigs. They should have been sued, but when I got the letter, it was somehow too late. And I didn't want anything to do with these arse-fuckers, not even in that way. Excuse me. Martha, don't allow me to talk like that. I hope you'll forgive us, Martha and me, and listen to what happened to the healer and my father, before the stewardesses get to us. My father wrote everything down, in the light of his weakening torch. For me. He wrote it down for me, even if I couldn't really understand it. He thought he was writing it for an eight-year old child. Although nine years later I didn't understand what it was about either, not even properly today, to be honest. So, my father and the healer, with the help of this completely emaciated boy, who could speak a little English, made a deal. She channelled N.T. for him, he signed a piece of paper for her that she could use to get through the restricted zone. My father was uneasy about doing this, the scrap of paper is written in Vietnamese, but she needs the signature of an officer or sergeant in the US army, and so he signs, without knowing what. The emaciated boy can't explain it to him either, he keeps saying, with the paper go to other place. The healer is extremely happy with the signature and sets out to channel N.T. My father's abbreviation. Towards the end of the letter, he uses more and more abbreviations. He is growing ever weaker, and the torchlight is also growing weaker. He spends all of his final days writing the letter. You on the other hand are wondering what or who is N.T. I asked myself that for years, it took a lot of investigation. And a lot of money. I even flew to Vienna once. But I'll spare you the story of the investigation and tell you that brilliant Professor Angelfield in Mississauga found the solution thanks to a section in the letter. The section reads: heal. says, N.T. on beach on morning 3000 year ago. Professor Angelfield said straight away that heal. is healer, N.T., that is someone who is standing on the beach one morning three thousand years ago. A dying man could be excused the grammatical mistake of 'year' instead of 'years'. I am still surprised, my father was very strict about

using correct grammar. From then on, I mean, from this section on, Angelfield needed just a few more days to put the picture together. N.T. is Nguyen Tranh, a holy ancestor, worshipped in several villages in the Gulf of Tonkin. It was said of him that he appeared on the beach one morning three thousand years ago. Accompanied by a tame monkey, to be precise. Clarification by the professor, my father makes no mention of the monkey. He writes what Nguyen Tranh said. It is unclear whether the healer told him what N.T. said, or whether N.T.'s spirit is already with him. In any case, N.T. is supposed to have said, don't make any noise when you wade through what is not a rice field, gather up your two heads, don't make a fuss, my mother is a fish. You might think these were the feverish ramblings of a dying man, but the professor said, no, it is recorded that Nguyen Tranh said such things. It is also recorded, according to the professor, that Nguyen Tranh was asked what all the sayings mean, and he replied, that the riddle is the solution. My father makes no mention of it, just of the darkness in the hut, but now he knew, it was because N.T. was all around him. I should remember that, complete darkness = N.T. And behave accordingly. Whatever that means, he doesn't say. Professor Angelfield couldn't say either, or didn't want to, I was just paying him to find out who N.T. was. My father then writes, the healer spoke for a long time, in Vietnamese. The emaciated boy no longer translated, he lay in the corner on the ground. My father saw that when the door opened one time and the sunlight came in. But nothing else. I mean, nothing or no one else came in, my father writes, the door simply opens and closes. Professor Angelfield had said, yes, such phenomena had been recorded across the entire Nguyen Tranh area, which is why it was so difficult to identify the place where my father lay. In that moment, when the door was open, my father saw the healer, he wrote. She was crouched on her heels, in front of her a small bottle of Coca Cola. Then he saw nothing more, just heard her voice. He was dead certain, so he wrote, dead certain, that she was speaking to N.T., asking him to stay with him, when he returned home, to lift Rosie's curse. At this point, Angelfield had asked, your father has probably passed away, right. I couldn't get him to say why he was asking. He just said, I don't want to have said anything. So, now it's the row in front's turn, green curry and roast beef, what did I say. But don't think it's over now, he has no more time to finish telling his story. Yes, I have. The rest of the letter consisted only of key words and abbreviations. My father no longer has

the strength to write, and he can barely see anymore. T-light dying, he writes, N.T. in the world, heal. gone, breathe, boy. I presume that the boy was still there, and my father could hear his breathing. At least for a while. Then it says: riddle, breath gone, t-light flickering, dark. He wrote the word dark in the dark, the handwriting slopes upwards. Then the last complete line, started much further down, he probably noticed, that he couldn't write in a straight line any more, and wanted to have space, but the last word is still written in the top line. The same again: what is going to happen to me? Well, yes, Martha, listen, don't let me down now. Wait a moment. Martha wants me to drink up, even if she is little more than a lukewarm brew. So. You're probably asking yourself, why didn't Bill go to the Gulf of Tonkin and try to find the place where his father died. But I ask you, although you're fixated on the trays with the slop, how should I have gone about it. Finding an obscure healer, if she were even still alive, the boy was out of the question. No one else was there at the time. I could have asked someone from my father's unit where they'd left him, the pigs, but I didn't want anything to do with them, like I said. So, I could have stomped around the jungle backwaters for years, but Angelfield also said, he would advise me to leave it. Why. The tray with your curry is sailing over my head, but there is still time to tell you that Angelfield just stared straight ahead and shook his head. I didn't like that, I'm not going to lie. So, and now to us, my dear.