My Saga, Part 1

Karl Ove Knausgaard Travels Through North America

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By KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD FEB. 25, 2015

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I lost my driver's license over a year ago. I lose stuff all the time. Credit cards, passports, car keys, cash, books, bags, laptops. It doesn't worry me, they usually turn up eventually. The last time I was in New York, I left my backpack in a taxi. I had taken three of my kids with me, so I was a little distracted when we got out. All of our passports were in the backpack, as well as my laptop, where everything I have written in the last 20 years is stored. I never talk to taxi drivers, but this one had been so friendly that I ended up questioning him a little. At a red light he even took out a photograph of his children, which he showed me. When we got back to the hotel that afternoon, I asked the receptionist what we could do. He just shook his head and said I could forget about seeing my backpack again. This is New York, he said. But the driver was from Nepal, I objected. And he had two kids. I'm sorry, the receptionist said, I don't think that will help much. But of course you can report it missing. At that point the doorman came over, he had overheard our conversation and said he knew some Nepalis, should he call them for me? So he did, and I met them outside the hotel a while later. Based on my description, they identified the driver, and the next morning the backpack was waiting for me at the reception desk.

These things happen often; in my experience they always turn out fine. There is a saying in Norway that he who loses money shall receive money, and I think that's true, because when you lose things, it means you're not on your guard, you're not trying to control everything, you're not being so anal all the time — and if you aren't, but allow yourself to be open to the world instead, then anything at all might come to you.

I know that's true, but at the same time I also know that the reason I say it is to turn all my faults and weaknesses into strengths. It's *good* that I'm afraid to speak on the phone with anyone except my closest friends. It's *good* that I always put off paying bills. It's *good* that I never cash the checks I receive. That means I'm a writer, I think I'm not so focused on worldly matters, which in turn means that some day I just might write a masterpiece.

So when my driver's license stayed gone, the loss went into the same mental category; it became part of the stuff a writer is made of. I could drive without it anyway. Where I live now in Sweden, there are seldom any police checkpoints.

When The New York Times Magazine contacted me in December to ask whether I would travel across the United States and write about my trip for them, at first I didn't think of my missing license. The editor proposed that I

travel to Newfoundland and visit the place where the Vikings had settled, then rent a car and drive south, into the U.S. and westward to Minnesota, where a large majority of Norwegian-American immigrants had settled, and then write about it. “A tongue-in-cheek Tocqueville,” as he put it. He also suggested that I should see the disputed Kensington Runestone while I was in Minnesota. It was on display in a little town called Alexandria, near where a farmer had claimed to discover it in 1898, and it could be proof — if authentic — that the Vikings had not only settled Newfoundland but made it all the way to the center of the continent. It probably was a hoax, he said, but seeing it would be a nice way to round out the story.

I accepted the offer at once. I had just read and written about the Icelandic sagas, and the chance to see the actual place where two of them were partly set, in the area they called Vinland, was impossible to turn down.

A few weeks later, I was on a plane flying from London to Toronto. I was running a temperature, and after battling my way through all the lines and security checks at Heathrow that morning with an aching body, I wished I could keep flying. I just wanted to sit and watch movies and doze, far from everything. Now and then I would pause the movie and switch to the map to see where we were. We flew over Iceland, then toward Greenland and then over the North American continent. It was more or less the same route the Vikings sailed a thousand years ago.

When we learned about Viking exploration in school, I never imagined that it had actually happened; not even when we went to see the authentic Viking ships in the museum in Oslo in ninth grade. It was as if the ships, with their solid timber, their carved dragonheads and their rows of oarlocks, belonged to the material world, while everything I had read about the Vikings, about what they did, belonged to the immaterial world of books and fantasy. In that world, Iceland was “Iceland,” Greenland was “Greenland,” and the discovery of America was a fairy tale. That the explorer Helge Ingstad in 1960 had discovered precisely where the Vikings built their houses, on the northern tip of Newfoundland, in a small place now called L’Anse aux Meadows, and that his wife, Anne Stine Ingstad, had led the excavations there, removing all doubt that the fairy tale was true — all this for me only added a new layer of legend. I had read a great deal about L’Anse aux Meadows, but not once had it struck me that you could actually go there.

Now I was on my way.

After spending the night in St. John's, Newfoundland, I boarded the small plane for St. Anthony at dawn. The landscape beneath us was flat and barren and consisted mainly of scoured rock, with the occasional patch of stunted spruce. Small ice-covered lakes lay scattered here and there, many of them free of snow, probably because the winds coming off the ocean swept them bare. But not a house, not a boat, no sign of life anywhere.

Normally, I would have been excited. I love desolate landscapes. But now I was somehow distracted.

Christmas had been so stressful that I hadn't had the energy to apply for a new license. Instead, I emailed the Swedish Embassy in Washington a few days before New Year's Eve to ask if they could fix it for me. They could not. So I had figured on calling the Swedish Transport Agency when I arrived at the airport in Copenhagen, which would be the first day offices were open, and on them faxing the documentation to the embassy, which would then email me. That's what I had done, and they had promised to send it two days ago.

But the liberating email, which would prove that I was in fact in possession of a driver's license, still hadn't arrived. What would I do if it didn't?

I had 10 days to get from the Viking settlements to Minnesota, where my flight home would depart.

Without my license, the whole plan would be shot.

How could I have been so stupid that I hadn't taken care of it before I left? How hard could that be?

I would just have to wait until Monday, I thought, looking down on the windswept landscape. It was no disaster, I would lose just one day, and still be able to catch my flight home from Minnesota.

When, after a 30-mile bus ride from the airport through endless rows of spruce, I arrived at my hotel in St. Anthony, I asked the woman at the reception desk if there was a taxi that could take me to L'Anse aux Meadows later that day.

"But it's closed," she said. "You want to go there now?"

I nodded. She grabbed the phone while she looked me over. She was in her 60s, wore glasses, had curly, reddish-gray hair and looked rather stern. "I doubt whether they can drive you all the way out."

"That's fine," I said.

She was still holding the phone.

“And it’ll cost you. Did you want it to wait for you there?”

I nodded. At last she made the call. It didn’t seem to be a problem. They could do it for $200.

My room was big, and it had a kitchenette where you could do your own cooking. The shower enclosure was something I hadn’t seen before, the wall and the tub had been cast in one piece, and for a moment I stood there wondering how they had gotten it into the room; I couldn’t see any sign of a joint, but how could that be?

The phone rang, and I hurried out to get it.

“Hallo?” I said.

“Come on out to the reception,” the woman said.

It turned out that her husband could take me to L’Anse aux Meadows. He had a four-wheel drive car that could get us all the way there — if the site wasn’t closed, that is — and he wouldn’t charge me as much as a taxi driver, she said.

His name was Pierce, he was in his 60s and had a deeply lined face and kind eyes behind his glasses. He said that they were expecting a heavy snowfall the next day, and that this was probably the last chance to get out to the site for a long time. We walked to the car, the windshield sparkled in the light of the low winter sun.

“Nice car!” I said as I got in. He smiled and started the engine, then began driving up the gently sloping, barely snow-covered ground. To the left, on the other side of the main road that ran through the little town, lay a large, yellow-gray brick building, which I realized must be a hospital. The flag outside was at half-mast.

“Are you the owners of the hotel?” I asked.

Pierce shook his head and laughed. “Nope,” he said. I took that to mean that he was a kind of janitor or handyman there, but I wasn’t sure, because he spoke with a heavy accent that was difficult to understand.

A few minutes later we were out of town. Pierce talked the whole time, while I nodded and made noncommittal noises as I struggled to make sense out of the few words I could understand. He had lived in the area all his life, grew up in a nearby village and moved to St. Anthony a few years ago, he worked in the fisheries and in boatbuilding, possibly also at a car-repair shop, and he had had a pacemaker put in, that much I gathered.

After a while, we turned right at a crossing, and I spotted a sign saying L'Anse aux Meadows was near.

Soon more signs appeared, advertising places to sleep or eat, most with Viking-related names. One said "Snorri Cabins," and I wondered if the name referred to Snorri Sturluson, the 13th-century Icelander who wrote the "Heimskringla," an important history of the ancient Norwegian kings, or if it had to do with another Snorri, who, according to another of the sagas, was born in Vinland in the first autumn after the Vikings arrived. It was only a few miles from here that Snorri Thorfinnsson was born, the first child of European descent in the Americas, almost exactly a thousand years ago.

That the Vikings would sooner or later discover the North American continent was perfectly logical. They came from the sweeping and rugged Atlantic coast of Norway, where boats were the natural means of transportation and fishing was an essential trade. Over time, they developed oceangoing craft, both warships and cargo ships, and used them to slowly expand their world. They traveled to the Hebrides and to the Orkney and Shetland Islands; they went to Ireland, Scotland, England and France. They colonized Iceland toward the end of the ninth century, then discovered Greenland a few generations later and colonized it too. The journey from the west coast of Greenland to the North American continent was only another two days by sea. They must have wondered about the source of the continental driftwood that came ashore in Greenland. And if they didn't intentionally sail farther west, driven by need or lust for adventure, chances are good that they got there by accident: They had neither magnetic compass nor sextant, but navigated by the sun and stars, and in fog, which there is a lot of in these waters, they often drifted far off course. According to the two Icelandic sagas that deal with the discovery of the new continent, "The Saga of the Greenlanders" and "The Saga of Erik the Red," this is exactly how it happened. A ship went off course and discovered a landscape no one onboard had seen or even heard of. They didn't go ashore but followed the coast of the new land northward, before they headed back east and landed at a Viking settlement in Greenland. There they told of what they had seen, and the following year, a crew of 35 sailed out to investigate. The land they caught sight of first, they named Helleland (in all probability it was Baffin Island); the next, they named Markland (which is probably Labrador); and the third, they named

Vinland. There, on its northern tip, they went ashore, built longhouses and lived for several seasons before returning to Greenland. Two more expeditions followed; they used the same buildings, and their stays were equally brief. Then both the longhouses and the continent vanish from history, as if they had never existed, other than in the form of these two stories.

The sun was low in the southwestern sky when we arrived at L'Anse aux Meadows. Pierce turned left onto a small driveway. There was a gate; it stood open. That seemed to surprise him as he drove slowly along the access road beyond, which in places was covered with smooth ice. This close to the ocean, the trees grew sparsely and were low and stunted.

On top of a gentle slope, beneath a rock outcrop, there stood a gray, wooden building. Smoke was coming from its chimney. Pierce stopped the car. "We're here," he said.

I got out. The building was obviously some kind of museum or visitor center. Past it was a large plain, and at the end of that was the ocean, which was entirely frozen over. A wooden boardwalk leading down from the building toward the plain where the actual ruins of the settlement lay was in some places covered by snowdrifts, in others bare. I tried the door. Naturally, it was locked.

I walked down the slope, reached the boardwalk and followed it all the way out onto the plain.

In front of me lay a world so beautiful and so cruel that it numbed my senses. The vast expanse of the ice, the dark blue ocean beyond, beneath the pale blue sky, the islands in the distance, sheer cliffs rearing up from the water, and then the strip of land that could be glimpsed to the north, which had to be Labrador.

It was completely silent.

I stood there without moving for a long time, looking out to sea. The silence did something with the landscape. Usually, something is making a sound. The wind sweeping across the land, whistling past every ridge or rise it encounters. Birds squawking or chirping. And the sea, the constant soughing, night and day, that sometimes in a storm turns into roaring and hissing.

But here everything was still.

All sounds belong to the moment, they are part of the present, the world of change, while the soundless belongs to the unchanging. In silence lies age.

A thousand years is no time at all, I thought.

As I looked out to sea, I had no difficulty imagining a Viking ship approaching land. Green, lush grass, the ocean blue and still, the air filled with the cry of gulls, the smooth rocks crowded with seals.

What were they thinking as they took it all in?

"The Saga of the Greenlanders" describes them as being eager. They had floated into a shallow and been stuck as the tide ran out. "But so much did they desire to land, that they did not give themselves time to wait until the water again rose under their ship, but ran at once on shore, at a place where a river flows out of a lake; but so, soon as the waters rose up under the ship, then took the boats, and rowed to the ship, and floated it up to the river, and thence into the lake, and there cast anchor, and brought up from the ship their skin cots, and made there booths."

Farther out there was a low swaybacked house that had to be a reconstruction of a Viking dwelling. But where were the ruins, the foundations of the actual structures? I looked around. Roughly 50 yards away was a row of humps in the ground. Could that be it?

I had expected fences, signs, like a theme park, something to indicate that this was a tourist attraction. It was, after all, the place where Europeans had set foot on this continent for the very first time.

I walked toward the humps. The scarf I had knotted around my face was already stiff with ice from the moisture in my breath. Just as I thought. These were the remains of their longhouses. Discreet placards offered printed information of a most straightforward kind, such as "A dwelling and small forge."

Could that be right? Could this be it?

Yes, it had to be. Here, a small group of Nordic people had lived a thousand years ago. They brought livestock with them, and various tools. They must have lived just as they had back home, hunting, foraging and gathering wood throughout the summer, all in preparation for the hardships of winter.

And yet they were a long way from home, far, far out in the unknown.

The world must have appeared very different to them, I thought. It must have seemed completely open, limitless, uncertain. They sailed west and came to desolate Greenland, with its enormous glaciers, where none of their people had ever been before. They sailed even farther west, without knowing what they

would encounter, and landed here.

Were they afraid?

They must have been. Building structures like the ones at home, living in exactly the same manner, must also have been a way to master their fear of the unknown, not to be overwhelmed by it, a way to make the unfamiliar seem familiar.

When I woke up in my hotel room early the next morning, there was a blizzard outside. Snowflakes chased through the air, swirled, blew furiously along the ground. The darkness was full of blinking headlights from snowplows, the roar of engines, warning sirens, loud thuds when the heavy plows or tractor scoops struck the ground. The temperature had risen during the night, from 1 to 25 degrees.

I dialed the number of the driver's-license office at the Swedish Transport Agency, keyed in my personal identity number and sat down at the desk, scrolling through some Norwegian newspapers as I waited my turn.

A prerecorded voice came on and informed me about opening hours, then the line went dead.

What the hell?

Had they closed?

But it couldn't be later than 1 p.m. in Sweden.

I looked at the Transport Agency website. To my dismay, I discovered that it was a holiday in Sweden tomorrow, *Trettondagsafton*, the Feast of the Epiphany, and a half-day today.

That meant I couldn't get the driver's-license confirmation letter until three days from now at the earliest, more likely four.

Oh, no.

I wasn't even in the U.S. yet, I was just in Canada!

I lay back in bed and stared at the ceiling. I should email The Times and explain the situation. Maybe they had a solution. But I couldn't. I just couldn't bring myself to tell them that I'd undertaken this great road-trip assignment across the U.S. without my license. They'd think I was a complete idiot.

In any case, there was nothing I could do today.

When it got light outside, I could see from the terrace where I stood smoking that the flag outside the hospital hung at half-mast again. I wondered

whether it was in memory of the same deceased or whether a new person had died.

The previous evening, I ate dinner at Jungle Jim's restaurant. Everyone had looked up at me when I entered, a sort of ripple traveling through the room, heads lifting, necks turning, only to subside as I sat down at one of the tables. The walls were clad in bamboo, there were a few plastic palms strewn about and some of the dishes had jungle-related names. The contrast to the dark and empty town outside, the freezing cold air, which made it painful to breathe, the snow and the vast sky full of stars, couldn't have been bigger. Several TVs were on with the sound muted, showing a hockey game between Sweden and Russia, a semifinal for the World Junior Championship. Everyone in the place, except the waiter, was fat, some of them so fat that I kept having to look at them. I had never seen people that fat before. The strange thing was that none of them looked as if they were trying to hide their enormous girth; quite the opposite, several people were wearing tight T-shirts with their big bellies sticking out proudly.

I couldn't quite figure out a lot of the dishes, all those chicken wings and barbecue. I didn't know what went with what, and was none the wiser after checking out what other people were eating, because they seemed to be having myriad dishes, served in baskets; some tables were entirely covered with them, some even stacked on top of one another. So I picked a spaghetti dish — that I could relate to. It consisted mainly of cheese, and tasted like something I could have cooked myself, back when I was still a student and would mix myself something out of whatever was in the fridge.

This evening, I ate at a place called Pizza Delight. It was located in the Viking Mall, and I was the only guest. The waitress, a girl of maybe 18, seemed permanently amazed at everything I said and did. I ordered a pizza; she asked me several times whether that was all I was having. Yes, I said. When it was brought to my table and I started to eat, she stood behind the counter, glancing at me surreptitiously. I knew I was doing something wrong, but I had no idea what.

I had brought another book with me, the Dutch reporter Geert Mak's description of a trip he made across the U.S. in 2010, in the footsteps of John Steinbeck. I brought it to see how he did it, I thought I might use it as a kind of template, not for the content, but for the form. Now it filled me with intense

shame. He had just gotten off the plane, picked up his rental car, got in and started driving. No fever, no insecurity, no anxiety, no missing driver's license, no unproductive days hiding out in a hotel unknown to his employers while he waited for the holiday season back home to end. He had paragraphs presenting statistics about America and Americans, he quoted from a wide array of books, including Tocqueville's, and, not least, he had something to say about America, he was able to put what he saw into an economic, political and cultural context.

Whereas I didn't know anything. I knew nothing about the U.S., much less Canada. And my only observation thus far was that people here were fatter than back home. What was that if not *the* cliché about America?

As I returned the book to my backpack and went to look for the waitress, who had been out of sight for a while, I was furious and in despair. And now, on top of everything, there was the business of tipping. I hated leaving tips, not because I was stingy, to the contrary, but because I never knew how much to give or how to do it if I paid by credit card and the card terminal didn't have a tipping function. Worst of all, however, were the times when someone carried my luggage to my room. I could never bring myself to give them money, the situation was too embarrassing, I felt that stuffing some cash into their hands would just humiliate them.

This time I had a $10 bill in my pocket, which I put on the counter after I paid, sort of casually and by-the-way, full of shame, because I was treating her as a servant.

The next day I got an email from the editor at The Times, wondering how things were going. I saw no other option than to tell him the truth. I was stranded in St. Anthony for the third day without a driver's license, but I hoped to get hold of a document that would allow me to drive within a day. He suggested that the photographer, meant to follow in my footsteps two days later, instead could fly up here, and that I could ride with him back down. I replied that I preferred to travel on my own, that there might not be any other option, but that I would rent a car as soon as the papers were ready.

The blizzard raged on all day. I sent what I had written to my Norwegian editor, and he replied a few hours later saying that the description was "a little stiff," which in his vocabulary was equivalent to saying it was a disaster. I lay down in bed and read about the Vikings while my chest filled with despair. The

Times emailed to inform me that it was impossible to get hold of a rental car in St. Anthony, at least one that could leave the island, and that I would probably have to fly to the U.S. instead.

If there was one thing I had been looking forward to, and had intended to base my article on, it was the sound of adventure that American place names evoked. Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania. All my life I had kept encountering them, and when I saw them in writing, vast spaces opened up within me. The names were romantic, exotic, distant, yet so close, strange, but still familiar. This is what I had wanted to write about, what this almost mythological landscape was like in reality. It was supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Now there was nothing left of any of that.

When I woke up on Day 4, it had stopped snowing, and instead it was freezing cold again. I was so ashamed that I could hardly get up. I remembered how proud I had been on New Year's Eve, as I sat in the candlelight, talking about this assignment, how The Times had commissioned me to write, not just any old article, but a long and thorough piece for its relaunch issue, and how happy I had been when my friend Thomas asked me how much they were paying me, so that I could tell everyone without seeming to brag. And here I was, more than halfway into my allotted time, and I still hadn't even set foot in the U.S., I still hadn't seen a thing, because I had been so unbelievably moronic that I'd flown here without my license, and without telling anyone. Nor had I used the time to talk to anyone, or to walk around and get to know the town, so that I at least could describe *something*, if not the U.S., then at least its neighbor, Canada.

I grabbed the phone and dialed the Transport Agency. At least they were open for business now. Maybe something could still be salvaged from the mess.

No sooner had my call gone through than the line went dead.

I tried sending a text message. "Message sending failed," my cellphone said.

It had run out of credit.

I use top-up cards because no Swedish phone company will let me open an account, I have too many late payments on my credit report. Nor will any bank lend me money to buy a house or a car. I have to pay everything in cash.

I went to the phone company's website and filled out the top-up form.

It didn't go through.

What the hell?

I tried again.

The same thing happened.

What a nightmare.

I got dressed, stepped out onto the terrace and had a cigarette. When I came back in, I went to the toilet. I hadn't gone since I arrived in America, so the result was significant. I wiped myself thoroughly, then flushed.

Instead of the water disappearing with a slurping noise before the bowl filled up again, it started to rise. I watched it for a long time. The water level showed no sign of going down. The toilet was clogged. I flushed again, thinking perhaps that would increase the pressure sufficiently. Instead, the water flowed over the top of the bowl and ran down on both sides, spilling onto the floor. I mopped it up with a towel, put the towel in the tub and looked around for an implement of some kind. There was simply no way I was going to call the reception desk about this. I searched every drawer and closet but found nothing I could use to try to remove the plug of feces and toilet paper that must be clogging the drain. Instead, I wrapped a plastic bag around my arm and stuck my hand into the icy water that was welling up from the bowl.

My arm wouldn't go far enough.

How much bad luck could one person have?

I threw the plastic bag in the trash can, washed my hands carefully, closed the door on the whole sorry mess and went out to the reception area. I smiled at the elderly woman behind the counter and asked her how to dial out from my room. She said to dial 9. I told her that didn't work. She said all I had to do was wait, an operator would soon come on the line.

Shortly afterward I got my credit and was texting the woman I had been in touch with at the Transport Agency. She had sent the fax on Friday, but maybe she had the wrong calling code? I checked. Right. That's why. I had forgotten to add the country code. She promised to send it again.

In the bathroom, however, the situation was unchanged.

I stood there for a while wondering whether I should dare to flush one more time. Finally, I did. But nothing had changed. The water welled up, spilled over the edge and down on all sides. I mopped it up. I looked around the room again for a suitable instrument, stood there for a while with a clothes hanger in my hand, like an idiot; the hanger was way too big for the drain. But what if I tried breaking it?

I got another plastic bag from my suitcase, emptied it of dirty laundry, wrapped it around my arm and tried to stick my hand further down the drain this time, with no success.

There was nothing for it but to tell the reception.

After all, it wasn't my fault.

It probably happened all the time.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead I lay down on the bed and continued reading about the Vikings in Greenland. A couple of hours later I checked the bathroom again, by then it had sorted itself out on its own; all the water had drained away. I flushed, and the bowl filled with fresh, clean water. In my inbox I found the license-confirmation letter as well as my plane tickets to St. John's late that evening and then on to Toronto and Cleveland the next morning.

"Have you enjoyed your time here?" the shuttle bus driver asked me as he put my suitcase in the hold later that evening, beneath a frozen sky full of crackling stars.

"Yes, I have," I replied. "It's a fantastic place you've got here."

The new plan was to fly to Cleveland, meet the photographer and drive with him to Minnesota, to see the runestone at the museum in Alexandria. I didn't quite know what to expect from the runestone. Most experts on Norse culture and runic inscriptions consider it a hoax. But there are those who have fought to have it acknowledged as authentic, and who think that the experts have been influenced by considerations of prestige and academic conservatism, that they are prejudiced and have never given the inscription a fair chance. It was nevertheless intriguing, I thought. The inscription on it, short but epic, runs as follows:

Eight Goths and twenty-two Norwegians upon
a journey of discovery from
Vinland westward. We
had a camp by two skerries one
day's journey north of this stone.
We were out fishing one day. When
we returned home we found ten men red
with blood and dead.
Ave Virgo Maria, save us from evil.

Have ten men by the sea to look
after our vessel, fourteen days' journey
from this island. Year 1362.

I love apocryphal versions of reality, and the people who obstinately dedicate their lives to vindicating them. One of my favorite books is by Felice Vinci, an Italian nuclear engineer: "The Baltic Origins of Homer's Epic Tales." His theory is that the events described in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" really occurred in Nordic lands. That Ithaca was a Danish island, and that the strait between Scylla and Charybdis was in fact Moskstraumen, a strait far to the north of Norway. Vinci's idea was that the descriptions in the Homeric poems didn't match the geography of the Mediterranean. But if you move the setting northward, everything fits. The explanation, according to Vinci, was that the Greeks first lived in the north, but were forced to move south for climate reasons. There, they named the landscape using names from their previous home, just as the immigrants to America used names from home when they arrived in the new continent in the 18th century. New York, New Hampshire, New Amsterdam, but also just Paris, Oslo, Rome, London — or Alexandria.

Identity is not something we invest in the landscape, not in the lake or the forest or the mountain. Identity lies rather in our notions about the landscape and in the names we give it, names that are densely layered with meaning. Naming is obviously a way of making the unknown known, of creating a sense of belonging, but the names soon take on a life of their own, embodying history, myths, conceptions and misconceptions — "New York," I write, and what you are thinking of is not the daily changing of diapers, the stomach upsets or a damp coffee filter that rips so that the grounds spill onto the floor. Seen in that light, it was irrelevant whether the Kensington Runestone was authentic or fake, for what it testified to was the fact that some people *wanted* it to be seen as authentic, some people *wanted* the Vikings to have made it to Minnesota and these people were in all probability Scandinavians, who thus would no longer merely be destitute peasants driven to the new country by need but people with a proud past who were directly descended from the very first Europeans in America, who had not simply been content to spend a winter on a spit of land way up in the northeast, but had made their way as far as the Midwest, where almost all Scandinavians ended up, and who wanted in this way to endow themselves with a history, which is one of the many forms that a sense of

belonging takes.

At noon the next day I looked out the window of my plane from Toronto, staring down at the outskirts of Cleveland, an endless row of streets with identical houses, beneath the dirty gray light of a misty, freezing sky.

At last I was in the United States. And in my backpack were the documents proving I had a driver's license, stamped by the Swedish Embassy in Washington. I had agreed to meet the photographer at the airport and travel with him for a day, but then I would attempt to rent a car and continue on my own.

I didn't really enjoy talking to people that much, at least not to strangers, and the thought of spending the next five days in a car with someone I didn't know was a bit unsettling. In this case, I also had a hunch that the photographer was in many respects my total opposite. We had exchanged some text messages about where to go and what to see. The first thing he had written to me, was this:

Hey man, it's Peter the NYT photographer. Texting you so you have my number. Inshallah this message comes through. Safe travels.

Inshallah?

Detroit is fascinating. I know this wild and lovely family living there. 14 people living in a house. Smoking a lot of dope. In Wisconsin I know a vet who is a character. Anyhow regardless it's pretty easy to get into weird and fascinating situations in this country. . . .

What I wanted to see were the woods, the meadows and small towns of Maine and Vermont, and the last thing I wanted was to end up in what he called "weird and fascinating situations." I had a deep-seated fear of drugs, in any form, they represented a kind of transgression that I found deeply disturbing. Just seeing the word "heroin" shook me to the core, there was something diabolical about it. Being so close to chaos all the time, I feared nothing more than the things that could unleash it, and I knew I would love heroin, as I loved everything that took me away from the present moment. I have based my life upon saying no to all kind of temptations, like taking time off, going on holiday, having a drink in the afternoon, staying up late at night. Was I going to sit in a derelict house with a family of 14 who all smoked marijuana? And what would I say to the poor veteran? How was it in the war? What are you doing now?

Inside the terminal, I stopped at a bookstore to look at travel guides. I still

hadn't decided where to go, the only sure thing was that I would end up in Alexandria on Monday, and a travel guide could suggest routes to follow and provide information about the places we drove through. One of my favorite books about the U.S. is Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita," which among many other things is also a kind of road novel. It describes a journey through the small-town world of post-World War II America, where the protagonist, Humbert Humbert, is constantly on the lookout for distractions for his child mistress, and therefore stops at an endless series of attractions, which every single little town seemed to be in possession of. The world's largest stalagmite, obelisks commemorating battles, a reconstruction of the log cabin where Lincoln was born, the world's longest cave, the homemade sculptures of a local woman. Humbert's gaze is European, deeply sophisticated, cultivated and ancient, but also perverted and sick, while the things he observes on the journey across America are superficial, childishly un-self-conscious, ignorant of history, but also innocent and possessed of the freshness of the new.

"Lolita" came out in the U.S. in 1958, one year after another road novel, Jack Kerouac's "On the Road." Oddly enough, the journeys that these two books describe also begin at the same time: Both Humbert and Lolita, and Sal and Dean, hit the American country road in 1947. It would be hard to imagine two more dissimilar fictional landscapes. This is because Kerouac describes it from the inside, with no distance, this is the America he grew up in, and he is so much an integrated part of it that he seems to embody its very soul. It is a young, restless, hungry, open soul. There are no points of contact with that America in Nabokov's novel, and if you read the two books simultaneously, the reason becomes obvious: In "Lolita," all is dissembling, there are only signs, everything stands for something else, and the one and perhaps only thing that is authentic, the child's reality, is desired from an impossible distance, the breaching of which destroys it completely. In "On the Road," nothing stands in the way of the authentic, except the rules of formal life; when they have been overcome, the glittering night opens to anyone who desires to enter it. The naïveté of this is astounding, but so is the power.

Now, both Nabokov's book and Kerouac's were nearly 60 years old, and themselves a part of this country's history. But the conflict between life and the imitation of life, and the impossible desire for authenticity, was still being explored in American literature, where entire human destinies could be played

out in the interiors of historical theme parks and which, time and time again, allowed the perverted psychological language of sincerity and caring to collide with the evasive and unacknowledged emotions of lived life, often in comical ways, sometimes in ways that seemed desperate and claustrophobic.

I couldn't find any travel guides, and I bought a notebook and a pen instead, paid, and put them in my backpack. Then I walked out into the wide corridor again and headed for the baggage claim.

"Karl Ove?" said a voice behind me.

I turned around. A young man of around 30, dressed in a dark, slightly shabby coat, with curly hair and glasses, stood there looking at me.

"Peter, the photographer," he said and put out his hand. "I thought you might be somewhere around here."

We had a smoke outside the departure hall. It was so cold out that my muscles began to contract after only a few seconds. Peter said he was glad I smoked, it would make the trip a lot easier. "You don't intend to smoke in the car, do you?" I said. He nodded. "Isn't that a little too decadent?" I said. He laughed a little, perhaps unsure if I really meant it, and said it wouldn't be a problem if we kept the windows open just a crack, didn't smoke on the last day and sprayed the inside of the car with air-freshener before we handed it in. He'd done it before, it was fine.

I questioned him a little and found out that he grew up in a middle-class suburb in Maryland, outside Washington, that his father was Dutch and his mother American.

I took the book by Geert Mak out of my backpack and showed it to him, because he was half Dutch, but he'd never heard of either the book or the author.

Outside the rental-car company, we heaved the suitcases into the back of a huge Ford S.U.V., and Peter mounted the GPS, entered an address and drove slowly out of the parking lot. The voice on the GPS belonged to an old woman and was annoying, it sounded as if she were reprimanding the driver.

"Hell, no," Peter said. "This won't do."

He stopped the car, switched off the GPS and fiddled with his cellphone for a few seconds, then placed it on the dashboard and drove on.

The female voice that filled the car sounded young and full of promise.

"She sounds pretty sexy," I said.

He looked at me.

"You're right about that," he said.

When we drove out of Cleveland a few hours later, I was worried; I hadn't seen anything yet that I could write about. To be able to describe something, you have to feel some kind of emotional attachment to it, however faint. The external has to awaken something within; nothing means anything in itself, it is the resonance it produces, in the soul and in the language, that gives meaning to the thing described. Cleveland meant nothing to me. The air was freezing, the windows of the skyscrapers twinkled, people hurried singly through the nearly deserted streets; outside a car in a parking lot lay a pile of sliced white bread, surrounded by a flock of birds. They took off when Peter opened the car door to take a picture of them; their abrupt departure was like the opening of a fan.

We had stopped at a lunch place downtown, each of us with a bowl of hot soup. Peter placed the cameras on the table and took off his cap, scarf and coat. I did the same.

"So what's your plan?" he asked.

"I don't really have a plan," I said. "Drive up toward Minnesota, that's all. And then maybe rent a car myself tomorrow or the day after. If you don't mind, that is."

"No problem."

"I'm a little shy," I said. "I don't usually talk very much. Just so you know what's in store for you."

"I don't think you're that untalkative," he said. "But it's fine with me. I can talk, and I can be quiet."

We ate on in silence, he checked something out on his cellphone. Then he looked up at me.

"So your idea is to drive across America and write about it without talking to a single American?"

"Yes," I said.

"That'll be a challenge," he said.

"I know," I said.

On the way back to the car, we stopped by another place for coffee. I told him about the last time I was in New York, when a well-known American writer invited me for lunch. I brought three of my children with me, none of whom

speak English. I thought we might have some difficulty, but hoped for the best. He came and picked us up at the hotel, and we took the subway down to Chinatown, where we found a suitable restaurant. I tried desperately to think of something to say. We had to have something in common, we were about the same age, did the same thing for a living, wrote novels, though his were of considerably higher quality than mine. But no, I couldn't come up with a single topic of conversation.

He talked a little, I listened, nodding politely now and then, said: "Oh, really? Is that so?" while all the time I also had to communicate with the children, who weren't used to strangers either.

When we got back to Sweden, I received an email from him. He apologized for having invited me to lunch, he had realized he never should have done it and asked me not to reply to his email.

At first I didn't understand what he meant. I thought we'd had a good time. So why was he apologizing?

Then I realized he must have taken my silence personally. He must have thought I didn't find it worth my time talking to him.

I wrote back and asked him if he'd seen any Bergman movies? No one talks there either. And Finland was even worse; there, no one ever said anything to each other. I wrote that I'm always like this, that I never say anything to people I don't know, even when they're having dinner at our house. He never answered.

"Who was it?" Peter asked.

I told him.

"It's deeply un-American, you know, not to make small talk. It's a very important part of the culture of this country. You remind me a little of my dad. He didn't know how to make small talk, either, when he first got here. Or maybe he didn't want to. But he does now."

Peter deemed my proposed plan — driving 12 hours back east to Maine to glimpse my dreamed-of American landscape — completely unrealistic, and rightly so, as I realized with a sudden sense of shame. At the same time, I had the feeling that he really wanted me to see Detroit. And why not? It was just a few hours north, so we could get there this afternoon.

As we drove through the snow-covered landscape, surrounded by cars with smoke fluttering out of their exhaust pipes, under the gray-white sky, past rows

of run-down buildings, interspersed with clumps of colorless trees standing in colorless fields, the feeling I got was that something here was over, that something had been emptied out and that nothing new had begun. But perhaps that was too harsh a judgment to pass on a whole country after spending three hours in it?

"Too bad we're doing this in winter," Peter said. "In summer, everything is a lot more open. People sit out in the evenings, it's a lot easier to make contact with people then."

"I imagine it is," I said.

He hunted around with one hand for the pack of cigarettes that lay in the open space in front of the gear stick.

"Normally, I would be too exhausted to take this assignment," he said. He had been traveling all over the world. "But The Times was really on their toes for you. They were so reverent, you have no idea. It made me curious. I wanted to find out what kind of a guy you really were."

"A depressed Norwegian," I said. "Nothing to write home about."

He didn't comment on that but bent his head a little and lit a cigarette.

"Do you mind if I have a smoke, too?" I asked.

"Go ahead," he said. "Just open the window a little."

I fumbled in my pocket, found the pack of cigarettes, tapped one out, felt for my lighter, which was in my trouser pocket, lowered the window a couple of inches, put the cigarette in my mouth and lit it.

As always, I followed the first drag down into my lungs with my thoughts as I inhaled, and the resistance it met, in the form of a tiny burst of pain, as always filled me with a brief surge of something joyful, followed by an equally brief surge of sorrow. All my children begged me at irregular intervals to quit smoking. Once, on her birthday, I promised the oldest I would quit, but I couldn't do it. Few things made me more ashamed than that. On the other hand, I had once taken a genetic test, and the results told me I had a considerably lower risk of developing lung cancer than the average person.

I poked the stub of my cigarette out the window, it sped out of sight, and I closed the window again.

As we approached Detroit, the billboards were becoming more frequent, more and more buildings appeared along the road, big warehouses and shopping centers, typical of the outskirts of major cities, while the light slowly

faded from the sky above.

It began to snow.

Suddenly, a chasm opened to our left. An enormous industrial site lay beneath huge, black clouds of smoke, our whole field of vision was filled with steel pipes, metal walls, tanks and towers, and it seemed to be on fire, there were flames leaping up in several places, patches of glowing and flickering orange beneath the darkening sky, against the backdrop of bulging, black clouds.

“Look at that!” I said.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Man is an awful and disgusting species.”

“But it’s so beautiful!”

I had never seen anything like it. I twisted my neck to keep it in sight as long as possible. The car climbed the gentle slope of a concrete bridge, and when we came down on the other side and stopped at a crossing, there were brick buildings on every side. We were in Detroit.

“I suggest we just drive around town for a while. It’ll be dark soon, so if we check in, we won’t see anything.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said.

The wind drove the falling snow into eddies as we drove through town. The snow formed strange patterns on the slippery roadway, got torn to shreds, hung like veils in the air. We drove beneath some skyscrapers, which were too spread out to give any sense of downtown, or maybe that impression was caused by all the empty lots, or the big office buildings, heavily tagged with graffiti and full of broken windows. It looked more like a periphery than a center, I thought. We kept driving down the empty, windswept main street, then turned right and entered a residential area. There wasn’t a person in sight or any lights.

“We’d better be careful around here,” Peter said. “There are a lot of carjackings in this area.”

He turned off to the side and stopped the car. A small flock of plastic flamingos stood on a lawn next to the road.

“Let me know if you see anyone coming,” he said and grabbed his camera.

“There’s someone right behind us,” I said.

He turned around and looked at the guy who had just come out of one of the houses and was now staring at us.

“Let’s go for a little drive,” Peter said, and pulled back onto the road again.

We drove around a few other ghostly blocks, came back, parked again by the flamingos. I had a smoke while Peter took pictures; when I got back in the car, I was shivering with cold. The cold was deep, somehow it lodged in the marrow and even after an hour in the warm car, I could still feel it, as if it was close by all the time and only needed a few seconds of ice-cold air to get activated, causing my muscles to contract, my teeth to chatter.

The guy was standing there again, a dark outline against the gray-black sky thick with heavy snowflakes.

“Shall we go?” I shouted.

Peter nodded and got in. He plotted in the address of the hotel while the car rolled slowly downhill.

“It’s right around here somewhere,” he said.

The hotel room was small, neat and beautiful, but ice-cold. I lay under the covers for a while without being able to get warm. The wind howled and whistled in the street outside, occasionally the walls creaked, snowflakes hurtled through the air in the glare of the streetlights. I took off my clothes and got in the shower, turned it to maximum heat and stood there, immobile under the stream of warm water, for 20 minutes. That helped. Then I brewed myself a cup of coffee, drank it and lay back down on the bed.

I’d seen poverty before, of course, even incomprehensible poverty, as in the slums outside Maputo, in Mozambique. But I’d never seen anything like this. If what I had seen tonight — house after house after house abandoned, deserted, decaying as if there had been disaster — if this was poverty, then it must be a new kind poverty, maybe in the same way that the wealth that had amassed here in the 20th century had been a new kind of wealth. I had never really understood how a nation that so celebrated the individual could obliterate all differences the way this country did. In a system of mass production, the individual workers are replaceable and the products are identical. The identical cars are followed by identical gas stations, identical restaurants, identical motels and, as an extension of these, by identical TV screens, which hang everywhere in this country, broadcasting identical entertainment and identical dreams. Not even the Soviet Union at the height of its power had succeeded in creating such a unified, collective identity as the one Americans lived their lives within. When times got rough, a person could abandon one town in favor of another, and that new town

would still represent the same thing.

Was that what home was here? Not the place, not the local, but the culture, the general?

When my mother went to school, her textbooks described Norway as one of the poorest countries in Europe. Her father's brother Magnus immigrated to the U.S., like many others from that area and that time: Between 1825 and 1928, roughly 800,000 Norwegians came to America, nearly all of them to get away from poverty, cramped living conditions and unemployment. They adopted the new culture in different ways. Some gave their new towns Norwegian names, celebrated Norwegian feast days and maintained all of the Norwegian traditions. Others became Americans the moment they set foot on American soil. My grandfather's older brother was one of the latter; he met a Norwegian girl on the boat, they fell in love and when they parted ways — she settled in Chicago and found work as a domestic servant for a wealthy family, while he picked up odd jobs farther north, in and around Grafton, N. D. — they wrote letters to each other in English. When they got back together, married and had children, they never spoke Norwegian to them, only English. Those kids were going to be Americans.

Magnus waited more than 40 years before he went back to the Old Country. That doesn't mean he didn't have feelings for his place of birth. In a letter he sent from Grafton to his family in Norway, in December 1928, he wrote:

This Saturday evening I went to the Cinematograph and saw the Norwegian motion picture "The Bridal Procession in Hardanger." When I saw Bergen and Bygstad, Flatråker, etc., I felt such a powerful longing that I could not hold my tears back. There were many people crying at the Strand Theatre that night. . . . No one knows what Salbu and Åfjorden are like and what they are worth, until they are thousands of miles away. I have so many memories of home and the life of our village that I sometimes weep for joy when I think ahead to the day when we shall meet again.

I met Magnus only once, almost 60 years after he wrote that letter. He was visiting his brother, my grandfather, at my grandfather's little farm back in Norway. They looked very much alike, both were talkative and merry, but at the same time, there was a gap between them. Magnus spoke with an American accent, and when I saw him sitting alone on the bench outside the house one evening, overlooking the fields, he looked like a stranger. It must have been

Grafton he was longing for then.

Peter had done some research and found a bowling alley where they served food and also put on concerts. During dinner, we decided to leave Detroit the next morning and head for Minnesota. “We could drive up along the lake, that’s supposed to be a very scenic route,” Peter said. I was rather uplifted by the prospect. I was supposed to write about America for an American newspaper, and the last thing I wanted was to seem like an introverted European complaining about how awful everything was here. I wanted to see something magical, I wanted to see something beautiful; I wanted to write about being blown away by the power and freedom of this country.

I might even experience something representative this very evening. Three bands were playing, and what better place was there to experience American music than Detroit, the birthplace of Motown and home of Iggy Pop and the Stooges?

When the first band came on stage, I realized that it wasn’t going to happen. They played some kind of blues rock, with reference to the sound of early 1970s, Grateful Dead-ish, but in a high-school-graduation-party kind of way. The band knew how to play, but they knew how to play the way 14- and 15-year-olds know how to play.

Was this for real?

Weren’t we in Detroit?

After the show, we crossed the snowy street with our heads down and got into the car. As Peter pushed the ignition, I hoped he wasn’t as drunk as I was. On the other hand, it was just a couple of blocks over to the hotel. But apparently we weren’t going there; he continued down the road, looking for a liquor store. I stayed in the car and sat there smiling while he shopped.

We continued drinking in Peter’s room. He tore the phone loose and used it as a window stopper, so we could smoke without being fined, and handed me his book with photos of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which he had covered for a decade, and of the lives of the veterans back in the U.S. I leafed through it while I tried to come up with something to say to him. I ended up saying that he sought complexity, not the iconic, and that this gave his photos enormous distinction. The expression on his face didn’t change when I said it, so it was impossible to tell whether I had pleased or insulted him.

He put the book on the bed and opened a new beer.

"So what's your position on the question of God?" he asked.

I got up, put out my cigarette and set the half-empty beer can on the coffee table.

"I think I'll go to bed now," I said. "It's been a long day."

The second half of "My Saga" will appear online on March 11, 2015. Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.

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