My Saga, Part 2

Karl Ove Knausgaard's Passage Through America

By **KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD** MARCH 11, 2015

In Part 1 of "My Saga," which was published March 1, the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard journeyed from his home in Sweden to Canada, with the intention of tracing the Viking trail from L'Anse aux Meadows, the first European settlement in North America, into the United States and westward to Alexandria, Minn., site of a possibly fraudulent Viking runestone. After several setbacks, and with just days to spare before he had to catch his return flight to Sweden, Knausgaard met the photographer Peter van Agtmael in Cleveland, and the two of them drove to Detroit.

One joy of life in the north comes after a winter storm, when the sky, freed of its burden, has paled, and the glow of the unseen sun is everywhere reflected by the snow, so that all things stand out sharp and clear. That I should experience this in Detroit, once the center of the world's auto industry, came as a surprise. But I felt it as soon as I woke up. The light in the room was different, and when I drew open the curtains and looked out at the street, where a woman bundled up in heavy clothing was walking slowly along with a shopping bag in each hand, I felt the old, familiar promise it held of a new beginning.

"Oh, God," Peter said, lifting the back of his hand to his eyes as he stepped outside.

I wanted to suggest that I drive, but the car was an automatic, which I wasn't used to, and I was reluctant to reveal my incompetence by asking for instructions.

We got into the S.U.V., and Peter started the engine and entered the GPS coordinates. The plan was to head north for Cheboygan and spend the night there. Soon we were out on the highway, smoking in our seats as Peter zigzagged slowly between the heavy, slow-moving semitrailers, the cabs of which resembled elaborate little houses. Ever since I landed in Cleveland the previous day, the landscape had been the same, a sort of centerless, semi-urban sprawl of highways, subdivisions, shopping malls, warehouses, gas stations and factories. If the Vikings really had left their settlements up in Newfoundland and explored the continent by following the rivers and lakes westward, as the Kensington Runestone's presence in Minnesota suggested, it was in a world completely different from the one we drove through. I tried to imagine it, tuning out the sounds of the highway, the speed of the car, the concrete and the steel, but the place I then envisioned, a landscape untouched by man, was far too romantic to be true. The pre-Columbian Americans also had cities, they had roads, and some

historians say that, at least before the diseases carried by Columbus and his successors wiped them out, there were more people here than in Europe. The really remarkable thing about the Vikings therefore wasn't that they discovered America, but that they left it, almost without a trace.

What if Columbus had done the same?

I thought: What if the authorities in Europe at the end of the 15th century, when Columbus informed them of what he had seen and experienced, decided to leave America alone? Not to conquer it, not to colonize it, not to exploit it?

It is inconceivable.

If there is something to be gained, if it is gainable, no power on earth can restrain the forces that seek to gain it. To leave a profit or a territory or any kind of resource, even a scientific discovery, unexploited is deeply alien to human nature.

But if we imagine, contrary to everything we know about human nature, that Europeans living in the 16th century had said simply, "Let's leave the New World in peace, out of respect for the people there and their way of life," what would the continent look like now?

"Do you mind if we stop here for a sec?" Peter said, nodding toward a shopping center in the middle of a vast, snow-flecked parking lot. "I need some shoelaces."

"Of course," I said.

"Then you'll get to see a typical American big-box store into the bargain," he said, turning into the lot and driving slowly along the glinting row of cars to find a parking space.

The store, a Target, was like a great hall, the ceiling had to be at least 50 feet high, and the various sections offering all kinds of merchandise went on for what seemed like a full city block. It seemed almost obscene to buy something so trifling as shoelaces in this gigantic box. None of this would have been here, I thought. Not the mall, not the parking lot, not the cars. Another culture with another future would have defined the continent.

Peter paid, and we went back to the car, got in and drove out onto the highway. Leaving America and yet keeping it under watch would have turned the continent into a kind of vast human nature reserve, the people there following their own path of development, without knowing they were under observation.

What an awful thought. And nearly inconceivable. Not only is it alien to

human nature to leave a profit unexploited, but discovering, inventing or knowing something without passing that knowledge on is alien to us, too.

We passed Flint, and the landscape began to change. The road narrowed, there were fewer buildings, the amount of snow kept increasing and the empty spaces it covered expanded. Woods appeared and disappeared. The sky was clear blue, the sun shone, the spruce trees, loaded with ice, glinted in the sunlight.

Unlawful smoking in a rental car can be challenging, at least when it's cold outside. Now the outside temperature was maybe 10 degrees, and the urge to smoke had to be continually weighed against the discomfort of cold air from the open window. Then there was the ash. Using the ashtray in the car was out of the question, so I had to knock off the ash against the edge of the open window, which wasn't all that easy, because the force of the wind frequently tore the entire burning cherry away from my cigarette, so that I kept having to light it. The worst part was getting rid of the butt. If I just held it over the edge of the open window and let go, it could just as easily blow back into the car. This happened several times, with the butt typically flying onto my trousers or the creases of my jacket, forcing me to hunt frantically for it before it set fire to something.

Those cigarettes occasioned a lot of fiddling and fumbling.

The landscape stayed the same all morning, groves upon groves of trees casting their shadows across the snow-covered roadway, broken up by open fields or little towns that were seldom more than single rows of sunlit houses on either side of the road. I looked for a cafe or a diner, because I wanted to experience something American, and figured I should just get it over with, find some Americans and actually talk to them. That's what Geert Mak did in his book about America: He had breakfast at a rural diner and chatted up the locals, who talked to him about the golden past and the hopeless future. But all the cafes and restaurants, of which each town seemed to have exactly one, were closed.

I flicked a half-smoked cigarette out the window. It flew back in and landed between the seat and the door, presumably still burning. I looked down, couldn't see anything and started fumbling around for it with my fingers.

"What are you doing?" Peter said.

"I lost my cigarette," I said. "It's still lit. I can't reach it."

"O.K.," he said. "We'll stop here."

He turned into the parking lot in front of a gas station with the indicators blinking and stopped the car. I got out, opened the back door, bent down and peered under the seat. I still couldn't see anything.

"Try moving the seat forward?"

"How do I do that?"

"You push that button there."

"Which button? That one?"

I pushed the button, but all that happened was that the back of the seat inclined slowly forward.

"This is, without a doubt, the most exciting thing that has happened so far on this trip," Peter said.

"I wish the whole car would just explode," I said. "At least I'd have something to write about."

"Did you find it?"

"No."

Peter opened his door and came around my side. He slid the button in the proper direction, and the seat began to glide slowly forward. There it was. The cigarette had burned out and was lying safely on a rubber mat.

When we continued north, I felt depressed. What Peter had said, about the burning cigarette being the most exciting thing to happen so far on our trip, was actually true. If this had been just any old trip, it wouldn't have mattered. But I was supposed to write something about this trip, and not only that, I was supposed to use this trip to grasp something essential about the U.S., perceive something with my foreign gaze that Americans couldn't see for themselves. Instead, I saw nothing. I experienced nothing.

When my mother's father, Johannes, came to the United States in the early 1980s to visit his brother, Magnus, who had emigrated more than 50 years before, it was the greatest voyage of his life. Until he died, he told stories from that journey. Everything had been meaningful. On the flight, there was a men's chorus, Johannes told people. They got drunk and sat there caroling. It was an experience. At the airport, he was picked up in an open-top 1960s Cadillac. That was an experience. To see Magnus's farm, which, compared to my grandfather's tiny smallholding, was gigantic — that was an experience. My two cousins went with Johannes on the trip, and they told me how he sat up in the living room at

night, all alone, watching TV. He didn't speak any English and couldn't understand a word the people on the TV said, but still he sat there late into the night, zapping his way through all the channels, hypnotized by America and all things American.

I told Peter.

He looked at me.

"You have relatives here? Where do they live?"

I shrugged.

"I don't really know. But I think they're in Minnesota."

"But there's your story right there! Find out where they live, then we'll go there and visit them. It ties everything together. The Vikings, the Norwegian immigration, your trip to the U.S. . . . "

He was right.

I felt the sun rise in my mind. Suddenly everything seemed easy and full of light.

I opened the window as far as it would go, stretched out my arm and dropped the cigarette; the wind caught it, and it spun out of sight. When I closed the window again, I glimpsed something blue between the trees. A moment later, the landscape opened up, and I looked straight ahead at a vast lake, covered in ice near the shore, pale blue farther out, filled with sunlight.

My eyes teared up, not because the sight was so beautiful, but because the beauty was so sudden.

Then we were in among the trees again.

"Did you see that?" I said. "The lake?"

"Should we stop?"

"Yeah, let's stop."

We drove back, parked the car and got out.

The water lay motionless; far away on the horizon, its pale blue merged seamlessly with the hazy blue of the sky.

A green island lay in the distance. For some reason it seemed to be floating above the water. It could be that the water around it was frozen, and the white of the ice was blending with the haze, making it appear as if the island hung suspended between lake and sky.

Peter stood next to me with his camera lowered.

"It's too beautiful to take a photo, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

To the northwest, a massive cloud formation hung immobile in the sky, as perfectly white as the snow beneath our feet.

Not a soul, not a sound, just this vast light.

We walked back across the creaking snow, shivering with cold. In front of the car, I picked up my courage and asked Peter if I could take a turn at driving.

"Sure," he said.

"You'll just have to show me how the automatic transmission works, O.K.?"

"Of course."

The car leapt backward as I reversed it without the restraining influence of a clutch and again when I put it into drive and turned onto the empty road. But soon I got used to the automatic shifting of gears and was driving a car in the U.S. for the first time, while Peter sat next to me taking photos through the window every time something caught his interest.

I received a text message from my mother with my cousin's phone number in Norway. She thought my cousin might be Facebook friends with one of Magnus's grandchildren.

At dusk, when the light falling on the snow still had only the merest tinge of blue, we pulled over to look at an enormous concrete statue of Jesus that stood right next to the road, between the groves of trees. It must have been at least 15 feet tall. In one outstretched hand, he held a globe. All his limbs were out of proportion, and his face was so crudely made that the statue seemed the embodiment of a child's drawing.

To the left of it, there was a house, and to the right, a fenced-in yard. Beyond the fence stood a giant dinosaur. I went over to have a look. A sign on the locked gate proclaimed this exhibit to be the finest in the world. Several other hulking prehistoric creatures stood there motionless in the snow.

When I turned around and looked back at the house, I saw a little girl and a woman in her 30s, probably the girl's mother, standing in the window staring at us.

What kind of a place was this?

The history of art was little more than the history of man's attempts to represent the sacred, from the animals in the first cave paintings to the dolphin frescos at Knossos, from the medieval icons to the hyperrealist angels of the baroque, from Turner's heavenly light to van Gogh's rain-swept villages. Art

elevates us by intensifying and densifying the world. Of course, this is true only of good art; the least trace of anything awkward or amateurish, and we remain in our unelevated state, our reality of blushing, stumbling, idiotic misunderstandings and blunders. That the artists of the past century have abandoned the search for the sacred does not change what came before; it only tells us that they no longer consider the sacred to be a significant subject of investigation, that the vertical axis has been replaced by the horizontal, so that art no longer lifts us up, but turns us in.

The statue of Jesus was obviously not the work of a modern caricaturist or intellectual, toying with the fundamentally childish nature of faith. It had been made, I assumed, in a sincere attempt to represent what is finest and most important in the world. Over the course of the past two days, I had seen many images of Jesus, all of them cartoonish stereotypes, yet they must have been genuine expressions of something many people considered deeply significant. The contrast with, say, Russia, was striking: Had I been driving there, I would have come across a very different caliber of representations of Christ, given the nation's many monasteries, churches and thousand-year-old tradition of icon painting. Throw Dostoyevsky into the bargain, and Russian Orthodox Christianity becomes something you could spend your entire life studying, because it seems so close — with its notions of guilt, grace and redemption — to the enigma of existence itself, touching the core of what it is to be human.

How do you compare that to a billboard with a line drawing of a good-natured, bearded man and a phone number to dial for salvation?

I gloated a little over that thought as we drove north through the empty, darkening woods, until it struck me how wrong I was. The depth of American religion lay not in visual art, not in representation but, obviously, in music. I had some gospel records at home; some of the recordings were from the 1920s, and their raw force, their fervor, heartfelt and ecstatic at the same time, was like a fire, brutal yet beautiful, no less exquisite than a Russian Orthodox icon.

One time in Brooklyn, after a reading, I heard music coming from a place farther up the street, and I went up there and poked my head in, and what I saw, a gospel choir all in white, singing and swaying, was as alien, mysterious, cultlike and compelling as any Russian Orthodox Church service.

The religion of American music was neither contemplative nor brooding, not something you sat listening to alone. It was something you experienced, here

and now, together with others.

We arrived in Cheboygan around 9 p.m. The houses along the main street glimmered in the dark, and the snow softened every contour, covering the roofs and sidewalks in plump heaps. It seemed like a pleasant, well-functioning town, considerably larger than the others we had passed since Flint but still small. We parked outside a pub that Peter found on his cellphone. The night was starlit and freezing cold, and what I could glimpse of the pub's interior, through windows festooned in snow, had a warm and cozy glow.

Inside, the place was packed. We found a table, took off our coats, looked at the menu. Around us, people laughed and talked. A TV hung on every wall, each with different images flitting soundlessly across its screen. Nearly every place we went had TVs on the walls, and they were always on. I never saw anyone actually watching them, beyond an occasional glance up at the screen. Why were they there?

The waitress came over. I had made up my mind to try meatloaf, which sounded very American to my ears, and a pale lager.

"What did you say?"

I repeated it.

She stared hesitantly, almost despondently, at me.

Peter intervened to help us out. The waitress gathered up the menus and disappeared.

The same thing happened nearly every time I had ordered something in the past week. The waiter or waitress would look questioningly at me and ask me to repeat myself. Every exchange of information was piecemeal, chopped into bits, full of misunderstandings and repetitions. It wasn't that I didn't speak English, it was that I stood on the outside of the flow that made things glide along easily and without friction, where everything said and done was as expected. I was in command of the content, but not of the form, and form is always the most important aspect of human communication. I experienced the same thing when I moved from Norway to Sweden, all those suddenly blank stares and silent nods, which meant either that someone didn't understand what I was saying or that what I was saying was preposterous. In those early years, every time I met people from Norway, I felt relief. They only had to say a few sentences, and at once I could place them geographically and socially and address them accordingly. When I was still living in Norway, I wasn't even aware that this kind

of knowledge existed, it was entirely intuitive and obvious, just part of what being Norwegian entailed, and my easy access to this whole subconscious mountain of implicit knowledge and shared references was probably what it meant to have a national identity.

Once, I mentioned this to a Swedish woman. She looked indignantly at me. "But those are just prejudices!" she said. "You're judging people before you've even spoken to them! It's much better not to know all those things, so that you can make up your own opinion about them. We're individuals, not representatives of a culture!"

That is the most Swedish thing anyone has ever said to me.

What is culture, if not a set of prejudices? A set of unformulated and unconscious rules and ways of behavior that every member of a given society nonetheless immediately recognizes and accepts?

Nowhere in the world has shared culture been a more imperative requirement than in America. More than 300 million people live here, and they had descended over the course of a very few generations from a huge number of disparate cultures, with different histories, ways of behavior, worldviews and experiential backgrounds. All of them, sooner or later, had been required to relinquish their old culture and enter the new one. That must be why the most striking thing about the United States was its sameness, that every place had the same hotels, the same restaurants, the same stores. And that must be why every American movie was made after the same template and why, in this sense, every movie expressed the same thing. And that must be why all these TVs were hanging on the walls, unwatched; they created an immediate sense of belonging, a feeling of home.

Even though I grew up with American music and films and read about American politicians and celebrities practically all my life, I was still an outsider. I didn't understand all these TV sets with their bright smiles.

The waitress brought our beers.

"I love your accent," she said. "Where are you from?"

"Norway," I mumbled.

"Wow," she said.

"Don't you love my accent?" Peter said.

"Where are you from?"

"Maryland."

"Well. . . ."

They laughed, and she disappeared into the kitchen again.

I got up around 5 the next morning and brewed a cup of coffee, which I drank standing on the terrace outside my hotel room in the cold while I smoked and looked down at the black river flowing below; in the darkness, I could faintly glimpse its course between snowy banks.

I was supposed to give a speech in a few days, so I had to finish it during this trip, hence the early morning.

But it was impossible to write. I couldn't even manage the first sentence.

Still, I kept trying for a couple of hours. It was so cold that I sat with the bedcovers draped over my shoulders. Finally, I gave up, went into the bathroom and ran a bath. The shower enclosure was of the same mysterious origin as the one I saw in Newfoundland, with the wall and tub cast in one mold and no joint to explain how it had gotten into the room.

But oh, did it feel good to be submerged in hot water.

In the bedroom, my cellphone gave a beep.

The message was from my cousin in Norway. Magnus's grandchildren were named Mark and Matthew Hatloy. Matthew lived in Florida, and Mark lived near Grafton, N.D. My cousin would try to find their phone numbers and email addresses in the next few hours and get back to me.

I plotted the route to Grafton on Google Maps. The drive would take about 13 hours. So we could arrive late tomorrow evening, talk to Mark for a couple of hours, drive down to Alexandria the next day for a quick look at the Viking runestone and on to the airport in Minneapolis that afternoon.

I got dressed and went out on the terrace for another cigarette. The sun had begun to rise, and now the opaque river water was clearly visible against the white banks. The great currents appeared to be only a few inches deep, as if they were flowing over flat, black rock.

There was a yearning in it, I thought. Black water coursing through a landscape of snow.

Then I thought of Mark and Matthew. I knew nothing about them, except that they were about the same age as me, that we had the same great-grandparents and that they, unlike me, had grown up in the U.S. We were second cousins, fairly close relations.

When I got back inside, I Googled them. It felt strange to see their name,

Hatloy, on American websites; my mother and her whole family were named Hatløy.

But there was hardly any information about the Hatloys. Mark's name came up only in connection with a company in North Dakota that sold agricultural products. So presumably that's what he did for a living.

The same page featured ads for services that could provide all kinds of information about people: where they lived, what schools they had gone to, what jobs they had, if they had ever been convicted of a crime or spent time in jail.

I typed in "Mark Hatloy" and hit enter.

The website began suggesting documents at a furious pace, the screen filled up with green columns, new resources with new data, and each time one was completed, another sprang up.

It didn't feel good.

His life was none of my business.

On the other hand, all this must be publicly accessible information in the U.S.

The website finished its search. To access the information, I had to pay a certain sum. I took my credit card out of my back pocket, put it on the bed in front of me and began to type in the digits. Then I canceled the transaction, put the card back, shut down my laptop and went over to the main building for breakfast.

When we left Cheboygan, a little after noon on my third day in the United States, the wind and snow had started up again. The landscape was completely empty and deserted. We drove through endless woods, occasionally broken up on one side by a lake that would quickly vanish. The sky cleared, the sun came out, the contours sharpened. I saw a sign advertising a lumberjack show, which I'd already seen on the wall outside the men's room in the Cheboygan pub, and I saw plastic sculptures of fish and elk a dozen feet tall outside lodges and eateries. In some places, snowmobiles whizzed by, on tracks in the woods or on the snow banks along the road. We were in an America that I hadn't known existed, that I had never seen in pictures or heard anyone mention.

In the afternoon we stopped at a pizza place in a small town by a frozen lake. My cousin back home had sent me Mark's contact information, and while we waited for our food, I sent Mark an email. It bounced back immediately. The address was no longer in use.

Oh, no. I would have to call him.

The woods on the other side of the lake stood motionless and green-black by the white edge of the water. The sky, still blue, was growing hazier by the minute and would soon reach the point when the first light of the stars far away in the cosmos suddenly pierces the heavens.

It had to be close to zero degrees.

We drove west all evening. The murmuring heater, the even hum of the engine and the compact darkness outside had a hypnotic effect. It was as if we were no longer in this world, at least I felt that way, and I told Peter things I had never told anyone. He sat without moving in his seat as I talked. Normally, it took me years to trust people. Peter, I trusted after a few hours. I had no idea why, but I believed everything my intuition told me; no knowledge seemed more accurate. Then Peter took over from me and spoke about his own life while I sat there quietly, looking at the light of the headlamps slicing through the dark and occasionally flashing back at us from a road sign. There were hardly any other cars on the road. It was five degrees outside. The stars glittered above us. The sight was so beguiling that we finally stopped and got out. It was completely and utterly still. Looking up at the sky, which was veiled by hazy bands of clustered stars, was like staring into eternity.

Soon we drove on through the woods. After a few hours, the landscape suddenly opened up, and there, far ahead, a city appeared, floating in the darkness. At its center stood what appeared to be several enormous towers, with red, blinking lights running up and down their sides. We stared at them, mesmerized. They looked like something out of the future, something that didn't exist yet. What were they? Skyscrapers?

"What's the name of the town?" I asked.

"Duluth," Peter said.

"Never heard of it," I said.

"Bob Dylan grew up here," he said.

"Really? Here?"

Duluth, in Minnesota, is in fact a twin city with Superior, right across the state border in Wisconsin. Together they look down on Lake Superior. We drove into an industrial harbor area in Duluth, where the red lights of the mysterious towers on the hill above disappeared from our sight. Peter pulled over to look for a good bar on his cellphone, and we ended up across an inlet in Superior, at a

place called Izzy's BBQ Lounge and Grill.

After spending the entire day in the car, with little but woods and lakes to look at, it was a shock to the senses to open the door and enter a bar full of people, lights, movement and music. We each ordered a beer and a Jack Daniel's and sat down at a table. The place was filled almost exclusively with people in their 20s. And it was a karaoke bar. A big man with a red beard went up on stage, and, when the song started playing — it sounded like something by Kid Rock — he grabbed the microphone and let out a couple of rhythmic roars. When he started singing, it was superb, he was really good. Enlivened by it all, the heat, the crowd, the music, the whiskey and the delicious beer, I opened my backpack and took out my notebook, opened it and started to write.

"Ha ha ha! You mean you're actually going to take notes?" Peter was incredulous. "You haven't written a single note during the whole trip, and now you want to do it here?"

I laughed along with him. It struck me that this was the first time I had laughed in the U.S. This was great!

Peter ordered chicken wings and some more drinks. I watched a rodeo on TV while he was gone. It seemed as if everyone knew one another. All of them, without exception, wore black. A lot of hooded sweatshirts, a lot of black jeans, a lot of boots. It seemed as if the '90s had never ended in here.

An older black man, Izzy himself, as we quickly learned, came over to our table and asked if everything was O.K. Peter talked to him for a while, told him who we were, asked about the place.

After the fourth round of beer and whiskey, we started playing darts. Peter explained that I had to throw the darts in an arc, up a little first, aim over the target. If there is one thing I can't stand, one thing I really loathe, it's when people tell me what to do. So I threw the darts straight ahead, even though I quickly realized that I was going to get clobbered by Peter, who tossed the darts lightly and almost daintily into the air, so that they struck the red inner circle.

While we stood there throwing darts, one of the bartenders came over to us, a black woman in her 20s.

"Is it true that you're from Norway?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I'm Norwegian, too!" she said.

"Really?" I said.

"Yeah, my great-grandmother was from Norway. But I've never been there. I can't believe you're from Norway!"

She was beaming with enthusiasm and joy. I questioned her a little, and it turned out she was Izzy's daughter, Sharita Turner — she was 22 and getting her master's degree in chemical biology. She didn't know much about her great-grandmother's life in Norway, but she called her mother while she stood there, and explained the situation: Someone from Norway's here! Where was it that great-grandmother came from? When did she come here?

Her name was Johannah Johnson, it turned out, and she came to the U.S. in 1868.

Sharita asked me what Norway was like. I said it was about the same as here. She asked me what I was doing here, I told her that I was writing an article about Norway and Norwegianness in the U.S., that I'd been to see the Viking settlements in Newfoundland and was now in Minnesota to write about the great Norwegian immigration here.

"So us meeting you here is incredibly weird," I said.

"Yeah, it's really wild," she said.

Peter took a photo of her, and then one of her, her father and her half sister.

"Isn't it incredible?" I said to Peter. "That the first Norwegian I meet in the U.S. is black?"

"People are going to think you've put an enormous amount of effort into researching this article, that's for sure," he said.

When I woke up the next morning, I had an anxiety attack. I lay there for a long time, staring out at the empty room. The last thing I could remember was that I had gotten into an elevator. I had no recollection of seeing the room before. Everything was terrible, everything was diseased and I was a ridiculous, laughable character. Oh, God, what an idiot I was.

I had talked.

To total strangers, I had babbled away. With no dignity whatsoever, happy and enthusiastic over every little thing. I had given compliments! My eyes had filled up with tears at my own human warmth and goodness.

Oh, Jesus, was I an idiot.

With an act of will I swung my feet to the floor, sat there for a few minutes, then got dressed with a new act of will and went down to the breakfast room.

There was no way around it now. I would have to call Mark.

Might as well get it over with, I thought, and went outside into the street. I took out my cellphone, dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Is this Mark Hatloy?"

"Yes, it is."

I introduced myself, told him we were related, I was writing an article about Norway in the U.S., could I come for a visit?

"When were you thinking?"

"This afternoon?"

Peter wanted to see Bob Dylan's childhood home, so we drove there first; it was just a few blocks away, up a steep hill behind the hotel. It looked exactly like all the other houses in the neighborhood, a small wooden duplex with a grassy patch in front. There was no sign indicating that Bob Dylan grew up here, nor was there a statue of him. That seemed appropriate, for in contrast to the other 1960s artists who were still alive, there was nothing about Bob Dylan to remind one of a statue, nothing about his music or his role had become rigid or clearly defined, no final form enclosed him. In fact, it was as if he weren't really a person at all, but had somehow dissolved into his music. His old songs were constantly in motion, and the new songs emerged from the same stream. As he traveled around, permanently on tour, you couldn't tell what came from him and what belonged to the American song tradition; he was just playing the music. On "The Basement Tapes," you can hear how he discovers this mode for the first time, how he begins to live in the music, as he keeps tossing out one tune after the other, song after song, some of it fantastic, some of it junk, some of it interesting, some of it nonsense, and it doesn't matter in the slightest, for the whole point is the lightness; that all demands for perfection and completion, for flawlessness, have been suspended; and the motion.

All writers, artists and musicians know the feeling: when you disappear into what you are doing, lose yourself in it and are no longer aware that you exist, while at the same time the feeling of existing is profound and total and what you make is never better. Work created in this state really shouldn't be published in the artist's name, because it has been created precisely by the artist's nonpersonal, nonindividual, selfless side. Bob Dylan is the master of the selfless self, the king of the not-one's-one, a deeply paradoxical figure who lived and breathed the music of this deeply paradoxical country.

"I know it's idiotic," Peter said, "but could you take a photo of me in front of his house?"

Afterward, Peter wanted to take some more photos of Duluth and Superior, and I drove slowly over the long bridges that connected them above the port area while he took shot after shot through the open window. The sky was gray, the concrete was gray, the snow that pressed against the side of the road was gray, and the landscape that spread out beneath us, full of warehouses, cranes, silos, fences, access roads and quays, and beyond, enormous factories spewing out smoke — all of this was gray, too. I couldn't believe this was the same magical place we had seen the previous evening, when we emerged from the dark woods and saw those enormous, blinking red towers stretching toward the sky.

In the daylight, we now saw that they were not towers, not skyscrapers, but simply a row of slender antennas, the very plainest kind, for transmitting radio, phone or TV signals.

On the other side of Duluth, the road continued through the wooded Minnesota landscape, the blazing sunlight filtering through the treetops creating ceaseless, shadowy patterns on the snow-covered asphalt. I had told Mark we would arrive around 5 p.m., but it soon became obvious that we would never get there on time. I tried texting him, but the message didn't go through, probably because there was no money left on my phone account. Peter offered to call him, and I accepted gladly.

When he hung up, Peter said that Mark sounded like the archetypal American. I asked him what he meant. He shrugged, it was nothing specific, just the way he spoke.

I considered the strangeness of that: That everything Norwegian, all that was particular to the west coast of Norway and to the Hatløy family, had been completely obliterated in just two generations in the U.S. If it had been my grandfather Johannes who had emigrated instead of his younger brother Magnus, I could have been the one sitting there, up in North Dakota, an American waiting for my Norwegian relative who was roughly the same age as me and to my surprise had announced his arrival this very Sunday.

I told Peter. He laughed and said he had never met anyone less American than me.

Magnus Hatløy was a Norwegian when he emigrated to the United States in 1926. When I saw him for the first time, more than 50 years later, his name was

Magnus Hatloy, and he was an American. Some years ago, I was sent copies of several letters from my mother's family, among them some from Magnus's first years in the new country. He had no education, no money; he left home with no clear plans or prospects, going alone by ship to New York. Everything must have seemed uncertain and precarious to him. He went northwest, to Grafton, where he did odd jobs and saved money to buy his own land. The first years were rough. In one letter from 1929 he writes that he has been cheated out of $400. He had spent two summers working for a man by the name of John Hopperstad, who, it turned out, went bankrupt and was unable to pay his wages.

I have never heard of a worse man. After I found out there was nothing left to take, I went over to him and told him what kind of a man he was, and since then I turn my face away whenever I see him coming.

When Magnus wrote this, he was working on a farm. He wanted to quit, but times were so hard that there was no other work to be had. He wrote home that he was attending "correspondence school" to become a railway man and hoped he would be hired in the spring. He also wrote that he hadn't seen Martha, the Norwegian girl he met on the Atlantic passage, for eight months, but she sent him a letter twice a week.

She is a splendid girl and she is pure. I just received a very fine birthday present from her. It was a coat or "bathrobe" that one wears when one takes a bath on a Sunday morning. It cost many a dollar. . . . Oh yes, there are plenty back home who think, they sure live well over there in America, but there are more of those here who think they live better in "the Old Country." It was annoying to lose the money, but I am young and strong and while I am in good health, things can only get better. Certainly times will improve now that we have the new president, Hoover. He is a good fellow to the common man.

In the summer of 1932, times were still bad. Now, Martha wrote home. She was working as a domestic servant for a rich family in Oak Park, outside Chicago.

Here the trees are very green and give a lovely shade, there are stately gardens with a great many flowers. . . . Only rich people live here, . . . and if one only has enough money,

one can get everything one wants. I will not mention hard times, it seems it is the same everywhere, not just here. It is rather terrible, and when the rich lose their wealth, it is bad for those of us who have nothing, too. . . . And I do see things in a fairer light now than this winter. Magnus has work, and even if it is only for the summer, it is better than nothing. He doesn't earn much, I don't think, just enough to survive. . . . For the time being, marriage and farming must remain up in the air. When one has no income, I suppose it is better not to be married.

In fact, within a year Magnus and Martha would be married and have their first child, David. They lived in two rooms with no furniture of their own, but they had bought a radio, Martha wrote, and it lightened up the place.

David was my mother's cousin, and it was his son we were now on our way to see, presumably on the same farm where Magnus and Martha lived until they died.

Late in the afternoon, the landscape began to change, for the first time in three days. It happened gradually and almost imperceptibly. A snow-covered field might appear among the trees to the right, a snow-covered meadow among the trees to the left. There was more open land, and eventually the clumps of trees became the exception, and farms appeared, with big barns and towering silos. Soon the plains stretched out endlessly on both sides, an utterly flat, utterly white landscape. The sun burned soundlessly in the lofty blue sky. It was enormous, and I glanced at it now and then. I had never seen the sun that big.

A factory appeared in the distance, its white smoke a long ribbon across the blue sky, immobile as a photograph. Nothing moved except the little cars speeding along the highway. As if burdened by light, the sun slowly sank toward the horizon. The blue of the sky, which all that day had been open and full of light, seemed to contract, as if the light were being sucked out of it.

We crossed an old iron bridge and entered North Dakota. In the little border town we turned right, and for the next few miles we had the sun at our backs, until it finally sank out of sight and the darkness back east rose like water in a tank, from the ground up into the sky, where the stars appeared one after the other. For long periods, the darkness extended unbroken to both sides, occasionally perforated by small clusters of lights from solitary farm buildings or homes.

It felt as if we were driving into the depths of something.

Around 7 p.m., we drove up to Mark's house. It lay by itself far out on an

empty plain, surrounded by darkness. When we got out, the cold seemed to grab hold of my cheeks, digging its claws into them.

The door opened, a man came out.

"Karl Ove?" he said.

"That's me," I said and went over to him.

"Welcome," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "Incredibly nice of you to receive us on such short notice."

"You were lucky," he said, "that much I can say. Come on in!"

The house was big, spacious and appeared to have been recently built. There were children's drawings hanging in the kitchen and photos of a boy and a girl. The TV was on in the living room, tuned to a football game.

"Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Beer?"

"Maybe a coffee," I said. "Or wait, no, a beer, if you have any."

He opened the fridge, took out a Bud Light and handed it to me. There was something familiar about his facial features, but I was unable to place them more precisely or trace them back to a particular person he resembled.

This was the first American home I had visited. Everything was well ordered; the long kitchen counter, a slab of something that looked like granite, was practically empty, and so was the kitchen table. That gave the place an air of bachelor life, a sense that the kitchen had been built for many people, but was being used by only one.

"Nice place you've got," I said.

"Thanks," he said. "I built it myself."

"Did you? That's impressive."

"Come here, I'll show you something."

We went over to a painting on the wall, a small farmhouse with a barn next to it.

"This house belonged to grandfather and grandmother. I tore it down and built a new one in the same place. But I left the barn standing."

He told me that they built the first house the way they built them in Norway. It had been so plain that Martha protested. It didn't help that the barn was both bigger and more elaborate.

"The old house was full of Norwegian stuff," he said. "Runners and tablecloths, that kind of thing. I packed everything away in boxes, didn't have the heart to throw it out."

"Do you think they missed Norway?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure they did. For instance, they would sit in the kitchen listening to Norwegian news on the radio when I was a kid, I remember."

We sat down on the sofa in the living room. A book with pictures of airplanes on the cover lay open on the coffee table, next to a magazine about flying.

"Now explain to me exactly who you are," he said. "Who you're the son of."

I told him that my grandfather had four children: Kjellaug, Sissel, Ingunn and Kjartan, and that I was Sissel's son.

"I named my son after Kjartan," he said. "Spelled the American way, of course. Charton."

"My uncle will be pleased to hear that," I said. "He's a poet. A very good poet."

"I met him when I was there. But he wasn't a poet then, was he?"

"He worked at a shipyard for many years."

"That's right! As a plumber?"

"Right. He was a communist. So he chose to become a proletarian, out of solidarity with the people."

Mark told me what he knew about his grandparents' first years in the new country. In 1932, they moved to Minneapolis, where Magnus drove fuel trucks. It wasn't until 1947 that they bought this plot of land. Both of their children moved away as soon as they were old enough, and they never came back. Mark grew up in Wisconsin, but when he went back to college in Grand Forks to become a mechanical engineer at age 25, he moved in with his grandfather, whose farm was just an hour away from campus, at first with no thought of staying on after he graduated. When Mark had the idea that he could eventually take over the farm, Magnus laid down harsh terms; at first he had to rent it, at the going rate. But the life out here suited him, and in addition to farming his own land, he also began to manufacture farm equipment. As the oil business boomed, he expanded into drilling equipment. Now he traveled all around the world, negotiating contracts and at the same time buying more land and expanding the farm, which had grown from 160 acres in Magnus's day to more than 1,800 acres today. He owned two planes, a small one for pleasure and a bigger one for business, and he had his own runway on the property.

The best parts of his life, he said, apart from his children, were the summer

mornings when he climbed into his plane, rose into the sky and flew over this landscape, green and lush and drenched in the light of the rising sun.

After a while I went out to smoke, and Mark joined me, lighting my cigarette with his lighter before he lit his own. The dark stretched out endlessly before us.

"When it blows around here, it blows like no other place on earth," he said. "Can you imagine what it was like for the first immigrants who came here? They practically lived in a hole in the ground. And the blizzards can go on for weeks. Six weeks, my grandparents were snowed in here once."

He looked at me.

"They must have been fleeing from something, the people who came here. That's what I often think. Something must have driven them out."

"Poverty," I said.

He nodded.

"Your grandfather was pretty wide-eyed when he came over here and saw this farm," Mark said. "Not just because it was big, but because it's so flat."

"He was a very sociable man," I said. "He was someone people crowded around at weddings and parties, because of the stories he told."

"Magnus was like that, too. I still meet people who remember him when I travel around. He sold silos. So when they see my name, they tell me they bought their silo from Hatloy."

Grandfather, who had sat here in the evenings watching TV without understanding a single word one hot summer 30 years ago, had something American about him, that's what I had always felt. Not just his pronounced sociability, the fact that he talked to everybody, but also his restlessness and all the projects he started up, hoping they would make him rich, like when he started breeding mink on his farm. Toward the end of his life, he often spoke with admiration of the neighbors who started farming salmon in the fjord; it had turned them into millionaires and, though he didn't say so, it was clear that he wished it had been he who had taken the risk and realized the profit. His advice to us for the future was to go into oil.

Nothing would have pleased him more than to learn that Magnus's grandson had become a rich man in America. If he had lived to see it, it would have been one of the stories he told.

We decided to have dinner together in Grand Forks, then Peter and I

would go on to Fargo and spend the night there, so we could get to Alexandria in time and see the museum there the next morning.

I rode with Mark in his huge Chevy S.U.V. He told me about his family, his children, his brother, his life, in a forthright and confiding manner, which was incompatible with one of my roles, that of a writer commissioned to write an article for an American magazine, but not with the other, that we were family.

It felt odd, getting so close to a man whom I had met for the first time a few hours ago, who was so American in everything he said and did. And yet somehow I felt as if I knew him. Why the feeling of intimacy? Because our grandfathers were brothers?

There was nothing about the house or about him, neither the way he dressed nor his behavior, to indicate that he was particularly wealthy. When he talked about his Norwegian heritage, what he emphasized was the work ethic. He worked constantly. He had the farm, which he ran himself with hired help in the spring and summer; he had the company, where he was still involved in sales and product design; and in recent years he had also built the new house.

The Protestant work ethic here was very familiar to me. Johannes hadn't had it, and probably not Magnus either; they had been cheerful men with more dreams than they had will to realize them, at least my grandfather. My mother's mother had the work ethic, and she had passed it on to my mother, who had just retired, and who missed her job in the same way, as she put it, a cow misses its pen.

That, too, is something I have inherited. I can't be unoccupied, I can't take a vacation, I can't relax; even reading a book, which is actually part of my job, makes me feel guilty. It's not work, it's enjoyment. At the same time, and this is obvious, what lies behind this need to be occupied is not just a moral sensibility; working all the time is also a way to simplify life, to parry its demands, especially the demand to be happy.

We parted outside the restaurant a few hours later, and Peter and I went on to Fargo. In the darkness, the road ahead of us seemed to be perpetually curving downward in the light of the headlamps, as if we were driving down an endless slope; it was an optical illusion, maybe because I was so tired, but I was unable to shake it off.

We spent the night at a cheap motel and drove on early next morning, through a world so cold and frozen that the few movements we saw beyond the

windows seemed to run counter to nature. Alexandria turned out to be a small and quiet town surrounded by farms and flat fields. Back home, thinking ahead to this trip, I imagined Alexandria as a bustling place, densely built and concentrated around its main streets, whereas in reality it was just the opposite, spread out and open and deserted. For some reason, I pictured the museum in the Modernist style, a daring if fairly small building, with the Kensington Runestone standing alone behind glass in an elegant room with a black stone floor. The museum we parked in front of that afternoon looked very different; it could have been a post office or small warehouse. And a gigantic statue, which we now stared at open-mouthed, set in a small park on the other side of the road, was as remote from the Le Corbusier- and Giacometti-esque style that I had unconsciously attributed to the museum as it was possible to get: With its conspicuous wings jutting from the helmet, yellow hair, bulging muscles and fiery red cape, it looked like a big joke.

The museum director, Jim Bergquist, a small, bearded man with glasses, wearing a Marius knit sweater like the one every child in Norway wore when I was growing up, met us at the door. Bergquist was friendly and talkative, with an above-normal interest in Norway, where he had roots, and pronounced every Norwegian place name with careful diction. After introducing us to the museum staff, he offered us coffee and cake. Then, still holding the white plastic cup in my hand, I followed him into the room containing the museum objects.

There it was. The Kensington Runestone.

It was maybe 30 inches tall and was placed inside a display case.

I knew the Vikings were my ancestors, but to me, they belonged to the world of the imagination, and that is why setting foot in Newfoundland, in the place where they had once gone ashore on this continent, was so shocking. That is what they had been after, the people who carved these runes into the stone: the power that a physical and material presence bestows on immaterial history.

But the sight of this stone didn't awaken anything within me.

Was it me? Had I closed my mind to the depth of history? Or was it the stone?

I walked around it a few times, noticing that the inscription ran on, around one side. The runic inscriptions I had seen earlier, back home, were all short and pithy, whereas this was practically a novella.

The inscription on the other side dated the stone to 1362, more than 300

years after the Vikings first set foot in Newfoundland. Maybe that was why it was different.

On the wall were placards telling the story of the stone: the inscription, the English translation, the circumstances surrounding its discovery in the 1890s, a map showing the documented Viking settlements in Newfoundland, with arrows pointing along the rivers and waterways they might have followed all the way to Minnesota.

Bergquist, the museum director, spoke about the stone as if it were authentic. As if 30 Vikings — 22 Norwegians and eight Goths — had actually come here in the 14th century and, after being attacked by Native Americans, carved their short narrative into this stone.

But did it matter whether it was authentic or not?

Hadn't this country been built on the promise of avoiding this very question?

Now Bergquist guided us to the rest of the museum. One room hosted many objects from the early-settler era, nearly all of them of Scandinavian origin; things I recognized from home, all the rustic antiques with Norwegian *rosemaling*. There were artifacts acquired from the Ojibwe and Dakota tribes who had settled here. Peter looked at one placard, which described the events of the Dakota War of 1862, when several bands of Dakota took up arms against settlers, and eventually against the U.S. Army. They lost, of course. There wasn't much about Native Americans here, and Peter wondered why the museum's curators had decided to focus on this violent episode. "Were these guys really even the aggressors?" he asked. It was a good question; Peter noticed a lot of things I had missed on this trip. When I looked up the war later, I found that the Native Americans revolted in reaction to a series of treaty violations, and after they lost, 38 of them were hanged on a single day, still the biggest mass execution in the nation's history.

We continued into a small room with items from the Civil War and the two world wars, then we went out in the back, where someone had relocated an old general store, a log cabin and a one-room schoolhouse. Beyond them was another hall with a three-quarter replica of a Viking ship, a huge steam tractor and an array of other farm machinery.

In short, it was a museum that covered the entire history of America.

The striking thing was how modest it all was, how insignificant the objects

that were meant to represent the country's entire momentous history turned out to be. How clumsily the paintings illustrating the various epochs were made. How awkward the overarching Viking theme was, from the winged helmet of the giant statue outside that beckoned to visitors, to the attempts to substantiate the theory that the Vikings actually came here, before any other Europeans, in the 14th century.

Yes, there was something homespun and makeshift and, frankly, childish about the whole thing.

And I loved it.

I loved it not only because I had finally seen something in the United States that Humbert and Lolita could have seen — a fabulous entry for Nabokov's catalog of American monuments, wonders and reconstructions — but also because it struck me that the image of reality that this particular reconstruction presented was, in a curious way, absolutely true.

It was liberating to see how small and insignificant each separate part of this history was, compared with our notions about its grandness. It felt liberating, because that is what the world is really like, full of insignificant trifles that we use to blunder on as best we can, one by one, whether we happen to be 19th-century immigrants building a log cabin in some forest glade, cold and miserable, longing to sit motionless for a few hours in front of the fire; or a local museum director in a Norwegian children's sweater; or a crafty Swede, carving runes into a stone and burying it in a field in an attempt to change world history. Or for that matter, an inept Norwegian writer who has spent 10 days on assignment in the U.S. without discovering anything, apart from this.

Karl Ove Knausgaard is the author of the six-volume autobiographical novel "My Struggle." The English translation of "My Struggle: Book Four" will be published in the United States in April. Translated by Ingvild Burkey from the Norwegian.

Sign up for our newsletter *to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.*

A version of this article appears in print on March 15, 2015, on page MM63 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: My Saga, Part 2.