

ROYA
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No. 60



NINETEEN FILMS. NINETEEN ENDINGS SHE CHOSE.

FIFTY METRES A SECOND

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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THE SHELF

nineteen boxes, chronological, left to right



A length of pine on two brackets that her father put up in the nineties to hold paint tins. On the end of each box a white label with a surname on it — no first name, no dates. Dates would have made it a memorial, and it is not a memorial, it is a working archive, and that difference has always mattered to her a great deal more than she could justify to anybody who asked. Inside each one: the card, in its case, in a paper sleeve; a printed contact sheet of frames; her notes, in a school exercise book, one book per year; and an envelope holding whatever the family sent afterwards — in eleven cases a card, in three a photograph, and in one a cheque for four thousand euros that has never been banked and never returned.

The gap is the middle of 2016, when the boxes stopped for eighteen months and everybody said the equipment had got better. Two of the labels are in a different pen because she ran out of the black one in the August she filled two boxes in eleven days and could not make herself go to the shop. Nineteen men and two women. No. Nineteen boxes. Two of the boxes are women, so nineteen people. The arithmetic goes wrong in her head that way every single time, without exception.

SYNOPSIS

Every flyer in the valley wears a camera. When one of them dies, the memory card comes off the body, and somebody has to cut the memorial film.

For fifteen years that somebody has been Solveig Aandahl. She receives the card in a brown envelope from a man who will not look at her. She copies it twice before she watches anything. She goes through the last minute of a person's life as many times as it takes, and then she builds four minutes that a family can sit through in a church.

She has made nineteen of these films. Every one of them ends in mid-air.

Her brother's card is in a kitchen drawer under a coil of garden wire, and she has never put it in a reader.

A novella about wingsuit proximity flying, the arithmetic of an acceptable death, and what it costs to be kind with somebody else's last four seconds.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I came to this sport the way nearly everyone does, which is the problem the book is about. I watched footage.

What held me was not the flying. It was the editing. Somewhere behind every clean, four-minute tribute film there is a person at a desk deciding where a life should appear to end. That decision gets made privately, by hand, usually by a friend, usually out of love, and it is never spoken of again. It may be one of the last genuinely unwitnessed acts we have left. Everything else about the sport is on camera.

I wanted to write about the mercy in that decision, and about what mercy compounds into when you perform it nineteen times over fifteen years and a generation of young people calibrate their sense of survivable risk against the result.

My mother told me a story as a child, from the Shahnameh, about a king who lashed four eagles to a chair and hung meat above their heads on poles so the birds would climb and the chair would climb with them. When I was small I thought it was a story about ambition. It is not. It is a story about somebody who understood one true thing regarding appetite and built a machine out of it, and about what happens to the machine when the birds get tired. I have been circling that story my whole working life.

The technical material here is drawn from published accident reports, instructional syllabi, and the accounts of people who fly. Everything else is invented. The reader should be aware, while reading, that they are doing the thing the book is about.

Chew Z

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1. CARD

Bruno Steiner brought it up to the house on the Tuesday, in a brown envelope from the post office with the address window crossed out in ballpoint, and he held it out to me with his arm straight, the way you pass something you would rather set down.

"From the Nose," he said. "Yesterday. They finished at eleven."

"I know when they finished."

"There is also a chest camera. They have not found it yet."

I took it and did not open it in front of him. There was nothing on the envelope, no name, because everyone involved already knew the name, and writing it down would have turned it into a different kind of object altogether.

Bruno looked past me into the hall. He is sixty now and he works for the Talgemeinde, and he has been the one to go up and collect what is left off the ridges eleven times in nine years, for eleven different people, and in all that time he has never once looked at my face while handing me a card. He looks at the door frame. He looks at his van. Once, in 2019, he looked at my shoes for the whole conversation.

"They will want it quickly," he said. "The sponsor telephoned the office already."

"They always telephone the office."

He went back down the path. It was the second week of June and the valley was doing what the valley does in June, which is fill up. Two coaches were parked at the Staubbach falls with their engines running and a line of people at the rail in bright waterproofs, photographing three hundred metres of water coming off a cliff and turning to smoke before it arrives at the bottom. Above them, on the eastern wall, the exit rocks were still in shadow, and not one person at that rail knew the rocks were there.

That is the thing about this valley that I have never got used to. It runs two industries stacked one on top of the other. The lower one has no idea about the upper one until the helicopter comes, and

then for about forty minutes everybody stands in the road with their phones up, and then the coaches leave on schedule.

I shut the door and stood in my own hallway holding it with both hands.

Nineteen.

I had known it was going to be nineteen since the telephone went at twenty past eleven the previous morning, and I had spent the intervening day and night being a woman who had made eighteen of these and was shortly going to be a woman who had made nineteen.

The house is my father's. He bought it in 1994, when a Norwegian could still buy a house in a Swiss valley if he was patient and slightly rude, and he did both of those things for two years and got it for less than it was worth, and then he died in it eleven years later without ever once saying he was pleased about the purchase. It has a cold ground floor that I work in and a warm upper floor where I do everything else, and the stairs between them are the most honest architecture I have ever lived with.

I went down.

The room has one window at knee height with a view of a wall. Two drives in a rack. A monitor I calibrate in February and September. A chair that cost more than the monitor, which people find funny until they have sat in something for nine hours going through the same forty seconds.

And a shelf.

I put the envelope on the desk, square to the edge, and did not touch it for a while.

Outside, a paraglider went over low and made the noise they make, which is not really a noise, more an alteration in the pressure of the air near your ear. Rune had hated paragliders. Rune called them deckchairs. He was twenty-nine and from Ålesund, four hours up the coast from where my father was from, and he had made a good deal of money for a sunglasses company and rather less for himself,

and on Monday morning at twelve minutes past eight he went off the Nose in still air and did not open.

I put the desk lamp on.

The strange thing about a card is that it is warm. Not actually. It has been in a helmet and then in a plastic bag and then in a brown envelope, and by the time it reaches me it is the same temperature as the table it is lying on. But everyone handles it as though it were warm. Bruno holds it away from his body. The sponsors write to me asking for *the file* and never once for *the card*. A helicopter pilot told me at the Horner, drunk, some years ago, that all the way down the valley he can feel which pocket of his flight suit it is in, like a coin in a shoe.

I think it is warm because it is the last part of the person that is still doing anything.

The body has stopped. The telephone has stopped. The equipment is in a bag in Interlaken with a number written on it in marker. But the card is still holding four minutes and nine seconds of a man's morning, exactly, without any decay at all, and it will go on holding it for longer than anybody now alive will care, and it does not know that anything has happened.

I opened it with a kitchen knife because the letter opener went missing in 2019 and I have never replaced it.

Sixty-four gigabytes, in a black case with one corner cracked. There was grit in the crack. The grit was from the third ridge, and I looked at it for a while, and then I photographed the case, both sides, before I opened it — because that is step one, and I wrote the steps down in 2013 after a bad one, and I have not deviated from them since.

Step two is to slide the write-protect tab down.

Step three is never, under any circumstance, to work from the card.

2. WHAT I DO WITH THEM

There are people in this valley who think I watch these the way you watch a film. Sitting back. In the dark. With something to drink. It irritates me more than I let on, and what irritates me is not the ghoulishness — I can live with being thought ghoulish, I have had fifteen years of practice — it is that they imagine the watching is the job.

The watching is about a fifth of it. The first hour has nothing to do with looking at anything at all.

I put the card in the reader with the tab down and copy it whole to the working drive. Then I copy it again to the second drive in the rack, which lives in a bank in Interlaken three months a year and has done since the flood. Then I check all three against each other and get the same string three times, and only then do I take the card out and put it back in its case.

Twenty-one minutes. I have never once shortened it, not even in 2018, when a father stood in this room while I did it, breathing through his mouth, waiting for me to finish so that he could ask me the question he had come to ask, which I already knew and which I answered by saying I would telephone him in a week.

Then I opened the folder.

Rune's helmet camera had made four files, because the camera cuts a new file every eleven minutes and forty seconds regardless of what is in front of the lens, which is the single most useful stupid thing about that make of camera. Three of the files were Sunday. One was Monday.

I opened Sunday.

This is not sentiment and it is not delay. You cannot read a man's last flight if you have not seen his ordinary one. A flare that looks aggressive to a stranger might be exactly how he has flown every morning for four years. A wobble at eight seconds might be his suit, or his shoulders, or a habit of glancing at his left inlet that he picked up in 2021 and never lost — or it might be the only real thing in the file. You do not get to know which unless you have watched him on a Sunday when nothing happened.

Sunday, 07:41. The camera comes on inside a car with the radio going, then off. Then on again halfway up, pointed at the back of somebody's rucksack, and it stays there for six minutes of boots on wet limestone and two men breathing. Then off.

Sunday, 08:55. The rock.

I let it run.

Here is what a memorial film never shows, because it is always the first thing cut: most of the footage from any flight is a man standing still, doing nothing.

Rune stood on that rock for two minutes and forty seconds. Below the toes of his shoes the wall went down eight hundred metres into shadow and there was a road at the bottom with a bus on it, and the bus was the size of a grain of rice, and he did not look at any of it. He looked at his hands. He pulled the left arm-wing zip and re-set it. He rolled his shoulders twice. He put his right hand across his body to the pilot chute in the pouch at the bottom of the container and found the handle with two fingers and let it go and found it again.

He did that four times.

Then he said, to nobody, in Norwegian, that the air was good, and he stepped off.

I have seen five hundred exits. It still does something to me that I stopped trying to describe out loud about ten years ago, because the people I tried to describe it to always assumed I meant the drop.

It is not the drop. It is the silence in the first second.

The suit is not flying yet. A wingsuit is a sail with no wind in it until you make wind by falling, and for the first second and a half a man in a wingsuit is a man in a heavy nylon costume going down at exactly the speed of a dropped stone, with the fabric hanging off him slack and stupid. And then the air arrives — in through the inlets at the shoulders and the hips — and the whole thing fills and hardens and becomes a wing, and you can hear it happen. A low sucking crack in the microphone. It is called pressurisation and it

takes about a second, and in fifteen years it has never once stopped being the most violent kindness I know of.

Then the noise. From the moment the suit fills to the moment the canopy comes out, the audio is one flat roar — a hundred and eighty kilometres an hour of air going past a plastic housing — and underneath it, if you know how to listen, a man breathing.

Rune flew for fifty-one seconds on Sunday. He tracked out from the wall, brought it back, ran a shallow line above the treeline with the rock going past his left shoulder, then turned into open air, let the speed bleed off, reached, threw. The picture jerked upward as the canopy came out. The roar stopped. And after the roar came the strangest sound in the sport, which is nothing at all.

He said something else that the wind took. He landed in the field behind the campsite. The camera went off.

I wrote it all down. Time, exit, line, suit, flare, my estimate of his altitude at the pull, and the fact that he checked the pilot chute handle four times before he stepped.

Then I opened Monday.

3. BERGEN

Our mother's kitchen had a window that faced a wall and a fluorescent tube that took four seconds to decide whether it was coming on, and on winter evenings when our father was at sea she sat between us at the table with her tea going cold and told us stories she had been told in Yazd by a grandmother who never in her life saw snow.

The one Erlend always asked for was the flying chair.

There was a king, she said. Kay Kāvus. He was not a bad king — that part matters, she always said it in the same place — he was a king who had been told very often that he was the greatest man alive, and if you tell a man that for long enough he starts looking for something to check it against.

So he decided he would go up.

Not up a mountain. Up. Above the birds, to see what was there and to be the man who had seen it. And he was a king, so he did not have to work out how. He had people for that.

They built him a throne. A wooden chair, and at its four corners they lashed four eagles, the largest they could take, and they starved them for a day. And then — here she put her hands up, holding two poles that were not there — at each corner they fixed a spear standing straight upward, and on the point of each spear they put a leg of lamb.

Erlend was six and laughed until he had to put his head on the table.

The eagles were hungry, she said. The meat was above them. So they climbed. And because they were tied to the chair, the chair climbed too, and Kay Kāvus went up over his own palace and over the city and over the mountains, and he was the first man in the world to go up, and he did it without wings and without magic and without asking anyone's permission, by understanding one single thing correctly.

What thing, I said. I was eleven and I did not like the story.

That the birds always want the meat.

And then?

Then the eagles got tired.

Because eagles do get tired. They are not machines and they are not angels, they are birds, and a bird can only climb for so long with a chair and a fat king hanging underneath it. And when they stopped climbing the chair stopped climbing, and when they began to fall the chair fell with them, and they came down together in the forest at Amol, in the mud, tangled in their own ropes. And the king was found there some time afterwards, alive.

Alive?

Alive. Scratched. Very frightened. And extremely ridiculous.

That isn't a good ending, said Erlend.

It is the ending, she said.

Years later, when I was old enough to look things up, I found that in the poem it does not stop there. He is humiliated and does penance and is forgiven and goes on being king and doing further stupid things, because the poem is a thousand years old and the men who made it had no interest at all in the tidy shape of a lesson.

But that was not the version I was given. The version I was given stopped in the forest at Amol with a man in the mud and four exhausted birds, and for most of my life I thought the point of it was: do not be arrogant, because you will come down.

That is what everybody thinks the point of it is.

Our father came home in the March of that year off a supply boat with his knuckles split open, and at dinner Erlend told him the story wrong on purpose, giving the king a soft landing and a parade, and our father said that was a better story. Our mother cleared the plates and said nothing whatsoever, and the tube over the sink took its four seconds and came on.

4. THE SERVICE

They hold them at the Horner because they have always held them at the Horner. Chrigel has a projector left over from a football tournament in 2008 and a white wall behind the dartboard, and for these he takes the dartboard down and puts it back up the following afternoon.

Sixty people came for Rune, which is more than most. He had four hundred thousand subscribers and the sunglasses company sent two women from Munich, one of whom cried honestly all the way through and one of whom spent the film by the toilets on her telephone, doing something about a statement.

I sat at the end of the bar where I always sit, which is behind everybody, with my back to the wall and a view of the room rather than of the film. I had watched that film a hundred and forty times in nine days. I had no need of it. What I needed to watch was them.

Chrigel put the lights down and the room went quiet in stages, in a wave from the front to the back, the way rooms do.

Four minutes and twelve seconds.

It opens on Rune in a car park in Ålesund in 2019, twenty-three years old and sunburnt, holding a folded suit and grinning at whoever is holding the telephone. Then five exits from five summers, cut so that his body leaves five different rocks in the same direction, which is a trick I have used before and will use again, because it gives an audience the feeling of a life with momentum in it.

Then forty unbroken seconds of a line he flew on a good September morning two years ago down the Lobhorn, low, with his own shadow beside him on the rock. It is the most beautiful thing that man ever produced with a camera. I put it at forty seconds because at forty seconds a room has settled and can receive something.

Then his voice over black, eleven seconds from a podcast, cheerful and slightly badly expressed: that he is not an adrenaline person, that he finds the exit calming, that people get this wrong about the sport all the time.

Then Monday.

I used nineteen seconds of Monday. The exit. The crack of the suit filling. The first eleven seconds of the flight, which were as clean as anything he ever flew. And then the picture turns — a right-hand turn away from the wall, out into the open valley, into nothing but air and light and the far side four kilometres off — and I held on that turn, and let the roar drop away under the music, and took it to white.

The last card had his name on it and two dates.

The room made the noise that rooms make. A boy at the front put both hands over his face.

And I sat at the back of a pub with a drink I had not touched and watched sixty people receive the information that Rune Hovda died in the middle of a beautiful turn in good air, and every single one of them believed it, because it was on camera.

Because I had put it there.

Afterwards the woman from Munich came over with two glasses I had not asked for.

"That was so beautifully done," she said. "Really. You have a gift for it."

"Thank you."

"Is this what you do? Professionally, I mean?"

I looked at the white wall, where Chrigel was already putting the dartboard back up.

"Yes," I said.

5. NESBIT

The van came into the campsite at Stechelberg on the fourteenth of June: a Transit with a Kent plate, a mattress in the back, a logbook on the passenger seat with two hundred and fourteen skydives in it, and a laminated spreadsheet taped inside the sliding door.

I did not see the spreadsheet until August. When I did, I understood the whole boy in about four seconds.

It had columns. He had made it in February, at a kitchen table in England, before he had ever been here. Jumps, then first flight course, then suit progression, then tracking, then first object, then wingsuit BASE, then terrain. Dates against every row. The last row said *proximity* and the date beside it said *August*, and he had written it in pen, pressing hard enough to go through onto the next sheet.

He was twenty-six. He had ridden BMX semi-professionally from nineteen to twenty-three, which meant eleven thousand pounds over four years, a left wrist broken twice, one collarbone, and — at an age when it is extremely useful to learn it — the difference between being frightened and being unprepared. He gave it up when he worked out that he was going to be the fourth-best man at every event for the rest of his life.

He found the sport the way everyone finds it, which is that it found him. An autoplay. Three minutes of somebody going down the Lobhorn with a shadow beside him on the rock.

That was Rune's September line. He did not know that. Hardly anybody who has seen that clip knows whose it is; it has been lifted

and re-uploaded onto forty channels with forty different pieces of music, and the man in it has been dead since June.

He walked up to the flight school at eight the next morning and Urs was outside on a folding chair in the sun, doing nothing, which is a thing Urs is extremely good at.

"I'm here for the first flight course."

Urs looked at him for a while.

"You have two hundred jumps?"

"Two hundred and fourteen."

"Show me."

Jory fetched the logbook and Urs went through the whole of it, page by page, three and a half years of a man's Saturdays, and he read the last twenty entries twice.

"You did sixty jumps in April."

"I took the month off work."

"Why?"

"To get to two hundred."

Urs shut the book and handed it back and said nothing at all.

Jory told me about this in October, sitting at my kitchen table, and by then he had understood what had happened in that exchange, and so had I. He had failed something. Urs had heard a boy say out loud that he had bought a number, and had let him past anyway.

That is the entire problem with this valley in one transaction on a folding chair.

"The course is Thursday," Urs said. "Two days on the ground, then we jump."

"Two days?"

"Two days."

"On the ground."

"Ja."

"Doing what?"

Urs stood and folded the chair and leaned it against the office wall, and it was only then that Jory got a proper look at his left hand, and at the two fingers that do not close all the way.

"Learning what it is," Urs said.

6. FIRST FLIGHT COURSE

The suit comes out of the bag onto a trestle table, and the first thing Urs does is refuse to let anyone touch it.

There were four of them that week. A Dutch woman called Fenna with three hundred and forty jumps. Two Israelis who had come together and did everything together and finished each other's questions. And Jory. The Israelis had already bought suits; Urs made them leave them in the car.

"This," he said, "is not a wing."

He picked it up by the shoulders and it hung off his fists like a coat somebody had died in.

"At this moment it is fabric. It weighs three and a half kilos and it will kill you faster than nothing at all — because with nothing at all you fall straight down and you know precisely where you are going to land. This does not fly. *You* fly. It becomes a wing only when you make it one, and you make it one out of air, and the air is the only part of this that you did not bring with you."

Then he laid it flat and went through it with one finger, and Jory, who had assumed the first day would be a formality he had to sit through, filled eleven pages of a notebook.

The arm wing: fabric between the arm and the flank, wrist to hip. The leg wing: fabric between the legs, ankle to ankle. Two surfaces, and both of them are made out of the space where your body isn't.

The inlets: vents at the shoulders and along the hips and at the leading edge of the leg wing. One-way. They scoop air in when you are going forward and they trap it. The suit is not one skin, it is two, with cells between them, and when the cells fill at pressure the whole surface goes rigid and holds a shape. That is pressurisation. A depressurised suit is a bedsheet.

The cutaway cables: you cannot reach a pilot chute with your arms sealed inside arm wings, so there are cables that free your arms. Urs made each of them find the cable blind, eyes shut, thirty times. Then again lying face down on the table with their arms out. Then again with him standing over them shouting.

"Why am I shouting?"

Nobody answered.

"Because when you need this, somebody will be shouting."

The second day was airflow. He drew on a whiteboard for an hour and a half — forward speed and lift, how a wingsuit does not really fly so much as fall slowly in a chosen direction, why a suit that will not pressurise turns instantly into three and a half kilos of drag hanging off a man in a flat spin.

Then he drew the flat spin.

"This is the one," he said. "Not the wall. Not the canopy. This. Your suit is a very large sail and your body is very small, and if one wing is loaded and the other is not, you will rotate. And the rotation loads the outside wing harder, so you rotate faster. It does not stop. It gets worse at a rate that you cannot imagine until it is happening to you. Sixty degrees a second. A hundred. Your blood goes into your hands. Your vision closes in from the outside. You cannot find your cable, because your arms weigh forty kilos now, and you cannot see your own hands, and everything you have ever known about what to do is written on a piece of paper in your car."

He put the marker down.

"On Thursday you will be very excited to leave the aeroplane. I am telling you now that the exit is not the difficult part. The difficult part is that this sport will give you eighteen months in which nothing goes wrong. It does that to everybody. And at the end of the eighteen months you will have learned that nothing goes wrong."

It was Fenna who asked. She asked it in a completely flat voice, and Jory said he liked her from that second onward.

"How many of your students are dead?"

Urs picked the suit up off the table and folded it, and he did it the way a man folds a flag.

"Six," he said.

7. TWO POINT FIVE TO ONE

It is the number everybody learns first and understands last.

Glide ratio. For every metre you go down, you go so many metres forward. A modern high-performance wingsuit, flown well, by somebody who knows exactly what he is doing, in still air, will give about two and a half to one. Some will give three. In the marketing they will tell you three.

So: you leave a rock eight hundred metres above the valley floor. Two and a half to one means two kilometres of forward travel before you are on the ground. It sounds enormous. It sounds like all the room in the world.

At the Horner on the Friday, Urs said three to one. He said it because he was sitting at a table of people who had just finished their first flight course and because it was a Friday.

I was three seats along with a beer I had been holding for forty minutes.

"Two point three," I said.

Urs turned his head.

"Two point three on that wall, in June, with two humid days behind it. You are quoting a wind tunnel number in a valley that has a wall in it."

One of the Israelis laughed, because he thought it was banter.

"Explain," Urs said. It was not a challenge, it was a request, and Jory noticed that Urs moved his chair back to make the table mine, and he asked me about it months later, and I did not have a good answer for him.

"Your glide ratio is an average across a whole flight," I said. "It is not a promise about any particular second of it. It is like saying your car does eighteen kilometres to the litre. Perfectly true. And of

no use whatsoever in the moment you actually need to know whether you can get past the thing in front of you, because that moment is four seconds long and your average is four minutes long."

I put the glass down.

"For the first eight seconds you are not at ratio at all. You are diving. You have to dive, because you have to make speed to make the wing work, and while you are making it you are going down a great deal faster than you are going forward. On the Nose you will lose about a hundred and twenty metres before that suit is doing anything for you whatsoever. And that hundred and twenty metres does not appear anywhere in the number three."

"And?" said Fenna.

"And most people plan the flight with the number and then fly the flight with the first eight seconds."

I left an hour later. Jory watched me go and asked Urs who I was, and Urs told him: she cuts the films.

"What films?"

"When somebody dies," Urs said, "there is a film."

8. ERLEND

The first time Jory saw my brother fly he had no idea who he was watching, which is the right way to see it, because on the ground Erlend was a man of no distinction at all.

It was the twenty-first of June, the longest day, and half the valley walks up for it, and Jory went because he had been told he could carry things.

They exited off the High Nose at ten to six in air so still that the smoke from somebody's cigarette on the rock went straight up.

Four of them went. The first two were fine. The third was a German in a new suit who over-flew his line and had to make a correction that everybody on the rock saw and nobody mentioned, then or ever.

Erlend went last.

He stood on the rock for eleven seconds. Jory would learn, later that summer, that Rune had stood for two minutes and forty, and that this was not unusual. But Erlend did not look at his hands. He did not roll his shoulders. There was no ritual to him whatsoever. He looked out at the wall opposite, and then he leaned forward from the ankles, the way a man leans into a doorway to see whether the room is empty, and he was gone.

The suit filled with that low crack.

And then he did nothing dramatic at all for fifty-eight seconds, and Jory told me it was the most frightening thing he had ever seen.

He did not dive hard. He did not run the wall for the camera. He came off the rock, found the line early — earlier than the German, earlier by a lot — and then simply sat in it, high, with room underneath him, and let the terrain arrive. He went past the shoulder of the ridge with fifty metres of air below him where the others had taken fifteen. He did not turn once in the entire flight. He went where the valley went. Near the end he lifted his hands very slightly, twice, and the whole shape of him altered by a few degrees, and he floated on for a distance that Jory would have sworn was not available to him.

He opened at a sensible height and landed in the field and sat down cross-legged in the wet grass to pack his own canopy, and did not speak to anybody for twenty minutes.

“Who is that?” Jory said.

“That is Solveig’s brother,” said Fenna.

He watched him from across the field: a slightly heavy man of thirty-three in a red suit, with the rolled shoulders of somebody who had spent most of his twenties at a desk, doing something absorbing with folded nylon.

“He’s good, isn’t he,” Jory said. “Actually good.”

“He is the best flyer in this valley,” Fenna said, “and he has forty-one thousand subscribers, and Rune Hovda had four hundred thousand, and if you can explain that to me I will buy you dinner.”

That evening Jory ate at my table for the first time, because Fenna had been invited and brought him. I looked at him in the doorway for a second longer than was comfortable and then stood aside, and I have gone back over that second more times than I can defend.

I do not know what I saw. I have told myself since that I saw the type — that I had seen the type nineteen times and knew what was coming. That is a lie of the kind you build afterwards, with the shape already in your hand. What I actually saw was a young man with wet shoes holding a bottle of wine that had been chosen by somebody who did not drink wine.

There was a story at the table that night. Our mother's story. Erlend told it because he was two beers in and because Fenna had asked why he had a small brass eagle on his keyring.

"A chair," he said, "with four birds tied to it, and meat on sticks over their heads so they fly upward. That's it. That's the whole invention. A chair with a good marketing department."

"And did it work?" said Fenna.

"Course it worked," said Erlend. "That's the problem with it."

I said nothing and put more bread on the table.

9. NINETEEN DRAWERS

The shelf is opposite the desk, at eye height if you are sitting down.

It is not a special shelf. It is a length of pine on two brackets that my father put up in the nineties to hold paint tins, and along it stand nineteen archive boxes, the grey acid-free kind that photographers use, each about the width of a hand.

On the end of each one, a white label with a surname on it. No first name. No dates. I thought about dates. Dates would have made it a memorial, and it is not a memorial, it is a working archive, and that difference has always mattered to me a great deal more than I could justify to anybody who asked.

They are not alphabetical. They are chronological, left to right.

BAUMANN. 2011. The first. A Swiss man of forty-four who had flown eleven years and went in on the Gitschen, whose wife wanted

something for the funeral in three days, and who is the reason all of this exists.

VUKOVIĆ. 2012.

DEEN. 2013.

HOLLIS. 2013.

RASMUSSEN. 2014.

TAKAGI. 2015.

MARCHETTI. 2015.

Then a gap in the middle of 2016, when we had a good eighteen months and the boxes stopped and everybody said the equipment had got better.

FALK. 2017.

BRANDT. 2018.

ILLÉS. 2018.

PEREZ. 2019.

And then two in eleven days that August, which was the worst thing that has happened here in my lifetime and which put a helicopter over the Horner every afternoon for a week. SOTO and LINDQVIST, side by side, the labels written in different pens because I had run out of the black one and could not make myself go to the shop.

MBEKI. 2021.

DURAND. 2022.

WYLDE. 2023.

NOVÁK. 2024.

SCHENK. 2024.

And then a space, and then HOVDA, still with the lid off, because the film had only screened nine days earlier and there were still emails going back and forth about an audio licence.

Inside each box: the card, in its case, in a paper sleeve. The drives have died and been replaced twice each over the years but I keep the cards themselves, physically, because nobody ever told me

what to do with them and nobody has ever asked for one back. A printed contact sheet of frames. My notes, in a school exercise book, one book per year. And an envelope holding whatever the family sent me afterwards, which in eleven cases is a card, in three cases a photograph, and in one case — DURAND — a cheque for four thousand euros which I have never banked and never returned and take out and look at perhaps twice a year.

I do not go to the shelf often. It has been in my eyeline every working day for fifteen years, which is an entirely different thing from going to it. You can stop seeing a wall. That is not a moral failure, it is how eyes work, and I have leaned on it harder than I should have.

That night in June I was at the desk finishing the Hovda paperwork, and I sat back and looked at the shelf and did the thing I trained myself out of doing years ago, which is to read the labels as names.

Nineteen men and two women.

No. Nineteen boxes. Two of the boxes are women, so nineteen people. The arithmetic goes wrong in my head that way every single time, without exception, and I have never worked out whether that is the sport's fault or mine.

I turned the lamp off and sat in the dark for a while.

Later, upstairs, I opened the drawer in the kitchen where the batteries and the string and the fuses live, and looked into the back of it, and closed it again.

That was the twelfth of June and there was nothing in the back of that drawer at all. I have thought about that a great deal since. I was only checking that the drawer still opened.

10. SLIDER DOWN

Some things about parachutes.

When you jump out of an aeroplane you have a great deal of sky. Twelve thousand feet. A minute of falling, and then you pull at three thousand and your canopy has as long as it likes to open — three, four, five hundred feet of opening — and this is good,

because a canopy that opens slowly does not break you. To make it open slowly there is a piece of fabric called a slider that sits at the top of the lines and comes down as the canopy inflates, holding everything back like a hand flat on a dog's chest.

When you jump off a rock you have four hundred feet.

So you take the slider off, or you push it up and tie it out of the way. Sliderless. Now the canopy opens immediately, brutally, and it hurts, and it is the only version that is any use to you at all — because a slow opening at four hundred feet is not an opening. It is a length of nylon that arrives at the same time as the ground.

Jory did his slider-down progression out of an aeroplane, which is what everybody does, because you cannot practise a hard opening for the first time with a cliff behind you.

He did eleven of them. The first one hit him so hard he bit his tongue.

"Good," said Urs on the ground, entirely unbothered, looking into his mouth. "Now you know what four hundred feet feels like."

Then the pilot chute. In BASE you have no ripcord and no reserve. You have a small round parachute in your hand, or in a pouch at the bottom of the container, and you throw it into the air behind you and it catches and drags the main out. That is the whole mechanism. There is nothing else. If you throw badly, or it wraps around your arm, or you hesitate, there is no second system that fires at a set altitude and saves you, because there is not enough sky for a second system to do anything except add weight.

Two seconds from the decision to a flying canopy, if everything works.

He practised the throw standing on the grass with a training chute four hundred times over a fortnight, until his shoulder ached, until he could do it while talking about something else. Then Urs made him do four hundred more while somebody counted at him wrong on purpose.

And then the counting, which you cannot get away from.

"You will count," Urs said, "and you will be wrong."

“Wrong how?”

“Fast. Everybody counts fast. In freefall you count one second in about seven-tenths of a second. On a bad day, half. You will exit and count to three and you will believe absolutely that you have taken three seconds, and you will have taken a second and a half, and on a low object you will throw into a canopy that has no air in it yet.”

“So how do you fix it?”

Urs shrugged. “You film yourself and you look at the timecode and you find out how much you lie.”

That night Jory did what everybody does, which is play his own footage back and count aloud along with it, and discover that his three was 2.1. He also discovered that his heart rate at the door was not the number he had been telling people, and that when he watched himself do the exit he did not recognise the man doing it.

He put the clip on his telephone and watched it eleven times.

Then he cut a nine-second version with a bit of music on it and posted it, and it did four hundred and eighty views by morning, which was more than anything he had ever put up in his life, and he lay in the dark in the van reading the comments.

He told me all of this, cheerfully, in August, as a funny story about being a beginner.

11. FÖHN

June turned humid, and then the föhn came over the Grimsel, and for two days nobody flew.

The föhn is a wind that comes over the Alps from the south and arrives dry and warm and far too quickly, and it does not come down the valley in a nice straight line the way weather does in a book. It hits the walls. It rolls. It sets up rotors — great slow rolling barrels of air in the lee of a ridge, a kilometre wide, entirely invisible — and inside one of them the air is going *downward* at eight metres a second, and your suit does not know that.

I taught it to Jory with a file from 2019 in which nobody died.

That was the thing about me that he had not expected. He had expected morbidity; he told me so in October. What he got was a middle-aged woman with a scrub bar running the same eleven seconds back and forth with two fingers, without any ceremony at all, like a mechanic with a torch and an engine.

"Watch the shadow."

"I'm watching the wall."

"Everybody watches the wall. The wall is not moving. Watch his shadow on it."

I ran it again. A flyer called Petar going down the flank of the Lobhorn at twenty past nine on a July morning, and beside him on the rock a small dark aeroplane-shape keeping pace with him.

"Now."

The shadow got closer. Not quickly. Over about two seconds it slid in towards him — which means he was getting nearer the rock — and it did this while he was not turning at all.

"He didn't move," Jory said.

"No. The air moved. He is in the outside of a rotor and it is putting him thirty metres left and about as much down, and the entire time his hands are telling him he is flying straight. Because he is flying straight. Straight through a room that is going sideways."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. He rode it out and he was fine and he landed and he had a coffee. That is why I use this one."

I sat back.

"If I showed you the ones where they died you would learn the wrong thing. You would learn that rotors kill people, which is no use to you, because you already believe you would never fly in a rotor. This one is useful because Petar is a very good flyer having a completely ordinary morning, and he is thirty metres off his line and does not know it."

Jory looked at the frozen frame for a while. At the shadow. At four hundred metres of grey limestone going past.

"How do you know all this?"

"I've watched about nine thousand hours of it."

"No, but — you don't fly."

I did not answer immediately, and he noticed, and he was polite enough not to say so.

"I did one BASE jump," I said. "In 2016. Off the Nose. Slider down, no suit, and I opened at six seconds, and it was the single stupidest thing I have ever done, and I got away with it, and I never did it again."

"Why not?"

"Because I had already spent five years watching what it does."

He accepted that. It was true and it was not the answer.

The answer is that on the walk down I understood I had wanted to be able to say I had done it, and that wanting to be able to say a thing is the worst reason there is to be eight hundred metres up in the dark with a folded parachute, and that I had been given, free of charge, on my first attempt, the one piece of information that most of them never get.

12. THE WALK-UP

There is a part of this sport that is not on any card, and it is most of it.

You get up at half past three. Not because dawn is beautiful — although it is — but because the air is only honest for about ninety minutes, and because the tourists arrive at ten, and because the police are not stupid and everyone has an arrangement with them that depends on nobody being conspicuous.

You eat something you do not want. Two of them told me over the years that they have never once been hungry at that hour and have never once skipped it, because you cannot fly a wall on nothing and you cannot walk two hours on nothing either. Bread. A banana. Coffee out of a flask that will still be full at the top.

You check the pack you already checked the night before. Then you check it again in the car park, which everybody does, and which everybody pretends is a joke about themselves.

You drive nine minutes and park where the cars will not be noticed, and then you start walking in the dark with a head torch pointed at the ground four feet in front of you, and you do that for two hours.

The path to the Nose is limestone. Wet for the first hour with dew, and slick in exactly the places where you would put a hand. It goes up through beech, and then out onto open grass where you can see the lights of Wengen across the valley and the valley itself as a black absence beneath them, and then into a cutting where somebody bolted a fixed rope into the rock in 1998 and it has been replaced twice.

Everybody uses the rope. Everybody says the rope is the most dangerous part of the day. Everybody laughs. It is true.

You do not talk on the walk. There is no rule about it. It is simply the grade — after twenty minutes you have no breath to spend and after forty you have stopped wanting to.

The pack is eleven kilos: rig, suit, water, and either shoes to leave at the top or shoes to carry down if you do not go.

Nobody mentions the second option. It is in every pack.

I have never done that walk in a suit. I have done it eleven or twelve times with a camera, in the years when the valley still had a few people who thought I ought to see the whole thing rather than the last minute of it, and I have done it once alone, in October of the year my brother died, which I will come to.

What I remember is the smell. Wet beech, then wet rock, then nothing at all — above a certain height the air stops smelling of anything, and I have never known whether that is the altitude or the cold or my own nose giving up.

And I remember the boots. Six or eight people going up in a line, nobody speaking, and the sound is not footsteps. It is a rhythm with a fault in it: everyone at the same cadence except that somebody,

always, is slightly out, and the pattern beats against itself the whole way up, and after an hour you cannot hear anything else.

At the exit rock there is a plastic box under a stone with a logbook in it and a pencil that never works.

And then you sit.

This is the part nobody films and it is forty minutes long.

You sit on top of a wall in your suit with your legs stretched out in front of you and the light comes up, and the valley below fills with it in stages — the far wall first, then the tops of the trees, then the floor last of all, the road and the river and the roofs coming up out of the blue like something developing in a tray. It is one of the great experiences available to a human being. It is free. Any walker can have it. The only difference between you and the walker is what you intend to do next.

You look at the smoke of your own breath to read the air. You look at the flag, if somebody has left one tied to the stake. You look at the tops of the trees eight hundred metres straight down, which move about ten seconds before you feel anything up here, and which is the only weather instrument that has ever mattered.

You talk a little. It is quiet talk and it is never about the jump. In fifteen years of listening to that section of the file — because the camera is on now, they put the camera on at the rock — I have heard men discuss: a gearbox, a brother-in-law, whether Chrigel waters the beer, a woman in Lucerne, the correct way to store a canopy over winter, and, once, at very great length, in 2018, the film *Heat*.

I have never once heard anybody say they are frightened.

And then somebody stands up.

That is the whole thing. Nobody announces it. Somebody stands up and starts to zip, and everyone's morning changes state, and there is a small unpleasant movement in the chest that people who do not do this imagine is fear. It is not fear. It is the feeling of a decision leaving the part of your life where you can still change your mind.

Order matters, and it is the only piece of etiquette up there that is entirely rigid.

The most experienced flyer does not go first. He goes second or third. The first man off is the instrument that reads the air — he will find the rotor, or the sink, or the lift, and everybody watching from the rock will learn from what happens to him — and the reason you do not send your best flyer first is not sentiment. It is that you would rather your best flyer be the one still standing on the rock, watching, with an opinion.

Nobody says this out loud either. Not once, in nine thousand hours, on any file I have.

On the fourth of July, Jory carried a pack up for other people for the eleventh time and sat on that rock in the cold without a suit on, and watched three men stand up one after another and become very small, and walked down alone in the sun with an empty bag. He got to the van at half past nine and cried for about four minutes with the door open and his boots still on, and he had no idea why, and he told me about it in August as though it were a symptom of something.

It is not a symptom. Every one of them does it, once, in the first summer, and none of them tell each other.

13. TRACKING

A tracking suit looks like a wingsuit that has been to prison.

The same idea with less of it. Small arm wings, a small leg wing, nothing that pressurises properly. You cannot fly a line in one. What you can do is go forward instead of straight down — perhaps one and a bit to one on a good day, flown well — and the entire purpose of the object is to make you spend a year finding out what your body does in moving air before anybody straps a surface to you that is large enough to kill you.

Jory hated it with a completeness that surprised him.

He had the time and he had money from a flat sale and by the middle of July he had two hundred and sixty jumps, and he was, by the letter of every syllabus anybody in this valley has ever written

down, ready. He was also twenty-six and had spent four months of an English winter on a spreadsheet.

"How long in this?"

"A season," said Urs.

"A whole season."

"A season is not long."

"It's the whole summer."

"Yes."

They were in the packing shed. Erlend was in there too, on his knees on the mat, doing the thing he did to a canopy that made it look like a different object from the one that came out of Jory's bag.

"You know what it is," Erlend said, without looking up. "It's that the season is invisible."

"What?"

"The years." He was flaking the lines out with two fingers, one at a time. "If you did four hundred hours in a tracking suit and it *showed* — if you came out of it with a scar, or a certificate, or a fucking hat — you'd do it happily. But nothing happens. You do a year, and at the end of it you're a man in a field with a bag, exactly like at the start. The only thing you've got is that you didn't die, and nobody can see that."

"So how do you know it did anything?"

"You don't." He pulled the slider up. "That's the deal. The sport is about eight years long and about seven and a half of them are boring, and every single piece of footage of it comes from the other half."

"That's not true. There's loads of training footage."

Erlend sat back on his heels.

"How much of it have you watched?"

Jory did not answer.

"Right," said Erlend. "So there is loads of it. And nobody watches it. So it doesn't exist."

He rolled the canopy and pushed the air out of it with his forearm.

“The footage isn’t the sport,” he said. “The footage is the advert. And the thing about an advert isn’t that it lies to you. It’s that it’s the four minutes out of eight years where somebody thought to press record.”

I was not in the shed. Jory told me that conversation twice — once in August, laughing, as evidence that my brother was a miserable bastard, and once in October, not laughing.

14. THE TYPE

People ask me what they are like. Journalists ask it, and documentary men ask it, and the mothers ask it, which is the hardest version, because what the mothers are actually asking is whether their son was one of a kind.

Here is the honest answer. They are not adrenaline junkies. That phrase is worse than wrong, it is backwards, and every one of them will tell you so, and for years I assumed they were being defensive and they were not. They were being accurate.

An adrenaline junkie is somebody who wants the feeling. What these people want is the *absence* of the feeling, and they have found the only reliable place to get it.

Rune said it into a podcast microphone in 2023, badly, in his fourth language, and it went past everybody who heard it: *I find the exit calming*. People took that for bravado. It is not bravado. It is a clinical description.

Here is what actually happens in a body on that rock, and I have this from a physiologist in Bern who spent two years measuring them and who was, I think, slightly disappointed by what he found.

Forty minutes before the exit, sitting on the rock, heart rate is elevated. Cortisol high. Cognition slightly degraded — they are worse at arithmetic up there than they are on the ground, measurably worse, which is why nobody makes plans at the exit. Everything is agreed in the car park.

The chest gets tight. The hands get cold, because blood is being pulled in towards the core. The mouth goes dry and stays dry. Some of them are nauseous every single time and have been for a decade and have never mentioned it to anybody.

And then somebody stands up.

And from the moment of the step, all of that stops.

Heart rate drops. Not rises — drops, and it drops fast, and in some of them it goes below their resting rate within eight seconds. Peripheral vision opens up rather than closing down. Time reporting goes long: a flight of forty-eight seconds is experienced, almost universally, as somewhere between two and four minutes, and they can tell you what they thought about during it in a level of detail that is not available to a person in a panic.

The reason is not mystical. It is that everything ambiguous has been removed.

A human nervous system is not distressed by danger. It is distressed by unresolved danger — by a threat it can neither escape nor address, which is the condition most of us live in for most of our adult lives, in traffic, at work, in a marriage, waiting for a result. Put a man in a situation with exactly one task, no choices, no ambiguity, no possibility of retreat and no one to consult, and a great many nervous systems will do something that looks from the outside like peace.

That is what they are buying. Not the fear. The forty-eight seconds after the fear stops.

And the ones who get hurt are frequently the ones who need it most, and this is the part that nobody puts in a documentary.

So: what are they like.

They are quiet. Overwhelmingly. The loud ones exist and they are the ones with the sponsorships and they are not the good flyers, as a rule, and everybody in the valley knows this and it never once appears in the footage.

They are punctual to a degree that becomes comic. A group that will fly a wall at forty metres will have an argument about a six-minute delay in a car park.

They are, most of them, extremely dull about everything else. This surprises people. They are accountants and joiners and radiographers and one dentist. They have mortgages. Erlend had a spreadsheet for the heating oil.

They read the weather obsessively and they read almost nothing else.

They are not, in my experience, brave. I have thought about this for fifteen years and I am confident about it. Bravery is doing the thing while the fear is present. These people have found a doorway where the fear stops on the other side, and they go through it repeatedly, and what that requires is not courage. It is tolerance for the forty minutes beforehand.

And they are, almost without exception, kind. Sentimental, even. They cry easily and in the wrong places. They will drive four hours to help somebody move a sofa.

I have sat in a pub with a man who was the most careful and considerate person in the room, who let everybody else order first, who walked a woman he did not know back to the campsite because it was dark, and who six days later went off the Nose in air he had been told about twice and did not come back, and both of those are the same man, and the second one does not cancel the first one, and I am tired of being asked to reconcile them.

One more thing, and this is the thing I would say to the mothers if the mothers ever asked the actual question.

They know. All of them. Every single one of them knows, in the way you know a fact about a distant country, that this may kill them. They will say so. They will say it into a camera, cheerfully.

What they do not know — what they *cannot* know, and what I made certain for fifteen years that they would not learn — is what it looks like when it does.

15. VIEWS

Nine weeks after Rune went in, his film passed nine hundred thousand.

I do not have an account and I do not need one. Chrigel tells me things. He tells me while holding a glass up to the light and looking through it, which is his way of not being the sort of man who tells people things.

Then the email came.

It was from a marketing manager in Munich and it was extremely polite. They were putting together a longer piece about Rune. A proper tribute. Twelve to fifteen minutes, real production values. They had spoken to the family, who were open in principle. And they wondered whether I would be willing to share the raw.

The raw.

I read it twice, standing up, in the cold room with my coat still on.

They did not know what they were asking for. I had to keep hold of that. This woman of thirty-one, who had wept honestly at the back of a pub in a foreign country in June, did not know that *the raw* meant four minutes and nine seconds ending in a particular way, and that the last of those seconds contains the sound of a man's body arriving on a limestone ridge at a hundred and ninety kilometres an hour, and that this sound exists, and is on a card in a grey box eleven feet from where I was standing, and that once you have heard it you have heard it.

They thought *raw* meant unpolished. They thought it meant more of the good stuff.

I wrote back: *No*.

Then I deleted that and wrote three paragraphs about the family's wishes and the licence and the material not being mine to distribute, which is a lie in the second half and true in the first, and I sent it, and they replied inside the hour thanking me for my time and saying that they completely understood.

That was the Wednesday.

On the Friday, Chrigel told me the film had done a million, and that a channel out of Denver had cut its own version out of Rune's older uploads with a piano underneath it, and that this one had done two million on its own.

"They did not ask you," he said.

"They don't have to. It's his footage. It's the sponsor's footage. I don't own anything."

"You made the film."

"I cut *a* film. There is no film. There are forty hours of a man's holidays and every one of us is going to be taking pieces off it for the next ten years."

He put the glass down.

I should explain the money, because nobody ever does, and because everything that happened afterwards runs on it.

There is no prize money in this sport. There is no league, no season, no ranking, no governing body worth the name. Nobody has ever been paid to fly off a rock.

What there is instead is attention, and attention gets converted into money at four separate points, and none of the four is the obvious one.

The first is equipment. A suit is four to six thousand francs. A rig is three. Cameras, mounts, canopies, replacement lines, a new main every two seasons if you are flying properly. A flyer who is visible is given all of it. A flyer who is not visible pays for all of it. The difference between those two positions is about forty thousand francs a year, which is more than most of them earn.

The second is travel. The Norwegian season is six weeks and it is not cheap. There are exhibitions in China that pay appearance fees. There is a man in Italy who will fly a suit with a company's name on it over a cycling race for eleven thousand euros, and the eleven thousand euros is not for the flying. It is for the twenty seconds of footage that goes out afterwards.

The third is the channel itself, which is the smallest of the four and the one everybody assumes is the largest.

And the fourth is the one nobody puts a number on, which is that visibility is how you get to keep doing it at all. The permissions. The lifts. The invitation to the closed exit on private land. The man in Chamonix who will put you up for a fortnight. Being watched is not the reward in this sport. It is the currency you spend in order to remain inside it.

So when a young man in a Transit van sits up until two in the morning cutting nine seconds of himself, he is not being vain. He is doing the only available form of work.

And every one of those four points is fed by the same thing: people at home, watching footage of somebody flying next to a wall.

That is where every franc in this valley comes from. Not one of them from the flying. All of them from the watching.

"You want a drink?" Chrigel said.

"No."

I walked home the long way, past the campsite, and the Transit with the Kent plate had its side door open and a laptop going on the mattress, and a young man was sitting cross-legged in the dark cutting nine seconds of himself in the air, over and over, with the same three seconds of a song looping.

I stood in the road for a while and watched the light of it flicker on the canvas of the awning.

I want to be exact about this, because it is the sort of thing I could make into a premonition and it was not one. I was not frightened for him. I was not thinking about the shelf. I stood in a road in the dark and thought: *that is a nice thing to see, somebody working late on something he cares about*, and then I went home and slept perfectly well.

16. FIRST BASE

The object was a bridge in the Valais, four hours away. A hundred and eight metres, which is not high. It is famous for not being high. People go there because it is boring, and it is boring on purpose,

and the entire point of a first BASE jump is that nothing about it should be interesting in any way.

No wingsuit. No tracking suit. Jeans and a rig.

Urs drove. Urs drives like a man delivering a piano.

They got there at six in the morning and there were already two other groups, and Jory stood at the rail and looked down at a river the colour of concrete dust and had a sensation entirely new to him, which was his own body making decisions in his absence. His hands were cold. His mouth had gone strange. He had done two hundred and sixty-one skydives and had never felt anything remotely like it at an aircraft door, and he understood, standing at that rail, that the aeroplane had been doing something for him all along that he had assumed he was doing for himself.

An aircraft door is four thousand metres up and it is loud and there is a horizon and there are other people and none of it is real.

A bridge is a hundred and eight metres and completely silent and there is a road behind you with a car on it.

"You will jump," Urs said, "and you will count to three, and you will throw."

"Three."

"Three. Not four. Not two."

"What happens at two?"

"Nothing. It works at two. But at two you have taught yourself that you are a man who panics, and you will be that man for the rest of your career."

He climbed over the rail.

It took him two minutes and eleven seconds to let go, and Urs did not say one word for any of it, and afterwards Jory realised that in eight weeks Urs had never once told him he could do something.

He let go.

There is no sensation of falling. Nobody believes that until it happens to them. There is a sensation of the world coming up in absolute silence, of the bridge going away above you very fast, and

there is no wind at first because you have no speed yet, and it is quiet, and it is slow, and it is the most alone a person can be.

He counted. One. Two. Three.

He threw.

The canopy came out and hit him across the shoulders like a car door and then he was under a wing with his legs swinging and the river still a long way below him, and there was a noise coming out of his own mouth that he did not recognise at all.

Six seconds, exit to canopy.

Urs timed it on a wristwatch, standing at the rail, like a man boiling an egg. He wrote it in a notebook. Then he walked off down the road towards the path to go and help carry the canopy up, and about halfway along he stopped, and stood still, and put both hands on the back of his neck for a moment, and then went on.

Jory did not see that. He was in a riverbed on his knees in the noise of his own blood.

Urs told me about it in the winter, and he told it badly, twice, and I understood that he had been carrying it around for months looking for somewhere to put it down.

17. CUT LIST

"You'll want a reel," I said.

It was August by then and he ate at my table twice a week, because Fenna had gone back to Utrecht, and because Erlend liked him, and because I had discovered — without ever deciding it — that I preferred a house with somebody in it.

"I've got footage," he said. "About forty hours. I don't know what to do with any of it. It's all rubbish."

"It isn't rubbish, it's unlogged. Bring the drive."

So on the Tuesday he brought it down to the cold room and I put him in the good chair and stood behind him, and that is how I taught a boy to do the only thing I know how to do.

First rule. You never work off the original. Copy everything, twice, and then do whatever you like to the copy.

“Why twice?”

“Because you will delete something at two in the morning and be certain you meant it.”

Then the coarse pass. Run the whole thing at four times speed and drop a marker anywhere the picture changes state — exit, opening, landing, a face. Do not judge anything on the coarse pass. Do not fall in love and do not despair. You are only building a map.

Then the log. Every clip gets a line: date, object, exit time, suit, who else was on the rock, what the air was doing. And one column at the end, which I call the last column, for anything that felt wrong.

“Felt wrong how?”

“You’ll know. It’s the column for the thing you’d mention if somebody asked you. Nine times out of ten you never look at it again.”

Then trimming. Handles, in and out. And I showed him the three-frame nudge, which is the key that moves an edit point by a hundredth of a second, and I told him what somebody told me in a basement in Bergen when I was nineteen, which is that everything that matters in editing lives in the three frames either side of where you thought the cut should be.

“Nobody watching can tell you where the cut is,” I said. “But they can feel whether you were sure.”

He worked at it for five hours and I left him to it and came back at ten with tea, and he had got nine minutes down to fifty seconds, and for a first attempt it was not bad at all.

“Where do you learn this?” he said.

“There’s nothing to learn. It’s the same six keys. Everything else is deciding.”

He ran it back once more, and stopped it, and dragged the out-point three frames earlier without thinking about it, without asking me, and the whole clip got better.

“There,” I said.

And I stood in my own cold room with a cup in my hand behind a boy who had just found, by feel, on his first evening, the exact place where a thing should appear to end.

I have gone over that moment more than almost any other. Not because of what it turned out to mean. Because of what I felt, which was pride, and which was not complicated in any way at all, and which was the last uncomplicated thing I felt about him.

18. THE SECOND CARD

The chest card came in the post.

Not in a brown envelope from Bruno. An actual padded bag with an Interlaken postmark, a cantonal police reference number, and a compliments slip — because the equipment had gone to the police, and the police had inventoried it, and somewhere in that process a second camera mount had been logged and photographed and its contents deemed of no evidential interest, and the whole lot released to the estate. And the estate was Rune’s mother in Ålesund. And Rune’s mother had put it in a bag and sent it to the woman who made the film.

I ingested it the same way. Twenty-one minutes. I did not shorten it for a card that could not possibly matter.

A chest mount points forward and slightly down. It sees the horizon and the hands. The helmet sees where the head is looking, which is where the man is thinking; the chest sees where the man is going, which is not always the same place. That discrepancy is the only reason anybody bothers to run two cameras, and in eleven years of two-camera flyers I have found it useful perhaps four times.

Two files. Both Monday.

The first was eleven minutes and forty seconds of the walk-up from chest height, which is to say eleven minutes and forty seconds of the underside of Rune Hovda’s chin and a head torch beam on wet limestone.

I watched all of it. Then I watched it again.

The second was the flight from the other angle, and it told me nothing that the helmet had not told me, and I had known before I opened it that it would tell me nothing, because I had already been inside those four minutes a hundred and forty times.

Except.

At three minutes and nineteen seconds into the walk-up file — over an hour before the exit, in the dark, on the fixed-rope section — the camera is on and pointed at nothing, and there is a conversation.

Two voices. Rune's, and one other. The other is breathing hard and is somewhere behind and below on the rope, and the microphone gets about one word in three, and none of it is interesting. Two men complaining about a knee. And then Rune says something in English which comes through completely clean, because he has turned his head towards the sound:

“—no, because she cuts them.”

And the other man laughs, and the rope creaks, and that is all.

I ran it back.

I ran it eleven times, and then at half speed, and then I pulled the audio out and cleaned it and ran it again, and it did not change and it did not become anything else. Four words. Something in front of it lost in a boot scrape. A laugh behind it.

There is a thing that happens when you find an object that does not fit, which is that you immediately build eleven contexts in which it fits perfectly, and eight of them are true and boring, and one of them is not.

Somebody cuts somebody's hair. Somebody cuts somebody's grass. Somebody was talking about a woman in the village who cuts the flowers at the church, which is a real woman, and who I thought of first, and who I thought of because I wanted to.

Or: everybody in this valley knows that I cut the films. It is the least secret fact about me. It is practically my job title. A man on a rope in the dark, asked why there is never anything nasty in the memorials, says *because she cuts them*, and his friend laughs, and

neither of them means anything by it whatsoever, and both of them are telling the exact truth without any idea that they are.

I wrote the timecode in the exercise book for 2026.

Then I put the second card in its sleeve and put the sleeve in the HOVDA box and closed the lid, and I stood there with my hand on the lid for some time in the cold.

And I did not write anything in the last column.

That is my column. I invented it. I taught it to a boy in this room two months later as the most important habit in the discipline. And on the one occasion in fifteen years when I had something to put in it, I stood in front of an open box with a pen in my hand and I did not.

19. TERRAIN

The first time you fly a line, the wall does not get closer. That is the whole problem in one sentence.

At a hundred and eighty kilometres an hour, forty metres off grey limestone, the rock does not appear to approach you. It appears to *move* — to run past your shoulder in a smear — and the part of your visual system that would ordinarily be screaming about an object growing in your field of view has nothing to say, because the object is not growing. It is sliding.

They call it the visual trap and it kills people who are otherwise doing everything correctly.

There is a second half to it that is worse, and it is arithmetic rather than perception.

A wingsuit at full speed covers about fifty metres a second. A decision — a real one, from noticing to acting — takes a trained flyer somewhere between four-tenths of a second and a second and a half, depending on how tired he is and how much of the flight he has already spent. Say one second, which is generous.

That is fifty metres of terrain that goes past while he is deciding. And the correction itself, once begun, does not take effect for

another thirty or forty metres, because a wingsuit does not turn, it *banks and waits*.

So the practical instrument you are flying with has a lag of about a hundred metres.

Which means that on any line where the margin is under a hundred metres, you are not flying the terrain in front of you. You are flying the terrain you predicted, from memory, before you got there. Everybody in this valley is doing that, on every proximity flight, and the good ones know it and the great ones plan for it, and the footage does not show it at all, because on footage a man who is flying from memory and a man who is flying from his eyes look precisely the same.

The eye reads closure rate badly against a surface with no scale on it. A limestone wall has no windows, no doors, no cars, no people. It has cracks that might be a hand wide or a man wide and you cannot tell which. Trees give you scale — which is exactly why the last hundred metres above the treeline is where flyers habitually and unknowingly go low. They cross the line where the world gets its dimensions back, and by then they are committed.

Erlend flew the Lobhorn on the nineteenth of August with Jory sitting in the passenger seat of a pickup at the bottom holding a radio nobody needed.

He came down the flank with a hard morning shadow beside him and he narrated nothing, because he never narrated, and the audio on that flight is one minute and four seconds of flat roar with a man breathing evenly through his nose underneath it.

That evening, at my table, Jory asked him the thing you are supposed to ask.

“How close were you?”

“To what?”

“The rock. At the shoulder.”

Erlend thought about it while he ate.

“Don’t know,” he said. “Sixty? Fifty. It doesn’t work like that.”

"How does it work?"

"There's a place where it feels correct," Erlend said, "and I fly in that place. And every year the place has moved about two metres and I don't notice it moving."

I was at the counter and I went very still with a pan in my hand.

"That's honest," said Jory.

"It's not honest, it's just true. Everybody's is moving. Mine moves slower than most because I'm old and lazy. Ask Urs where his went."

"Where did his go?"

"Two fingers," said Erlend, and held up his left hand and folded the middle two down, and went back to eating.

I did not say anything.

I have been asked since — by a man from a documentary company, politely, twice — whether there were signs. He wanted a sign. He had flown from London for a sign.

Here is what I have. My brother said, at my own table, in front of a witness, in August, that the place where it feels correct moves two metres a year and he does not notice it moving. And I heard it, and I recognised it as the most frightening sentence I had ever heard him say, and I stood at my own counter with a pan in my hand and I did not put the pan down.

That is not a sign. Signs are things you only get to call signs afterwards. That is a woman who has watched nineteen people die on a screen, hearing exactly what she has spent fifteen years learning to hear, and doing nothing with it, because it was Tuesday, and because there was food on the stove, and because he was my brother and you do not audit your brother at dinner.

I would do it the same way again. That is the part I cannot get round.

20. MEAT ON POLES

He did the story at the Horner on a Thursday with eleven people at the table and four beers in him.

It was August and the valley was as full as it gets. A table of Austrians, a table of Norwegians, two Americans who had arrived with a drone and a sponsor and no idea. And Erlend, who did not talk to anybody for weeks at a time, got up on a chair.

"There was a king," he said.

They shouted at him. He waited them out. He was good at this in a way that had always slightly frightened me, because it was the only time he ever seemed to want anything from a room.

"There was a king. Kay Kāvus. Persian. Four thousand years ago, whatever, doesn't matter. And this king decides he's going to fly. And the reason he decides is that everyone keeps telling him he's the greatest man alive — and if you tell a man that for long enough, he starts looking for something to check it against."

Somebody put a beer on the chair by his foot.

"Now. He can't fly. Nobody can fly. But he's got a budget."

Laughter.

"So he builds a chair. Big wooden chair, throne, whatever. And at the four corners he ties four eagles. Alive. And he's had them starved. And then — this is the bit, this is genuinely the bit — at each corner he puts a pole standing straight up, and on top of each pole he sticks a leg of lamb."

He held two poles that were not there above his own head. He had our mother's hands exactly, and he was using them exactly the way she used them, and I do not think he knew that.

"The birds are hungry. The meat's above them. So they go *up*. And the chair goes up with them. And the king is flying — over the palace, over the city, over the mountains, first man in the sky — and he never lifted a finger. He didn't have to be strong. He didn't have to be brave. He only had to understand *one thing*."

He held it. Twenty people waited.

"That the birds always want the meat."

The room made a noise.

"And then?" one of the Americans shouted.

"And then," said Erlend, "he flew home, and he landed in his own courtyard, and he had a *parade*."

Enormous laughter. Somebody banged the table. The Norwegians stood up.

And I sat three seats down with my back to the wall and watched my brother lie to a room full of flyers on purpose and get down off the chair grinning.

I could have said it. It would have taken four seconds and it would have got a bigger laugh than his ending did, because the true ending is funnier — a king in the mud at Amol, scratched and frightened and extremely ridiculous, is a much better joke than a parade.

I have spent every year since going over the reasons I let it go. They are all good reasons. It was a joke. Everyone knew. A pub is not a place for the true version of anything.

None of them is the real one.

The real one is that it was the first time in four years I had seen him enjoy himself, and I did not want to be the woman who corrected the ending.

21. THE SUIT ARRIVES

The box was on the step of the flight school office on the twenty-second of August with a courier label and his name spelled correctly.

Inside: a wingsuit. Top of the range. The one with the reinforced leading edge and the redesigned tail that everybody had argued about all summer. In his measurements — which meant somebody had his measurements, which meant Urs, or the shop, or the form he filled in for the first flight course in June.

There was a card. *Loving the content. No obligations. Let's talk in the winter.*

He stood in the road with the lid open and the tissue paper going in the wind and he was, for about ninety seconds, as happy as he had ever been in his life. He told me that himself. Those were his words.

The channel was at forty-one thousand. It had been at four hundred in June. What had done it was not the flying, because he had nothing to show; it was the *series*. Eleven short pieces about a man learning. The tracking suit. The counting. The six seconds at the bridge. The logbook. The boredom. Cut tight and honest and set to nothing much.

People liked it because it was true and small, and because it was the seven and a half boring years Erlend had said nobody watches.

Except now four hundred thousand people were watching it, which meant it had stopped being the boring years and become footage.

He carried the box up to my house, because I was the person he told things to.

I was in the garden with a coffee. I looked at the box, and at the card, and then for rather a long moment at him — and he was quick, he had always been quick about rooms, and he told me afterwards that he saw something come down over my face like a shutter in a shopfront, and that he had absolutely no idea what it was.

"It's free," he said.

"Nothing's free."

"No — I know. I know that. I'm not stupid. I'm not going to fly something I'm not ready for. It'll sit in the van."

"Will it."

"Yes."

I put the coffee down.

"How many jumps?"

"Three hundred and one."

"And in the tracking suit?"

"Ninety-something."

"Urs said a season."

"He said a season and it's *been* a season."

"It's been eleven weeks."

We stood in my garden with a Norway spruce at the end of it and eight hundred metres of limestone standing over both of us, and I heard him say the sentence, and I heard it come out in exactly the voice of a man who has already decided.

"There's not going to be a better time," he said. "The air's good until the end of September. And I'm ready, and everyone knows I'm ready, and if I sit on it now I lose a whole year for nothing."

I picked the coffee back up.

I had heard that sentence before. I worked out later — much later, sitting in front of the shelf with the exercise books open on my knees — that I had heard it from at least four of those boxes, and that one of them had said it in my kitchen with his shoes off by the door.

"Talk to Urs," I said.

22. THE BEST ONE

"Which is the best one?"

We were in the cold room again. He had come to use the good monitor and stayed two hours, and it had gone eleven, and outside it had started to rain the way it does at the end of August — straight down, no wind, hissing on the road.

"The best what?"

"The films. The nineteen." He said it easily. "I've watched all of them now."

I looked at the back of his head.

"When?"

"Over the summer. I found the Baumann one first, someone linked it, and then — you know. There's a playlist. Somebody's made a playlist."

"There's a playlist."

"Yeah. Eighteen of them. Not Takagi, that one's family only." He turned round in the chair. "They're not what I expected. I thought they'd be grim. They're kind of beautiful."

"Mm."

"So which is the best one? You'd know."

I should have said there is no best one.

I have gone back to that evening more often than to almost any other in my life, and the thing I cannot forgive is not the answer. It is how fast I gave it. There was no pause. A man asked me which of my nineteen films about dead people was the best one, and I answered him the way you answer somebody who asks which of your children is tallest.

"Lindqvist," I said.

"August 2019."

"Yes."

"Why that one?"

"Because it's the shortest. Three minutes ten. Everybody else's is four and a half because everybody else had a sponsor who wanted the logo in. Kai had nothing. Two cameras and a girlfriend with a telephone. There was almost nothing usable, so I had to build the whole thing out of eleven minutes of material, and when you have nothing you make one decision instead of forty."

"That's a technical answer."

"You asked me a technical question."

"I asked which one was best."

The rain hissed. I got up and did something at the far end of the room that did not need doing.

Kai Lindqvist was twenty-two. He died on the eleventh of August 2019, nine days after Marco Soto, on the same wall, in the middle of the worst fortnight this valley has had, and I cut both films in six days with a helicopter going over the house twice an afternoon.

The Lindqvist film is three minutes and ten seconds long. It is the best thing I have ever made. It has been watched two point one million times. There are comments underneath it in eleven languages and a great number of them say some version of the same thing, which is that it makes you want to go.

It ends on him coming out of a barrel roll into level flight with the whole eastern face lit up behind him. It goes to white on the roll-out.

The real footage runs eleven seconds past that point.

And I remember the afternoon I found the roll-out, which was the fourth day, in the middle of that fortnight, with the helicopter going over. I remember sitting up in the chair. I remember thinking, with complete clarity and no shame whatsoever: *there it is*.

That is the sensation, and it is the one thing about this work I have never been able to explain to anybody without watching their face change.

When you are cutting one of these you are not grieving. You are solving. Somewhere in eleven or forty or a hundred and ten minutes of material there is one frame that is the correct place to stop, and it is a real frame — it is not a matter of taste, it is not arbitrary, there is one and you either find it or you do not — and when you find it you feel exactly what a locksmith feels.

And then you go and stand in the garden for a while, because the thing you have just felt pleasure about is a boy of twenty-two coming out of a roll eleven seconds before he dies.

Fifteen years. Nineteen times. I have never once cried at this desk.

I want that in here, because people assume the opposite, and because I have come to believe that the not-crying is not a symptom of damage. It is the qualification. It is why it was me and not somebody else, and it is why nobody in this valley ever asked me a

technical question, and it is the whole reason the arrangement worked for as long as it did.

I did not tell him that. I told him it was the shortest.

“Right,” said Jory, and wrote it down, because he wrote things down, and turned back to the monitor.

23. BROTHER

I have not said enough about him and I have noticed myself not doing it.

He came here in 2015, when he was twenty-two, because I was here. That is the whole reason and he never pretended otherwise. Our mother had died in the February and our father had been dead ten years by then, and Erlend finished a degree in mechanical engineering in Trondheim that he had no intention of using and got on a train, and turned up at this door in April with two bags and a laptop and said he thought he would stay for the summer.

He stayed eleven years.

He got a job at a firm in Interlaken doing structural drawings for chairlift installations, which is exactly as dull as it sounds and which he was extremely good at, and he did it for the whole eleven years and never once complained about it and never once talked about it either. He rented a flat above a bakery in the village in 2018 because he said a man of twenty-five should not live with his sister, and he ate at my table three nights a week anyway.

He learned to jump the same year he arrived. Not because of me — I want to be precise, because it would be convenient for this account if it were because of me, and it was not. He learned because he met a girl in the first fortnight who packed canopies at Interlaken, and the girl lasted four months and the sport did not stop.

He was not a natural. That is worth saying, because people who watched him fly in the last five years assume he must have been. He was slow, and cautious, and slightly heavy, and for two years he was visibly worse than people who had started after him. Urs told me in 2017 that Erlend Aandahl was the least gifted flyer he had

ever put through a first flight course and probably the only one he was not worried about.

What he had instead was that he did not want anything from it.

That is rarer than it sounds and I did not understand its value until it was the thing I was looking for in nineteen boxes. Almost everybody who comes here wants something out of this — to be somebody, to have done something, to bring back proof. Erlend wanted to be in the air on a Tuesday morning and then go to work. He flew fewer jumps a year than any serious flyer in the valley. He turned down two sponsorships that I know about and I suspect there was a third.

He was funny in a way I have never been able to reproduce for anybody. Very dry, very slow, mostly about small things. He kept a running commentary for three years on a neighbour's ongoing dispute with a hedge. He did impressions of Urs that were cruel and perfect and which he would not do if there were more than two people in the room.

He was not happy. I want to put that in without making it into an explanation, because it is not one.

He was a person with a low ceiling on his happiness — he had always been, since Bergen, since long before any of this — and the eleven years here were, I am fairly confident, the best of his life, and the best of his life was somewhere around a six out of ten. He knew that about himself. He said it once, at this table, in about 2021, not as a confession, more as a piece of household information: *I've never had a really good day. I've had about four hundred fine ones.*

I said something stupid in reply. I said something about how nobody has really good days, they only remember them that way.

He said: "Yeah. You would say that."

That is the closest we ever came to the conversation, and I did not know it was the conversation, and I have gone back to those nine words more times than to any other nine words in my life.

The last time I saw him was the second of September, two days before, at this table, on an ordinary Tuesday.

He came at seven. He ate two helpings of something with rice in it. Jory was there and the two of them argued for about forty minutes about whether an English bacon sandwich is improved by brown sauce, and Erlend took a position he did not hold, on purpose, for the entertainment value, and won.

He helped me carry a bookcase up the stairs.

He said the air looked good for the end of the week.

He left at about ten and stood in the doorway and put his hand flat on the top of my arm on his way out — which is the thing Urs does, which I had never noticed was a thing my brother did, and which I have wondered since whether Urs got from him or he got from Urs.

And that is it. That is the whole of the last time. There is nothing in it. I have taken it apart to the individual sentence, the way I take apart a file, and there is nothing in it at all.

Which is, I have come to think, the only mercy available in this. If there had been something in it — a look, a phrase, a hand held a second too long — I would have spent the rest of my life knowing that I had been shown it and had failed to read it.

Instead I was shown nothing, because there was nothing to show. He carried a bookcase up my stairs and argued about brown sauce and said the air looked good.

24. THE FOURTH OF SEPTEMBER

He went off the High Nose at twenty to seven in the morning on the fourth of September.

The air was still. There has never been any argument about this. Three separate barometric logs from three separate rigs; the Meteo Schweiz automatic station at Lauterbrunnen recorded 0.4 metres a second from the north-northeast at that hour; and a man called Torbjörn lit a cigarette on the rock at 06:31 and the smoke went straight up, and everybody up there saw it go straight up.

There were four of them. Torbjörn went first. A Frenchman called Aubry went second. Erlend went third, because Erlend always went third. A Slovenian woman called Ana was to go fourth and did not go, and stood on that rock for forty minutes, and then walked down.

The line was the standard High Nose line, which my brother had flown, by his own logbook, a hundred and sixty-one times.

He exited cleanly. The suit pressurised at about a second and a half. He dived, transitioned, and was on line by eight seconds, with what Torbjörn — already under canopy, watching from below and to the left — described to the cantonal police as a normal, high, conservative entry. More room under him than Torbjörn had taken himself.

At forty-one seconds he was still on the line.

At forty-eight seconds he was on the third ridge.

The report gives the impact speed as approximately a hundred and ninety-five kilometres an hour and states that death was instantaneous. There was no indication of equipment malfunction. The parachute container was closed and intact. The pilot chute was in its pouch. The arm-wing cutaway cables had not been pulled.

Aubry landed and did not know. Torbjörn landed and knew.

The valley did what it does. The Horner did not open at lunchtime. There was a paper sign on the flight school office in Urs's handwriting saying *heute geschlossen*, and the paper was the back of a course registration form.

Somebody had to come to the house.

There was a short and unpleasant negotiation about who, conducted in the car park of the campsite in low voices, and it was settled the way these things are always settled, which is that the person who volunteers is the person who most wants it handled properly.

So Urs Blättler walked the eleven hundred metres from the campsite to my door and knocked on it at five to nine in the morning on the fourth of September, with the whole valley knowing and me not knowing.

That eleven hundred metres took him nineteen minutes. He told me so, much later. He said he stopped twice.

I answered with a tea towel in my hand.

I looked at him for about a second and a half.

Then I said: "Which one is it?"

I have never been able to explain that sentence. Not to Urs, who has never asked. Not to myself.

I did not say *what has happened*. I did not say *who*. I said *which one*, as though a man on my step at nine in the morning with that face on him were a delivery, and the only outstanding question were the contents.

Fifteen years. Nineteen boxes. And when it finally came up the path to my own door, the first thing out of me was the language of the shelf.

25. WHAT HAPPENS AFTERWARDS

Nobody writes down what happens after somebody goes in, so I will, because it took me four days to get through it and because the young ones all assume it is a helicopter and a funeral.

It is a helicopter and then it is administration.

The flight is reported by whoever lands and knows. There is a number for this and everybody has it in their telephone and nobody has ever once used the number without their hands shaking. Air Glaciers or Air Zermatt, depending on the day and who is up. The machine is in the air inside eleven minutes and on the ridge inside thirty, and there is a crewman who does this eleven or twelve times a season, all summer, for hikers and climbers and skiers and us, and I have often wondered what his shelf looks like.

Then the cantonal police, because a death outside a hospital is a police matter, and because a death outside a hospital involving a foreign national is a police matter with paperwork attached in three languages.

The body goes to Interlaken. There is a forensic examination, which is not optional and which the families almost always try to refuse.

Cause of death is never in doubt and the examination happens anyway, because the law does not have a category for a death that everybody saw coming.

The equipment is seized. All of it — rig, suit, canopy, lines, cameras, mounts, the shoes at the top of the walk-up if somebody remembers to go and get them. It is bagged and numbered and photographed, and there is a technical inspection, because there is always the possibility of a defect and because a defect is the only outcome that would produce a prosecution.

There has never been a prosecution here. There has been one in Italy.

Then the sponsor. Within four hours, usually. There is a statement, and the statement has been written in advance — not for this man, but as a template, because every company in this sport has one and updates it every eighteen months, and I have read eleven of them and they share about sixty per cent of their sentences. *Our thoughts are with. A gifted athlete. A member of our family. Out of respect for.*

Then the channel goes quiet for a period which is decided by somebody in an office, and then it does not go quiet any more.

Then the estate. Which is a flat with a lease in it, and a car, and a bank account nobody can access for eleven weeks, and a mother in another country who has to be told what to do about a mobile telephone contract in a language she does not speak.

Then, at some point in that first week, somebody in the valley says the sentence out loud for the first time, and it is always some version of the same sentence, and it is always said in the Horner, and it is always said kindly:

We should do something.

And then it comes to me.

That is the mechanism. That is the whole of it. There is no committee. Nobody appointed me. In 2011 a man came to my door because I owned a computer, and in 2013 I did the third one without being asked, and by about 2015 it had become a fact about

the valley in the way the fixed rope is a fact about the path — nobody remembers who put it there and everybody uses it and it gets replaced when it wears out.

I have thought about what would have happened if I had said no. Once, in 2018, I very nearly did.

I think somebody else would have done it. I think it would have been somebody worse at it, and I think the films would have been clumsier and longer and would have had more of the man in them and rather less craft, and I think — and this is the thought I cannot get out from under — I think they would probably have been more honest, because it takes a certain amount of skill to make an ending that nobody notices is an ending.

A clumsy person would have stopped somewhere obvious and everybody would have seen the join.

I never let anybody see the join. That was the whole of my contribution.

26. ENVELOPE

The card came on the ninth.

The same brown envelope with the window crossed out in ballpoint. The same man, in the same jacket, standing on my step at eleven in the morning — but not with his arm straight this time. He held it in against his chest, as though the wind might take it.

And he looked at me.

That was the difference and I noticed it in the moment it happened. Eleven times that man has handed me one of these, and eleven times he has looked at the hallway, the door frame, his own van, my shoes. And now he stood on my step and looked directly into my face for as long as it took, which was four or five seconds, and his eyes were wet and old and entirely without any hope of being of use, and he said:

“Solveig.”

“Yes.”

"There is also the chest camera. It is with the police. They will send it."

"All right."

"You do not have to—" He stopped. He had worked on this in the van and it had not survived contact. "Frau Aandahl. You do not have to do anything with this. Anything at all. You understand?"

"I understand."

"There are people who will do it."

"Who?"

Bruno had no answer, because there is no answer. There are no people who will do it. There is one person in this valley who does it and she was standing in the doorway with her hands at her sides.

He put the envelope into my hands and I felt him let go of it in stages, the way you release a thing to somebody you are not sure will take the weight.

I said thank you. He went to the van. It was a Tuesday.

I carried it down to the cold room and put it on the desk, square to the edge, and stood over it.

Step one is to photograph the case, both sides, before opening.

I did not open the envelope.

I took it back up the stairs and along the hall to the kitchen, and I opened the drawer where the batteries and the string and the fuses are — the drawer I had opened in June for no reason at all — and I put the envelope in the back of it, under a coil of garden wire and a torch with no batteries in it, and I pushed the drawer shut with the heel of my hand.

Then I stood in my kitchen for a long time.

In the exercise book for 2026 there is a page headed AANDAHL with one line under it in my handwriting. It reads: *card received 9/9, not ingested*. After it the pen has gone down into the paper and made a small hole.

27. FILM TWENTY

I made him one anyway.

It had never been done, and nobody knew it had never been done, because nobody outside that cold room has ever spent one second thinking about where the material in a memorial film comes from. It comes from the dead person's own card. That is the entire unexamined assumption on which nineteen films rest. The man films his life, the man dies, the friend cuts the film.

I built my brother's out of everything except my brother's cameras.

Chase footage: four flyers across six years who had flown behind or beside him and had him in frame. Torbjörn alone had eleven minutes of him from 2022.

Ground footage: the long-lens material the valley shoots from the campsite field, where a wingsuit is a mote crossing a wall and you cannot tell who it is unless you know the suit. I know the suit.

Tourist footage: two clips off the internet, taken by strangers at the Staubbach rail, in which a red shape crosses the top of the frame while somebody's mother says something about the weather in Dutch.

A hiker's telephone video from the Wengen path. Twenty-two seconds, in which Erlend at some point in 2023 walks past with a pack on and says good morning.

Bergen, 1998: eleven seconds of digitised camcorder. A boy of five on a kitchen chair with a tea towel safety-pinned to both wrists, arms out, being an aeroplane, and our mother's voice off-camera telling him to get down.

And his own voice, twice, both from other people's cameras. Once on a rock, laughing at something. Once in the packing shed, half out of frame, saying *the footage is the advert*.

Five minutes and three seconds.

There is no exit in it. There is no flight from his point of view anywhere in the entire film. The whole thing is Erlend Aandahl seen from outside, at distance, by other people, for twenty-eight years.

And the last shot is the long lens from the campsite field on a morning in June — a small red mark moving very slowly across a very large wall — and it does not end on impact and it does not end on a turn and it does not go to white. It simply goes out of frame at the left-hand edge. And the frame stays. And the wall stays. And there is nothing in it, and it holds for four seconds on an empty piece of rock.

The Horner had a hundred and ten people in it. They stood at the back and out into the road.

Afterwards Urs came and put his hand flat on the top of my arm and said: "There is nothing of his own in it."

"No."

He looked at me.

"You did not have his card?"

And I stood in a pub in Lauterbrunnen in front of the dartboard and said: "It was damaged."

Nobody questioned it. Nobody has ever questioned anything I have said about a card. In fifteen years not one person in this valley has asked me a single technical question about the material — not a policeman, not a journalist, not a father — because the material is the worst thing in the world and I am the woman who handles it, and the arrangement we all have, unspoken and unanimous and fifteen years old, is that I go in there and they do not.

I want to be clear that I did not invent that arrangement. It was offered to me. It was offered by everybody, all the time, continuously, in the form of not asking.

But I took it. And in September I used it to lie to a hundred and ten people about a drawer in my own kitchen.

28. GUEST

He moved into the spare room on the twentieth of September, because the campsite closes on the fifteenth, and because the van had a broken heater, and because I said in the middle of a conversation about something else that the room was there.

Neither of us said the actual reason, which is that the house had two people in it in August and one in September, and a house does that arithmetic on you every single time you come through the door.

He was careful in a way that annoyed me. He washed things immediately. He asked before he used the good chair. For about ten days he did the thing people do around the bereaved, which is to become slightly less than a person — all soft edges and offered tea — and then one evening I said, without any heat in it, “You can put music on, I’m not ill,” and after that it was better.

Here is what September was, because I have noticed that when people tell this kind of story they go from the funeral to the revelation in a paragraph, and it was not a paragraph. It was six weeks.

It was a slow, ordinary, deeply peculiar six weeks, and I was, for most of them, fine.

That is the part I find hardest to describe honestly. I was fine. I got up. I worked. I ate. I made two enormous pots of soup in the third week for no reason and gave most of it away. I was better company than I had been in years, because grief in the first month is not sadness, it is a kind of terrible clarity — everything is very sharp and slightly too loud and you find you can talk to anybody about anything.

The valley emptied. The coaches stopped coming. By the end of the month there was nobody at the Staubbach rail after four in the afternoon and the light went off the eastern wall at half past three.

Chrigel shut the Horner on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Jory flew twice in the second half of September. Both times off a low object, both times in the tracking suit, both times with Urs standing at the bottom, both times perfectly. He did not ask my permission and I did not offer an opinion, and we both understood exactly what that silence was and neither of us touched it.

The wingsuit stayed in its box in the van, and the van stayed in my drive, and by the end of the month it had three centimetres of beech leaves on the roof.

Urs did not fly at all. He has not flown since the fourth of September and as far as I know he never will again, and he has never once said so out loud, which is the most Swiss thing about him.

He came up on Sundays. He sat in my kitchen and ate whatever was in front of him and said almost nothing, and once he fell asleep in the chair by the window for forty minutes, and Jory and I moved around that kitchen quietly for the whole of it like people in a house with a baby in it, and when he woke he apologised in three languages.

Twice a week I went down to the cold room and worked on other people's holiday footage for money, because that is in fact my actual living. Weddings in Interlaken. A hotel promo. Eight years of an ongoing project for a Swiss family who film absolutely everything and watch none of it.

So twice a week I sat in that room with the shelf on my right at eye height and a drawer upstairs with an envelope in the back of it, and did four hours of colour-matching somebody's daughter's engagement party.

I never once, in six weeks, thought about opening the drawer.

I want that on the record because it is the strangest thing I know about myself. It was not a temptation I resisted. It was not there. I knew the envelope was in the drawer the way you know the boiler is in the cupboard. Twice I went into that drawer for a fuse.

Whatever people imagine about this — a woman circling a locked room in her own house, going to the drawer at three in the morning, putting her hand on the handle — none of it happened. I made soup. I graded a wedding. I slept eight hours a night for the first time since I was thirty.

On the second of October, over dinner, Jory said: "Can I ask you something about Erlend's film?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you use his card?"

My fork stopped. The whole kitchen went about two degrees colder and he saw it happen and had no idea he had done it.

"It was damaged," I said.

"Right." He nodded. He believed me completely. "It's only that I've been thinking about it, and it's — sorry. It's the best one. It's better than Lindqvist. And I keep thinking it's better *because* he isn't in it. Because the whole thing is other people looking at him."

I put the fork down.

"And I thought maybe you'd done it on purpose," he said. "And I wanted to know how you thought of it."

29. ARITHMETIC

Urs told me about Baumann on a Sunday in October, in a kitchen with the lights off, because the bulb had gone in the morning and neither of us had done anything about it.

"You have never asked me," he said.

"No."

"In fifteen years."

"No."

He had a glass of something in front of him and had not drunk any of it.

"Anton Baumann was forty-four years old," he said. "He had two children, eight and six. He flew for eleven years and he was — not gifted. Careful. He was a careful man who had made himself adequate through work, which I think is the most respectable thing a person can be, and I liked him very much.

"On the Gitschen he went in from a hundred and ten metres off a line he had flown perhaps forty times, and on the card you can see what happened. What happened is that he made a decision at eleven seconds and it was the wrong decision, and then he made four more decisions in three seconds, and every one of them was worse than the one before it. And at the end he is talking."

"I remember."

"He says his daughter's name."

"I remember, Urs."

"And Katja wanted a film for the church." He turned the glass a quarter turn on the table, which is a thing he does. "She had seen the American ones. The tribute films. She wanted one. And there was nobody. And I came to your door, and you were — what were you? Twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six."

"Twenty-six. And you had a computer, and you had made a film for the tourist office about the funicular."

"About the funicular."

"And I gave you the card and I said: make it four minutes, and do not put in the last part."

"You said *do not put in the last part*."

"Yes."

"You didn't say cut it. You said don't put it in."

"Is there a difference?"

"There is now."

He sat with that for a while.

"I have thought about this for fifteen years," he said, "and I am going to tell you what I decided, and I want you to understand that I am not asking you to agree with it.

"Katja was going to sit in a church with two small children. If she sees the last eleven seconds, she will hear her husband say her daughter's name in the voice he says it in, and she will hear it for the rest of her life at four o'clock in the morning. That is not information. It has no use. It cannot be acted upon. It is only damage — it arrives once and then it stays."

"And the boy," I said.

He looked up.

"There was a boy," I said. "In the church. Seventeen. Anton's nephew. He came to you in the March and did his first flight course in the June."

"Lukas."

"Lukas. He's alive. He's in Zurich. He has a company that installs solar panels and he hasn't jumped since 2019." I said it flatly. "I looked him up in the summer."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted somebody to be alive," I said. "That's all. I wanted to count one into the other column."

The kitchen was dark and the wall outside the window was darker.

"He would have jumped anyway," Urs said. "Lukas. He would have jumped whatever film we made."

"Probably."

"He would have."

"Urs." I turned my own glass the same quarter turn, without meaning to, and we both saw me do it. "That is not an argument. That is the sum done afterwards by the man who needs it to come out."

"Yes," he said. "That is exactly what it is. And it is also true. Both of those can stand in the same room, Solveig. That is the whole difficulty. You would like one of us to be lying."

He drank the glass at last, in one, like medicine.

"I would like it too," he said.

30. WHAT WAS ON IT

It was the eleventh of October. Jory had gone to Interlaken for the day and would be back on the 17:41.

I took the envelope out of the drawer at ten past nine in the morning.

There was no decision. I want to be accurate about that, because everyone assumes there was a night before it, and there was not. I

made coffee. I stood in the kitchen. And then I opened the drawer and took it out and went downstairs, the way you finally take a coat to the dry cleaner's after four months — not because anything has changed, but because this is the morning your hand goes to it.

I photographed the case, both sides. There was no grit in the crack because there was no crack; it was a new case, out of a pack of five, and he had bought that pack in Interlaken in the spring and there are three of them still in a box in his flat.

I slid the write-protect tab down. I copied the card to the working drive and then to the second drive, and checksummed all three, and got the same string three times.

Twenty-one minutes. I did not shorten it.

Three files. Two from the third of September, one from the fourth.

And I did what I have done nineteen times, which is that I opened the ordinary ones first.

The third of September: the packing shed. The canopy on the mat. His own hands doing the flake, forty minutes of it in real time from a camera he had left running on a shelf by accident and never deleted.

I watched all forty minutes. I watched a man I had known for thirty-three years fold a parachute badly and swear at it in Norwegian and start again.

The third of September, evening: eleven seconds of nothing. The camera on inside a pocket. A car door.

Then the fourth.

06:02. The camera comes on at the exit rock in the last of the dark. Four figures. Torbjörn's cigarette. The smoke goes straight up, exactly as eleven separate people have said it did.

06:31 to 06:39 is my brother sitting down with his legs out and the camera pointed where his head is pointed, which is at the far side of the valley, and the light coming up on it, and nobody speaking.

At 06:39:50 he stands up.

At 06:40:11 he steps off.

The suit pressurises at a second and a half with that low crack.

And then I watched Erlend fly, and it was the best flight I ever saw him make.

I am not being sentimental and I am not wrong. I have nine thousand hours. I can read a line the way a radiographer reads a chest, and the line my brother flew off the High Nose on the morning of the fourth of September was clean at every point where a flight can be dirty. The dive was shallow and unhurried. The transition was early. The entry was high — higher than Torbjörn's, exactly as Torbjörn said. And from twelve seconds onward that flight is so stable that the horizon in the frame does not move more than a degree either way for half a minute.

At thirty-one seconds he passes the shoulder of the ridge with what I measured afterwards, off two known reference points and a frame count, at seventy metres of clearance.

Seventy. He had flown that shoulder at forty for years.

At thirty-eight seconds he was in the clear. The terrain underneath him fell away into the gully and the whole rest of the valley opened up in the frame, and there was nothing in front of him and nothing beneath him, and he had — by any reading anybody could make — twenty-six seconds of comfortable flight and a hundred acres of open field to land in.

At forty-one seconds the picture changed.

He brought his hands in. Slightly. Both of them, symmetrically, perhaps fifteen degrees at the shoulder. The horizon in the frame tipped forward. The roar changed pitch as the suit went from flying to diving.

And the third ridge came up into the bottom of the frame.

I ran the last seven seconds forty times.

I ran them at quarter speed and at eighth speed and frame by frame with my finger on the arrow key, and I read them the way I have been taught to read them by nineteen dead people, and I looked for the thing I was looking for.

I was looking for an error.

There is no error.

There is no wobble in the wing that would say a collapse. There is no asymmetry that would say a rotation beginning. The suit is pressurised and holding through the entire seven seconds and you can hear it holding. His body does not fight anything, because there is nothing to fight. His hands do not go near the cutaway cables. His right hand does not go to the pilot chute — and the reason his right hand does not go to the pilot chute is that his right hand is precisely where it needs to be in order to fly the aircraft he is flying.

And he flies it. Accurately. All the way down. Into a ridge that is in front of him and lit and visible and in the frame the entire time.

The last frame is limestone with lichen on it, close enough to see the lichen.

I sat in the cold room with that frame up on the monitor and I understood what I was looking at, and I have not had a single day since when I have not understood it.

Every death I have ever watched has a moment in it where the man is surprised. Every one. It is the thing that makes the footage unbearable and it is also the thing that makes it survivable — because a person who is surprised is a person to whom something *happened*.

There is no moment on that file where my brother is surprised.

Clean. Controlled. Correct.

And deliberate.

31. SAME AIR

I telephoned the drop zone at Interlaken on the Tuesday and booked a slot for the Friday.

My licence was eleven years out of currency. They put me with an instructor for a check jump and I did it and it was fine, and afterwards the instructor — a Belgian of about thirty, extremely kind, entirely wrong about everything — told me I had good air awareness for somebody who had been out so long.

Then I went up alone on the second load.

It was the sixteenth of October and the morning was still, and the aircraft came round over the valley at four thousand metres at twenty past six, because I had paid for the early lift and made a small nuisance of myself about the time.

I went out of the door over the High Nose.

Not off it. Over it, three and a half thousand metres above it, out of a machine, in a jumpsuit, with a reserve on my back and an automatic device in the container that would fire at three hundred metres whether I was conscious or not. And I fell for sixty-one seconds through the same column of air, over the same wall, at the same hour of the same kind of morning, with all the sky in the world underneath me.

I saw the ridge. It was a grey line among other grey lines.

I saw the gully and the field and the campsite and the road and the falls, and the valley opened out beneath me exactly as it opens out in the frame at thirty-eight seconds, and it was beautiful, and it was completely ordinary, and there was nothing in it.

I pulled at eleven hundred metres. The canopy came up over my head and the noise stopped and I hung in the harness in the silence with my hands on the toggles.

Then I flew a large slow circle over the whole thing and cried until my goggles filled up, and then I landed in a field, and packed, and drove home.

It taught me nothing.

I had known before I booked it that it would teach me nothing. There is no information at four thousand metres. I went because I had spent fifteen years reading other people's air through a piece of glass, and because for one morning I wanted to be in the same room as my brother instead of on the other side of it.

And you cannot be. That is not a failure of effort or of love. That is the design of the thing. He was inside forty-eight seconds and I have the recording, and those are two different objects and no amount of altitude will make them the same one.

The Belgian was in the hangar when I brought the rig back.

"Same time next week?" he said.

"No," I said.

32. NINETEEN, AGAIN

On the night of the eighteenth I watched all nineteen releases end to end.

Not the masters. The public versions. The ones on the internet, in order, the way a stranger would come across them.

BAUMANN, 2011. Four minutes exactly, a church-friendly thing with a Bach cello piece I chose because it was out of copyright.

VUKOVIĆ, 2012.

DEEN, 2013. HOLLIS, 2013.

RASMUSSEN, 2014.

TAKAGI, 2015 — family only, which I still hold a copy of and still watch when I reach it in the order.

MARCHETTI, 2015.

FALK, 2017.

BRANDT, 2018. ILLÉS, 2018.

PEREZ, 2019. SOTO, 2019. LINDQVIST, 2019.

MBEKI, 2021. DURAND, 2022. WYLDE, 2023. NOVÁK, 2024. SCHENK, 2024.

HOVDA, 2026.

Six hours and eleven minutes, with the pauses.

I had never done that. You do not watch your own work in a series. You watch one at a time, years apart, on the worst week of somebody else's life, and then you close the folder and do a wedding.

Here is what a person learns by watching all nineteen in one night.

Every one of them is beautiful.

Every one of them contains, at around the four-minute mark, a piece of flying so good that a person watching will sit forward in the chair.

In every one of them the man is happy. He is laughing in a car park, or calm on a rock, or talking cheerfully and slightly badly into a camera about how people misunderstand this sport.

And in every single one of them, the flying stops in mid-air.

Not one of those nineteen films contains an impact. Not one contains a spin. Not one contains a man reaching for a cutaway cable. Not one contains an opening that fails, a canopy that turns the wrong way, a line-over, a hesitation, a shout, a word.

In nineteen films made over fifteen years about nineteen people, every one of whom died within four seconds of the last frame you are shown, there is not one frame of anybody in trouble.

They end on turns. They end on roll-outs. They end going away from the camera into open valley. They end on white.

And they have taught, cumulatively, four other things that I did not notice myself teaching until that night.

That the men who die are the visible ones. Because those are the men who get films, because those are the men with enough footage to make one out of, and so a young person watching the whole run concludes — without ever forming the thought — that the risk attaches to fame rather than to flight.

That death in this sport is a *late-career* event. Because a memorial film needs eight years of material, and so every one of my nineteen opens on a sunburnt boy in a car park in the past and closes on an accomplished man. There is no film for the ones who die in their second season. There is not enough footage. Those are the majority.

That it happens on the beautiful days. Because I only ever used the beautiful days.

And that it happens to people who were *loved*, which is true, and which is the one thing in the whole run that I would not take back, and which I now understand is the most powerful recruitment

sentence ever written: *if it takes you, this is what your friends will make.*

I sat in the cold room at four in the morning with the monitor light on my face and I did the count out loud, because there was nobody awake in the house — Jory sleeps like a young man, straight through, ten hours, arms above his head.

Nineteen films.

Nineteen endings that I chose.

And I want to be honest about what I was feeling at four o'clock that morning, because it was not horror. It was not guilt. It arrived nowhere near either of those.

What I felt was the thing a craftsman feels looking at a run of his own work laid out together for the first time: that I had solved the same problem nineteen times, and solved it well, and that the solution had a shape, and that the shape was consistent across fifteen years because it was mine. The way handwriting is yours.

Nineteen times I was handed the worst four seconds in the world and asked to make four minutes out of them. Nineteen times I found the last good moment and put the ending there.

That is what an editor does. That is not a crime. That is the job. I would defend it in front of anybody and I have, twice, and I won both times.

Then I turned the monitor off.

And in the dark, with my hand still on the switch, I thought:

If you did that nineteen times, and every one of them is beautiful, and every one of them ends in mid-air — then what does a nineteen-year-old with a laptop in Utrecht believe this sport does to people?

33. THE LAST ORDINARY NIGHT

I did not go to the shelf.

I want to put that down carefully, because it is the last thing I did as the woman I had been for fifteen years, and it was a decision that took about four seconds and I did not notice myself making it.

I stood up. The shelf was on my right at eye height. The masters were two metres away and I have never in my life been more than two metres from them, and I knew — with the thought I had just had still standing in the room like somebody who has come in without knocking — that the answer to it was inside those boxes and could be counted.

And I turned the light off and went upstairs.

Jory was awake after all. He was in the kitchen at four in the morning eating cereal out of a mug, because we had run out of bowls, because neither of us had run the dishwasher in three days.

"You've been down there all night."

"I have."

"Working?"

"Watching."

He did not ask what. That was one of the best things about him and I have thought since that it was also the worst — he had extraordinary manners about other people's rooms, and I needed somebody with no manners at all.

"Come and watch something rubbish," he said.

So at four o'clock in the morning on the nineteenth of October we sat on the sofa in my father's front room and watched forty minutes of a German programme about people restoring a barn, and neither of us understood the technical vocabulary, and Jory did an impression of the presenter that was not accurate and was very funny, and I laughed until I had to put the mug down.

That is what I did with the last night.

I have gone over it. Not with regret exactly — I do not think an hour of counting at four in the morning would have changed one single thing that happened afterwards, and I have stopped pretending to myself that it would. But there is a version of me that went to the shelf on the eighteenth of October, alone, with nobody in the house, and found out what she had done in private, with time to sit with it, and came to the kitchen table a week later having decided how to say it.

That woman would have told him herself.

Instead I laughed at a barn, and slept until eleven, and let a twenty-six-year-old find it for me nine days later while being helpful about drives.

There is no moral in that. It is only the way it went. But I notice that everybody who has been told this story assumes the discovery was a reckoning, something I went towards, and it was not. I had the door open and the light on and I turned round and went upstairs, and the reason I went upstairs is that somebody was in my kitchen at four in the morning and had offered to make me laugh.

I would do that again as well.

That is two things now that I would do again, and neither of them is defensible, and I have not found the sentence that holds both of them at once.

34. THE FIRST ONE

The archive migration was his idea and it was a good one, because two of my drives were eleven years old and one of them had started clicking.

He did it over three days at the end of October. I let him, and I told myself I was letting him because my wrist was bad and because he was quicker at it, and both of those things were true, and neither of them was the reason.

The reason is that I wanted somebody else's hands in it.

I have thought about that more than about almost anything else in this account. Whether it counts as confession if you leave the door

open and go and stand in another room. Whether I knew what was in the folders I pointed him at.

I have decided that I did not know and did not not-know, and that this condition is available to everybody, all the time, and is the most ordinary state of an adult life, and that it is where nearly all the damage in the world gets done.

Before he started I did go to the shelf. That much I did.

I took down BAUMANN, on the morning of the twenty-fourth, still in the previous day's clothes, and I put the card in the old reader — I keep every reader — and I opened the source file, and I watched the last eleven seconds of Anton Baumann for the first time since I was twenty-six years old.

He gets low over a shoulder he should not be low over. He tries to hold a flare too long — that is the decision at eleven seconds, and it is wrong, because a flare bleeds speed and he has no speed to give. Then he does the four things after it: he drops a shoulder; the drop starts a rotation; he fights the rotation with his legs instead of his arms, which makes it worse; and by the time he thinks of the cables the cables are forty kilos away from his hands.

He does not scream.

He says his daughter's name three times. Ines. Ines. Ines.

And Urs Blättler came to my door and said *make it four minutes and do not put in the last part*, and I took it out, and Katja Baumann sat in a church in Bönigen and watched her husband fly beautifully and disappear into white. And eleven days later she came to this house with a jar of something and said the thing that everyone has said to me since, in eleven languages, for fifteen years:

Thank you. It was beautiful. That is how I want to remember him.

I put the box back on the shelf.

I did not take down the other eighteen. I want that understood, because of what happens next and because it matters to the arithmetic: on the twenty-fourth of October I looked at exactly one master, the first one, the one Urs had asked me for, and I put it back, and I did not count.

I told myself I would do it properly in the winter.

I have wondered since what that meant. What *properly* would have looked like. Whether there was any version of doing it properly that did not end in a kitchen with somebody young sitting across from me, and I do not think there was, and I think I knew it, and I think that is why the winter was going to be a good time for it.

35. NINE SECONDS

He came up to the kitchen on the third day with the laptop under his arm at about four in the afternoon.

“Quick one. There’s a load of versions in the Hovda folder and I don’t know what to keep.”

“Keep everything.”

“There’s forty gigs of everything.”

“Then keep the master and the release and the source.”

“Right.” He put the laptop on the table and turned it round out of habit, the way you do, so that I could see the screen. And I could see the screen. “That’s what I thought. So — this is the release, yeah? Four twelve. And that’s the master, four twelve. Fine. But then there’s *Hovda_v3*, and it’s four twenty-one.”

He looked at the list.

“It’s nine seconds longer than everything else.”

The kitchen was very quiet. The fridge was not on. I remember that the fridge was not on, and that it came on about a minute later, and that I have never been able to hear that fridge start up since without something happening in my chest.

“Is v3 like a rough?” he said. “I didn’t want to bin it if it’s a rough, because sometimes there’s stuff in a rough. But it doesn’t look like a rough. The grade’s done and everything. It looks finished.”

He turned to me with his eyebrows up. Entirely helpful. Entirely without one idea in his head.

“Is it fine to delete it, or—”

I looked at my own hands on the kitchen table.

Fifteen years. Fifteen years of one arrangement, which was that I went in there and nobody else did, and in all that time it had never once been threatened by a journalist or a policeman or a grieving father or a sponsor or a court, and it ended in a kitchen in October because a twenty-six-year-old from Kent was being tidy about drives.

"Sit down," I said.

"I don't have to delete it—"

"Jory. Sit down."

36. WHAT WAS IN THEM

I did not defend it.

That should be said, because everybody who has heard this story since has assumed that I defended it, and I did not. I sat at my own kitchen table and told a young man a list.

"Anton Baumann. Two thousand and eleven. I took eleven seconds off the end. In those eleven seconds he loses a flare he should never have taken, he rotates, he fights it with the wrong limbs, and he says his daughter's name three times. Urs asked me to take it out. His wife thanked me."

"Solveig—"

"Ilija Vuković. Four seconds. A flat spin. You could not watch it and neither could I, and I have."

I went along the shelf with my eyes, which I could not see from where I was sitting, and I did it from memory, and I got all nineteen in order without one mistake.

"Marcus Deen. Nine seconds. A canopy that opened into the rock, which is the one everybody believes does not happen. It happens.

"Ray Hollis. Two seconds. And Ray's two seconds did not need to come off. I took them because the music resolved better. That is the true reason and I have never told anybody that until now."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because you asked me a technical question."

I kept going. Rasmussen, nine. Takagi, six — family only, and his brother flew from Osaka and sat in this kitchen, in that chair, with a cup he did not drink from. Marchetti, three.

Falk, eleven. “And Falk is talking. And what he is saying is not a name. It is a number. He has started counting at some point and he is still counting.”

Brandt, eight. Illés, three. Perez, five.

Soto, seven. Lindqvist, eleven — “and that is the one I told you was the best. And it is the best. And the eleven seconds I took off Kai Lindqvist are eleven seconds of a boy of twenty-two doing everything right and being hit by air that was not there when he left the rock. There is no lesson in it. It is only horrible.”

Mbeki, two. Durand, sixteen — the longest — whose mother sent me four thousand euros that I have never banked. Wylde, four. Novák, three. Schenk, three.

“And Rune Hovda. Four seconds. The nine seconds you found is a version I made in June with more of the flight in it, and I looked at it for a week, and then I took the four seconds off and did what I always do.”

Jory had not moved.

“A hundred and twenty-one seconds,” I said. “I have not added it up before tonight. In fifteen years I have removed two minutes and one second from the record and put nineteen beautiful things into the world in their place, and every single family thanked me, and I have never taken money for it except once, and I did not bank the cheque.”

The fridge came on.

“Say something,” I said.

And he said: “Which suits were they in?”

I looked up.

“Falk,” he said. His voice had gone flat and strange and very young.

“Two thousand and seventeen. What suit was he in?”

“Why?”

"Because I've got a spreadsheet," he said, "and I built it off the accident reports and the films. And I've got Falk down as a canopy problem. And you've just told me he was counting."

37. URS, AGAIN

I walked down to the flight school at nine that night. The lights were off and he was in there anyway, at the desk, with the door open to the road because that room smells of damp in October.

"You knew."

"Sit down, Solveig."

"You knew all of it. Not Baumann. All nineteen."

"Sit down."

I sat.

He did not put the light on. Outside there was one car going up towards Stechelberg and then nothing at all, because it was the twenty-eighth of October and there were about eleven people left in the valley.

"In 2013," he said, "after Deen, I stopped asking you. Do you remember that I stopped?"

"Yes."

"I stopped because it was no longer necessary to ask. And I want to be exact about what that means, because you will want to make me the man who did this, and I will let you, and it will not be true." He turned the glass a quarter turn. "I asked once. You did it nineteen times. Nobody asked you for the other eighteen."

"You could have said something."

"What would I have said?"

"You could have said: put it in."

"Put it in." He repeated it as though testing the weight. "Yes. And then I sit in the Horner in front of a hundred people and Katja Baumann and two children, and we watch a man scream. And afterwards everybody agrees that we have done a brave and honest thing. And in June I have eleven students instead of fourteen. And

in September one of the eleven is dead, and you and I have precisely this conversation with a smaller class."

"You don't know that."

"No. I do not know that. Neither do you."

I sat in the dark office and looked at his hands on the desk. The left one with the two fingers that do not close.

"I have had four hundred and eleven students since 1996," he said. "Six are dead. You will want to know whether I have ever calculated it, and the answer is that I have never *stopped* calculating it. Every year the sum comes out that I am running the safest operation in this valley, and that if I closed tomorrow they would all come anyway and learn from each other, which is worse. And that sum is true, Solveig. And it is also exactly what a man in my position would say."

He was quiet for a while.

"I taught them the sport," he said at last. "Two days on the ground before anyone flies. I show them the spin. I tell them about my six. I tell them about the eighteen months where nothing goes wrong. I have done that for thirty years and I have never once lied to a student in that classroom. Not once. And I need you to understand that this is the part I cannot put down."

"What is?"

"That it did not matter."

He said it without any drama at all, which is how I knew he had been carrying it since September.

"I have them for two days," he said. "And then they go home. And they watch four hundred hours of your films. And yours are better than mine."

"They're not teaching material—"

"Everything is teaching material. There is no other kind."

He finished the glass in one, like medicine.

"We taught them what this costs," he said, "and we taught them wrong on purpose. Me in a classroom for two days, and you on their

telephones for the rest of their lives. And they believed you. Why would they not believe you? You are the one with the footage.”

38. RECRUITER

I walked back up the road in the dark and did not go into the house. There is a bench by the church where you can see nothing, because this valley at night is two black walls and one strip of sky with a few lights in it. I sat on it in my coat until I could not feel my hands.

This is what I understood on that bench. All of it at once, in the way the true things arrive — not as an argument but as a change in the light of a room you have been sitting in for years.

I had always believed I was at the end of the process. The person the card comes to. The last one to handle it, downstream of everything — after the flying and the dying and the helicopter and the police and the paperwork — doing quiet, careful, slightly grim work on material that was already finished.

I was not at the end of the process.

I was at the start of it.

Those films are not a record of the sport. They are its recruitment material. Nineteen of them, and taken together they are the single largest body of instructional footage about wingsuit BASE flying that exists anywhere, and every young person who comes into this valley has watched all of them before they arrive.

And from them they form — not consciously, not as a decision, but in the way a person forms their sense of how deep water is — a picture of what happens when it goes wrong.

And the picture is: *you fly beautifully, and then you are not there.*

That is the lesson. Nineteen times. That death in this sport is clean, and instantaneous, and dignified, and arrives in mid-air to men who are doing something correct at the moment it occurs. That there is no spin. That there is no counting. That nobody says a daughter's name. That there is no eleven seconds in which a careful man of forty-four makes four decisions in three seconds and every one is worse than the last.

I took the fear out.

Nineteen times, three seconds at a time, by hand, with love, at a desk, in a cold room, for nothing.

And they built their entire understanding of the risk on the result.

They all watched them. Fenna watched them. Rune watched them — Rune, who is in the nineteen, who learned what this costs from the eighteen that came before him. Jory watched all eighteen public ones in one summer off a playlist that somebody made, and told me they were kind of beautiful, and asked me which was the best.

And Erlend.

Erlend, who grew up in the same kitchen in Bergen. Who came here at twenty-two because his sister was here. Who was eighteen years old and staying here for the summer, four years before he moved out for good — who sat on the floor of that room with his back against the shelf on a night in 2011 while I cut Anton Baumann down to four minutes for a church in Bönigen, and who asked me what was on the rest of it, and who I told to go to bed.

My brother learned what this costs from me.

Every flyer in this valley calibrated their sense of the risk against nineteen films made by a woman who was trying to be kind. And one of them was Erlend. And on the morning of the fourth of September he flew a perfect line into a ridge in still air with seventy metres of clearance at the shoulder and his hands nowhere near the cables, and I do not know why, and I never will, and I had spent fifteen years teaching everyone in this valley that when it ends, it ends beautifully, and in mid-air.

I am not this valley's mourner.

I am its intake.

39. JORY'S EXIT

He was going in the morning. Off the Nose, in the free suit, and he told me at half past nine at night in the kitchen with the map already folded in his hand.

"It's forecast still for three days. Urs is coming to the bottom."

"Urs said yes?"

"Urs said I've done everything he can ask me to do." He said it carefully. "Which isn't yes."

"No."

"But it isn't no."

I had the whole night, and I used every hour of it, and by my count I had eleven arguments.

I used ten.

I said the season was over and that the air in November is a different animal. I said three hundred and forty jumps is a number on a page. I said the suit was a gift from a company that would send a wreath. I said the tracking year exists for a reason and he had done eleven weeks of it. I said the Nose is not a beginner's object whatever anyone tells you in the Horner. I said the shoulder of the ridge is where everybody goes low without knowing it. I said the visual trap. I said the eighteen months. I said Rune Hovda checked his pilot chute handle four times on a rock and it did not save him.

At about two in the morning I said please.

And he sat at that table and took every one of them seriously, in good faith, one at a time, because he was not a fool and never had been, and he answered them like a man going down a checklist. And at the end of it he was still going.

So at ten past three I used the eleventh.

"You have watched nineteen films," I said, "and every one of them is a lie about how this ends. I made all of them. You built your understanding of this sport on my work, and my work is wrong. And I need you to understand that the reason you are not frightened enough is *me*."

The bad kitchen light buzzed. We still had not replaced it.

"I know," he said.

"You don't—"

"Solveig. I've known for a week. I haven't thought about anything else for a week." He turned his cup round. "And I've watched them all again. All eighteen. Since Tuesday. *Knowing.*"

"And?"

"And they're still beautiful," he said. "That's the thing I can't get past. I know what's cut off the end now. I know Falk was counting. And I put one on, and inside about forty seconds I'm just watching a man fly, and I want to go."

He looked up.

"So I don't know what to do with what you told me. Because it should have changed it. And it didn't."

At ten past four he went up to sleep for two hours.

He left the house at twenty to five with an eleven-kilo pack and shoes he would leave at the top.

I stood in the road in my dressing gown and watched the head torch go up through the beech, and it was visible for a surprisingly long time, on and off between the trees, going up the wall in the dark, getting smaller.

And I thought:

I do not know whether he would have gone if I had said nothing.

I will never know that.

I have taken a hundred and twenty-one seconds out of the world and I do not know what a single one of them did.

40. POLES

The eagles get tired.

That is the ending. The one our mother told us in a kitchen in Bergen under a tube that took four seconds to come on, and the one Erlend told wrong on a chair in a pub in August, giving the king a soft landing and a parade, because a pub is not a place for the true version of anything.

The eagles get tired, because they are eagles. They are not machines and they are not angels. A bird can climb for a long time

but it cannot climb for ever with a chair and a fat king hanging off it.

And there is a moment — this is the part I sat with on the bench by the church, in the cold, with the two black walls either side of me — there is a moment when the birds are still flapping. Still climbing. Still absolutely certain that they are about to reach the meat.

And the meat has not moved one centimetre closer. And it never will. Because it is nailed to a pole that is nailed to the chair.

They came down in the forest of Amol. The king was found there alive. Scratched, and frightened, and extremely ridiculous.

For thirty years I thought the story was about him. About arrogance, and going too high, and coming down. Everybody thinks that. That is what the story appears to be about, and it is what the story is put in front of children in order to appear to be about.

It is not about the king.

It is about whoever cut the meat.

Somebody in that story went to a kitchen and cut four legs of lamb. Somebody sharpened the poles. Somebody worked out how high the meat had to hang — high enough that the birds would climb, low enough that they would believe. Somebody starved those eagles for exactly one day, because a day is right and two days is too weak.

Somebody understood, with real precision and with no malice at all, what an appetite will do if you place a thing just above it.

That person is not in the poem. He has no name and no line and no fate. He is not punished and he is not thanked, and nobody who has ever told that story has thought about him for one second — including the woman who has been telling it to herself since she was eleven years old.

He built the machine. The king only sat in it.

I sat in my kitchen at half past five in the morning on the twenty-ninth of October with the light going grey in the window and my hands round a cup I had not filled, waiting to hear a helicopter or not hear one.

And I thought about the man with the knife. About how the whole of that machine — the chair, the rope, the birds, the height, the fall — comes down in the end to somebody standing at a table, working carefully, doing a small job well. Hanging the meat at exactly the right height above the eagles' heads.

At eight minutes to seven I heard the canopy.

You cannot see the Nose landing field from my kitchen, but on a still morning with the window up you can hear a canopy open, and it is a sound like a book being shut, once, hard, a long way off.

I put my head down on the table.

CODA

Eighteen months

I released it in April.

Erlend Aandahl's helmet card. The fourth of September, unedited, from the moment the camera comes on at the exit rock at 06:02 to the last frame at 06:41:00. Fifty-eight minutes and thirty-one seconds. No music. No cards. No title beyond his name and the date.

It contains forty minutes of four people sitting on a rock in the dark, not saying very much. A cigarette test. The light coming up on the Grosshorn. A man standing up. A step. A suit filling with a low crack. Forty-one seconds of the best flying he ever did.

Then a movement of the hands, fifteen degrees at the shoulder. Then seven seconds. Then lichen.

I wrote four sentences underneath it: that I had cut nineteen memorial films, that all nineteen were shortened at the end, that this one was not, and that I was sorry.

Four million views in nine days.

The comments were, on the whole, magnificent. People said it was the bravest thing anybody in this sport has ever done. People said it should be shown on every first flight course in the world. A federation in the United States wrote to ask permission to use it in

a safety module and I said yes. Two documentary companies wrote. A man in Colorado cut a nine-minute version with a piano under it, and I had it taken down, and it was back up on four other channels inside a week.

And in June, Urs Blättler took applications for his first flight course. There were fifty-one of them.

He has never had more than sixteen.

He hired a second instructor — Ana, the Slovenian woman who stood on a rock for forty minutes on the fourth of September and then walked down. He extended the course to three days. And on the morning of day one he puts my brother on the classroom wall, all fifty-eight minutes of it, with the lights off, and makes them sit through the whole thing including the forty minutes of nothing.

And they sit in the dark and watch a man fly beautifully into a ridge in still air. And they come out into the sun afterwards changed, and quiet, and sobered, and absolutely certain that they now understand what this costs.

And every one of them wants to go.

Six years

I still cut them.

There have been two more. I could have refused. There is nobody in this valley who would have argued with me, after all of it, if I had refused.

I put the whole flight in now. I have done that twice. Both families thanked me and one of them thanked me for the honesty specifically, and I have no way of knowing whether either film has made one person safer, and no way of knowing whether the nineteen made one person less safe.

I have understood at last that I do not get to know. That there is no correspondence I can trace anywhere between what I did at that desk and what happened afterwards to any human being — including my brother. That the entire apparatus of my guilt was

built on an assumption of influence I cannot demonstrate in a single case.

Guilt has a shape. You can get hold of it. You did a thing, here is who it happened to, here is what you owe.

This does not have a shape.

I was kind nineteen times and a generation learned that dying is beautiful. I was honest once and fifty-one people applied. This valley takes whatever you put into it and turns it into the same output, and it has been doing that since before I was born, and the machinery is not a company or a sponsor or an algorithm. It is much simpler and much older than any of those.

You have read this far.

You know what was on the card, and you know what I took off the end of nineteen others. And there was a moment somewhere in the middle of all this when you wanted me to open the drawer.

The eagles always want the meat.

That is the one thing you have to understand correctly. After that, the chair builds itself.

GLOSSARY

föhn FURN — German, *a warm dry wind*. A wind that comes over the Alps from the south and arrives dry and warm and far too quickly; it hits the walls, it rolls, and it sets up rotors, and for two days nobody flies.

heute geschlossen HOY-tuh ge-SHLOSS-uhn — German, *closed today*. The paper sign on the flight-school office door, written on the back of a course registration form.

Shahnameh shah-nah-MEH — Persian, *the book of kings*. Ferdowsi's thousand-year-old epic, in which a king lashes four eagles to a chair and hangs meat above their heads on poles so that the birds will climb and the chair will climb with them.

Every flyer in the valley wears a camera.
When one of them dies, the memory card
comes off the body, and somebody has
to cut the memorial film.

For fifteen years that somebody has been
Solveig Aandahl. She receives the card in
a brown envelope from a man who will not
look at her. She copies it twice before she
watches anything. She goes through the
last minute of a person's life as many times
as it takes, and then she builds four minutes
that a family can sit through in a church.

She has made nineteen of these films.
Every one of them ends in mid-air. Behind
every clean four-minute tribute there is
a person at a desk deciding where a life
should appear to end, and that decision
gets made privately, by hand, usually by
a friend, usually out of love, and it is
never spoken of again.

Her brother's card is in a kitchen drawer
under a coil of garden wire, and she has
never put it in a reader.

*"You film yourself and you look
at the timecode and you find
out how much you lie."*



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