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Leif Randt
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Translated by Stefan Tobler

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(An Extract)

By Leif Randt

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'When we set off back then, for our move to Coby County that spring, it felt like it came from a slightly drunken mood. That mood has now carried us on for forty years of a fantastic life.'

Mother Endersson, 65, Marketing and Emphasis Consultant

'A crisis of the local cosmetics and cultural industries is possible any time, sometimes even desirable.'

Jerome Colemen, †, Businessman and Visionary

'I love this city!'

Wesley Alec Prince, 26, Art Historian

Because it is my mother's sixty-fifth birthday, senior citizens in beige coloured raincoats are standing around on the roof terrace. Clouds are stacking up in the sky. It is drizzling. My mother says a few words by way of greeting and points to the bar. I'm there and wave my hand. I can't tell which of the guests are my mother's friends and which are normal spa guests. Most of them seem friendly enough to me, because the aperitifs they drank quickly have leant their eyes a caring twinkle. To these people I'm still a boy. Even though I finished my studies seven months ago, even though I earn money now and am wearing a quality shirt. The hotel belongs to my mother's companion. He is called Tom O'Brian and is walking around on his own roof, completely relaxed. Tom is only fifty-seven. Sometimes he comes by the bar with a quip: *'Well, Wim, shall we have a vodka and apple juice?'* Vodka and apple juice: that's a running gag between us. It has been since I threw up in the lobby once, seven years ago. I reach under the bar and pass Tom a beer from the cooler. He has narrow shoulders. He is wearing a corduroy jacket, light coloured jeans and suede boots. Before he moves on, we give each other a high five. Just how I used to give my good friends in high school a high five – showing off, but a little tense too. Tom built the hotel tower block eleven years ago. He has been with my mother for seven years. She creates marketing concepts which hit the nerve of various age groups. Even some of my friends check in here in the spring sometimes. I don't mind, because I love Tom O'Brian, the hotel tower block and my mother. In her tight trouser suit and classic short haircut, she looks a little frosty and very elegant. In the course of the evening I ask her how many of the people on the terrace she knows personally. She looks around and says: *'I'd guesstimate 38%.'* My mother has lived in Coby County for over forty years. I think she was always honest with herself. I pour her a Pepsi. Most of her guests ask for light mixed drinks. I have the impression that older people in Coby County drink like the kids just starting to drink. As if a circle was being closed, and as if the various age groups in our city were linked together in camaraderie. On the other hand I can't in good conscience describe the people here as *'older people'*, they are more like *'life-loving men and women in their late sixties'*. Many of them must have come to Coby County in their twenties, like my parents, to found film companies or publishers,

and later to open concept restaurants. Suddenly I think that these well dressed adults standing around here with slightly glazed expressions were probably part of the avant-garde when they were young. As the drizzle becomes a shower, many of them immediately reach their arms up in the air and start to dance. They move as if they were all simultaneously remembering the old camcorder videos of how they used to dance in the rain. Water runs out of my mother's short hair and down her face. She laughs and calls people inside the hotel. The bar I'm keeping has a canvas awning. I hear the rain drumming on it and put the white wine bottles in the cooler box. Soon the rain sounds more like hail and the awning is flapping in the wind. As I carry the cooler into the building, five senior citizens are still dancing away, soaked to the skin. I nod at them. Violent storms like this are completely normal on a thirteenth of February. My mother prepared well for it.

In the suites on the ninth floor wet clothes are peeled off and hot baths taken. Some of the guests turn it into a bit of party fun and bubbles fly around the bathrooms. I'm standing barefoot on the heated floor tiles of suite 914. Everything is ready. The tub has been filled with steaming hot water, and a champagne bucket has been placed beside it. Suddenly someone opens the door. Joline Caulfield, who used to be an economics professor, steps in with my mother's drunk cousin. They greet me warmly and take off their bathrobes. I tie the string of my swimming shorts and pull in my barely visible belly. My mother's buff cousin, whose name I've forgotten, has white hair on his chest. He puffs out his chest self-confidently. He gets into the bath first. In spite of its oval shape, it is big enough for three people. *'Or do you find it awkward with us?'* I never studied with Joline Caulfield, but I had always heard good things about her. I say, *'No – come on!'* A little later when our shoulders are covered in bubbles, and our legs threaten to touch below the water at any moment, we start to pass the champagne bottle round the circle. I'm sitting at the head of the tub with Caulfield to my left and the cousin to my right. I wouldn't have minded having glasses. My mother greets everyone from the speakers on the ceiling. She hopes we all feel at home and are warming up; she invites us to come down later for the buffet in the lobby. Joline Caulfield takes a big swig of champagne and asks about

my plans for the spring. I look at the black straps of her bikini. The older inhabitants of Coby County always assume that for us younger ones spring is a time of decisive change. As if the weeks between March and May would turn us into liquid figures. Perhaps she thinks that because you can read it in various cultural and business magazines' reports on spring in Coby County, which start by setting the scene with sentences like: *'Around ten in the morning the young couple from Bristol, UK, had still not had enough of dancing on the sand.'* And these sentences are then always followed by statistics, which even the locals find hard to believe, and then more descriptions which get mixed up with your own impressions in a strange way.

Not to become a surface for the projections of the former economics professor and the buff cousin, I claim that this spring I'm going to go travelling. *'I'm interested in seeing what life is like in spring in other places.'* Then I go quiet and watch the two of them sitting and thinking in the bubbles. They are probably asking themselves if I'm a particularly odd, older young person, or if they have completely the wrong ideas about young people today. The truth is of course, that I have no plans to go travelling this spring. The truth is that like everyone else I can't wait for spring in Coby County. Joline Caulfield holds the bottle of champagne in the steam coming off the bath. The bottle is covered in condensation outside. I take it and have a drink. I'm surprised that it is still bubbly. Then the cousin breaks the silence. *'So, we should get down to the buffet, wouldn't you say?'* As he lifts himself out of the bath, his chest hair hangs down in dark white strands. He rubs himself dry with a towel and then claps his hands. Miss Caulfield and I get out of the still hot water almost simultaneously.

I run into my mother at the buffet table. She is holding her next Pepsi in her hand and her hair is freshly blow-dried. She asks who I had to share the bath with. I tell her, and that it wasn't a problem. My mother grins and runs a hand through my hair. *'Lots of people haven't left their baths yet. It looks like a few romances are blossoming,'* she says. When I nod seriously, my mother laughs*. 'Oh Wim, some day you won't be so hard on everything.'* I nod again and breathe out and ladle some cream of fennel soup into a bowl. *'It'll be spring soon!'* I text Wesley, telling him that our mothers' social circles are looking forward to the

spring almost as much as we are. Although I can't really claim that our mothers are part of the same social scene. Wesley's mother left Coby County a year and a half ago. She's a neo-spiritualist now. His dad is an influential web designer but lives in a smaller apartment than his son because he likes understatement. He did not want to hold his wife back. Wesley never tires of mentioning that he loves Coby County. He wants to take a holiday from the beginning of March to the end of April, so he can again seek out direct contact to the young tourists from the big cities of the Western world. Wesley would also seek out direct contact to tourists from other cultural spheres, but none of them ever travel to Coby County. At least that is the impression I get. On the other hand, I can't say for sure that I would be able to recognise tourists from other cultural spheres. Ethnically, Coby County is really heterogeneous. My skin, for example, is pretty white, while Wesley's is more ochre. Still, someone would recognise immediately that we share a common past. After all, our college jackets have the same giant letters embroidered on them. We went to Coby County School of Arts and Economics. Wesley studied *'Art History since 1995'* and my course was called *'New International Literature Marketing'*. Today we have jobs which might not be as well paid in any other city in the world. As an agent for new writing, some of my clients are still minors. I correct mistakes in their texts and later deal with publishers about advances and royalties. My teenage authors' texts have an exuberant language and they show us older young people what life is like for younger young people today. Their everyday school and vacation days appears now to be a wild existential head-rush – no longer the ironically tinged romantic comedy which Wesley and I had to endure. As teenagers we assumed that life happens in short, self-contained episodes. So we fell in love for the first time at some point, and had sensual make-out sessions on meadows and hillsides. Later we had to come to terms with tragic separations and held mad dance parties on the beach out of defiance. The principle was that this chain of events repeated itself: sensual times; separation; dance party.

Over the course of the birthday night I had a number of conversations with people who had known me as a little kid in a denim jacket. The more tipsy I got, the more their praise touched me. I used to look a lot paler. And now I smile more and that suits me, just like my shirt. I'm asked if I'm in a relationship, if I

have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and I say that Carla is sick today, unfortunately, and is lying in my bed with a hot water bottle. In fact Carla is lying in her own bed and as long as she has a cold we're not planning on meeting up. We write to each other, because we're not good on the phone. Down the line my voice even sounds tired and annoyed when I'm not tired and annoyed at all. I like Carla's way of finding in writing new but simple metaphors for the fact that she misses me. Somehow I start to have conversations in the lobby which I would never have if I were sober. I mention that I have to get to the agency tomorrow morning early and as I say my goodbyes I'm hugged by many people.

Every year on Valentine's Day there are film premieres in the movie theatre on the promenade. This year there is a new extended version of *The Haze over Coby County*, with the colours corrected slightly. So not actually a real premiere, but even so there's been a mad scramble for tickets. Seven were sent to the agency. My boss Calvin Van Persy took five of them himself. Which left two. I didn't even ask Carla. Firstly, she's got a cold, and secondly she knows that the Valentine's Day film premieres are something Wesley and I have always done. *The Haze over Coby County* is a critical documentary about the easy life in our city. A young French director won the Special Prize at Cannes with it two years ago. People say that she didn't deserve to win at all, but since the film has been screened in European art house cinemas even more attractive tourists have started showing up in the spring.

When Wesley comes to pick me up at the agency, it is still far too early. The premiere starts in two hours. So I brew some coffee and put a plate of fruit on the old oak table in the kitchen. I pour the coffee into cups printed with animal faces. Animal faces – they are a running gag between Wesley and me. *'What kind of old table is this?'* asks Wesley and fingers the oak. *'Calvin Van Persy brought it from his grandmother's house. The table is supposed to give our agency kitchen soul, because that's what good texts need.'* Wesley grinned and I grinned back. For years the opinion had gone round the international press that the texts from Coby County might be stylistically perfect, but they lacked all relation to existential needs. I see one of my most important tasks in pointing out to authors the lies of the digital and print media. On *Le Monde*'s website it was recently

claimed that the market cannot bear any more lavishly produced books about beach parties in Coby County. The truth is that people want to hear much more about good times in Coby County. It's not only the sales figures that prove it – it's blindingly obvious: whoever doesn't live here, wants to imagine living here, and the rest of us want to compare our Coby County experiences with the experiences in the texts.

As the film begins the whole audience bursts into applause. On the screen our beach is shown first. The sky is icy blue; probably it's April. Only the sea can be heard. Then there is a sudden cut to the crazy carnival in the industrial quarters. Girls and boys in their early twenties are in each other's arms, dancing and shouting. *'There! That was me! Did you see me?'* I didn't see Wesley this time either, but I nod. Some of the audience recite the most well-known bits of the voiceover: *'Our dream is to one day sell ice cream on the Colemen Hills.'* And then everyone laughs. When the credits roll after eighty-two minutes, a lot of the extras' names seem familiar to me. I get the feeling there is a warm feeling of bonding in the room.

As soon as I get back to the foyer I look at my cell phone: no news from Carla. She's still able to surprise me. Wesley says: '*Although the film only shows images of Coby County, it hints subtly at the wider world.'* He puts his straw in his mouth and sucks up a lot of liquid from his long drink. *'And that's why the film is an international hit.'* I see no need to contradict Wesley right now. However, soon he's so tipsy that he gets involved in empty discussions at the bar about the film. When I leave the foyer, Wesley is talking to a guy who looks like an American and has obviously moved here.

On the way home there is a violent storm. People coming out of the premiere flag down taxis. The wind ruffles up their hair and sends empty cans of beer flying out of trash cans. I walk close to the walls of the houses. When I reach the traffic island in front of my apartment, I'm afraid that the shampoo sculpture installed there could be ripped from its base and kill me. But I know really that the Colemen&Aura sculptures have foam centres and papier-mâché surfaces; they are not heavy enough and are actually safe. The oversized shampoo bottle

bends elastically in the wind, but it is secured to its base so well a bomb could not move it.

After a few hours of sleep I stand on the balcony in my boxer shorts. Young men and women in light coloured uniforms are combing the city, collecting what the storm scattered on the streets. They are pushing blue bins on wheels in front of them and using large, fluorescent coloured reachers. The asphalt glistens in the morning light. It takes a while for me to look at the traffic island and then I just stand there motionless for a moment, three floors above the new hole in the view of the street. The sculpture must have been taken away that morning by the uniformed men and women according to schedule. No doubt a new installation will be put up later in the day. I have to admit that the view of the unadorned traffic island depresses me; maybe I still haven't learnt. When I was a kid sitting on the back seat of my parents' car, it made me sad to see new ads go up on billboards around town and old ones disappear. My parents claimed it was a typical reaction for a child – a way of seeing your surroundings that longed for clear structures. Now I have the nagging suspicion that I was already melancholic as a kid. I could read on the changing billboards of the passing of time, that days were going, never to return. It was a simple melancholy, which I could wrap myself in and feel good on the back seat. It was a mood which demanded nothing of me; it was probably harmless, but it was also unproductive and paralysing. And now I was having another moment like that and the mood returns, for whatever reason. One of the uniformed workers looks up from the street. Our eyes meet briefly before I disappear into the living room. My cell phone lights up. Carla claims by text message that she's no longer got a cold. She asks if I have weathered 'our storm' well, and invites me to go to her house in the early afternoon.

When Carla opens the door to me she is wearing hot pants and a top with a plunging neckline and a thin row of buttons. The first thing I notice is her perfect skin that glistens like nylon. If I am honest, I only fall for a particular kind of woman: the girlish slim ones who dress well and look somehow well off. And that is in spite of the fact that even the teachers at primary school told us not to

be taken in by appearances but to look at people's inner character, whatever their class, race or gender. Particularly just before the long vacation started they would stress that again and again.

Carla kisses me straight away with her lips parted and puts her hands on my back. Even after two years it does not seem like a worn out gesture. She asks, *'What's up?'* because I am not kissing back. I say*, 'Sorry, I was just lost in thought.'* Then I kiss her back and Carla pulls me down the wide hall, past her piano, and to her bedroom. We pad together toward the bed in the middle of the room, her feet on top of mine. Through a wide window you can see the sea. Clouds hang low over the sea and birds are flying by, speedily, as if carried by another storm. As Carla kisses me a smile plays on her lips, making me smile too. We are giving each other the feeling that we are really happy that we are probably about to sleep with each other. We get undressed in a relatively normal way: I yank my unprinted sweatshirt off over my head, my hair has a static charge, and Carla quickly unbuttons her shirt all the way. Soon we are lying on each other in the middle of the day. Carla pretends to be really enjoying it: she arches back her neck and grasps my ass in her hands. I know that it feels well toned. Not for a minute do I doubt that we are moving towards a liberating if somewhat flat climax. But in the moment I think that – it has already happened. Then she surprises me, saying *'Get off me.'* When I do, she starts to fondle herself in an emancipatedly exhibitionistic, legs-wide-apart way. As she does I sit on the edge of the bed, still naked, and look out the window. Carla breathes and hums to herself. Briefly I have the feeling that I live in a utopian sex space with Carla. Probably because the clouds have been scattered by the wind, and because a warm beam of light suddenly falls on our bed. Soon Carla has reached a kind of climax too, and then we kiss as you kiss when you seriously like each other, something that is almost asexual. After a number of short, relatively dry meetings of our lips we just sit there in the sunlight. I say, *'Today we're living in a utopian sex space.'* Carla smiles and whispers huskily that she missed me. I find the completely unmetaphorical way she said this completely appropriate right now.

Because we get the munchies after sex, we call the BakeryExpressService. The only people who work at BakeryExpressService are fine arts students. They often seem uncertain of things and don't seem to really like their job, but of course that is half their charm. Carla was never allowed to use the service when she was younger, as her parents were against boutique delivery services. So it was only when we started going out that she became a real fan of them. Sometimes she tells her parents on the phone that we are just eating the *'crazily good delivery cake'* again. I find that a little childish of her. Her parents are not going to try to talk her out of it any more. Carla's father is a musician and her mother an online editor. They have an open relationship; they are happy; and they have raised Carla to be a fantastic girl. Overall, Carla does not have anything to moan about.

The guy who brings the cake seems shy. He hands over the order in a recycled cardboard box. He barely looks around and I wonder what kind of art student he is, if he does not even try to register all he can in an unknown apartment. When he says goodbye I can only assume that he did not even notice the piano in the hallway. On many evening Carla sits down at it with her hair tied up and plays. She might even be more musical than her father, but she has decided not to earn her living from music. Now she is standing in front of me in the entrance hall and putting her favourite cake in her mouth. As she takes a bite, crumbs fall on to the parquet floor. The way Carla rushes the enjoyment of her cake seems honest to me and, actually, beautiful, until she suddenly asks me, *'When did you get to be like you are now?'* I pause, then say with a confident firm voice, *'You know that. You know me relatively well.'* We leave the crumbs in the hall and go back to the bedroom with the cake box. Carla has chosen a few films. We spend the remaining hours of the afternoon in silence.

That night, when I'm lying on my king-size mattress at home, I consider writing Carla an email to tackle her question. When did I get to be like this? I plan to deal thoroughly with the question, to start at the beginning:

I was born on a twenty-eighth of September. Apparently it was a golden afternoon, around five o'clock. My mother remembers an outside temperature of about twenty-two degrees; a low sun; and of course the basket of apples, grapes

and tangerines that the hospital gave her. Baskets of fruit like that are not given out any more, neither to economy nor private patients. They were only handed out for three years to the parents of the children who are now between twenty-four and twenty-seven years old. Wesley once said that people will always be able to tell of our age group that we were the fruit basket children.

My mother also remembers the ride home from the hospital. She was sitting with me on the back seat of my dad's car. At that point he had already had his greatest success, the comedy *Mister Cheerleader*, and his greatest flop, the titillating *Costa Costa County* had not been filmed yet. On that first drive through Coby County my mother had, she tells me, pointed out lots of things to me through the window and explained them, although of course she knew that as a new-born I could not see properly yet.

I started going to workshops at an early age: on pitches, in pools, in front of flat screen monitors. In particular, every district had lots of art classes. I always painted badly, but my collages made of coloured paper were among the best. When I was ten, one of the teachers said that one day I could earn a lot of money with my collages. But I only worked with coloured paper for about four months and as a young teenager I decided not to go down the fine arts route*. 'My path will be a different one,'* I thought back then, and I thought of it as a title for everything which was to come in the following years.

I got to know Wesley in an ice hockey course which we soon dropped out of together. We must have been eleven at the time and then at some point, maybe when we were fifteen, the era of courses and workshops finished and the phase of romances, breaking up and beach parties started. And basically that phase is still going, I sometimes think, because growing up is a process that never stops. I'm proud that I never went to a yoga class. And every day I'm stoked that I'm not a virtuoso chef. Looking back I have the feeling that I have always been true to a particular approach, so becoming the Wim Endersson who today works so successfully for Calvin Van Persy and regularly sleeps with the talented Carla Soderburg. What exactly that approach is, is pretty hard to define, but it's definitely got something to do with my preferences and inclinations. And my preferences and inclinations were probably formed in the time between the

first ride on the back seat of my dad's car and the first art class I attended at the age of three and a half. In other words, at a time I have no way of remembering.

As these circumstances and chains of events pass through my mind, I come to realise that there is not much point in putting it all in an email for Carla. Because actually she has known it all for ages, or at least, she should be able to work it out. And I pointed that out to her in her hall when I said that she knew me relatively well.

On the seventeenth of February, exactly three weeks before Carla's twenty-fifth birthday, and just two weeks before the start of spring, Wesley asks to meet me at the fountain in the Colemen&Aura mall. We have never met here. On the phone Wesley sounded unusually quiet and muted. The mall roof is made up of innumerable panes of frosted glass which spread the sunlight in a sensible way. Here and there spotlights have been installed too. It is all lit in such a way that your face looks elegantly proportioned when seen in the mirroring shop windows. This is a place for older women, I think, and see Wesley in the distance. He is sitting on the edge of the fountain and biting into a fish roll. *'How are you?'* I ask. Wesley has tucked his mousy blond hair behind his ears. He looks as if he has just dived into salt water and then not washed or blow-dried his hair, but just rubbed it dry.

'I talked to my mother on the phone. She's not doing well. Pretty badly, actually.'

'So she's coming back soon?'

Wesley shook his head. *'No, definitely not. The opposite. She's really worried about us . . . She still does those trainings. Well, you can think what you will of them, but recently she was working with old home recordings, ones the two of us were on. As sixteen-year-olds . . . and since then she's got a certain scene stuck in her head.'* Wesley seemed to want to focus so much on what he was saying that he put the fish roll down between us*. 'My mum always sees the two of us, running along the beach in the evening light. We're wearing baggy bomber jackets. At first glance we look like we did at sixteen, but our faces are us grown-up. We're running along the beach and laughing . . . and then suddenly we just fall through it. The whole beach collapses under our feet. As if the sand were on a fragile dome and*

under the dome there was only an enormous, empty hall . . . my mum sees this scene every training she does. She believes an inner danger has been growing in both of us. A danger which we will see this spring in Coby County . . . unless we skip town.'

I reach out for the fish roll between us. *'You've thought about the fact that your mum is a neo-spiritualist?'*

'My mum spent most of her life in Coby County, Wim, just like us. She knows us, and she knows the city, and she has never lied to me.'

Outside the mall I squint. The daylight seems much too bright to me now. A cream coloured taxi has driven up. Wesley waves to me as he goes. As the car drives off, he rolls the shaded windowpane down and calls out something I can't hear. I'm not sure if Wesley saw my confusion. I watch the taxi turn off and then look at my cell phone. No message from Carla. There is not the slightest breeze this afternoon. In the distance the sea roars, and the sun is certainly still strong.