The Playing Field

Soldier and Boy Under a Tree

On the willow oak under which Mikkel and Magnus were lying one summer afternoon there rained down every second on every square centimeter of long sunlit leaf a quintillion photons.

- —A thousand quadrillion photons.
- —What's it look like as a number? Mikkel asked. And what are those midges *doing*, bouncing up and down in the air and turning like a wheel?
- —They're happy, Magnus said in a drowsy voice. You write quintillion with a one and eighteen zeros. That's nothing compared to the neutrinos falling through the leaves rather than onto them, through us too, and the dithering gnats. They are so little that to them the spaces between the leaf's atoms is like from here to the moon.
- —Midges. Gnats are bigger. You think they're happy, like us?
- —They have minds. They're frolicking in existential ecstasy, dancing and spiralling. The old Greeks put mind everywhere, as things have to know how to be. This tree knows how to be a tree. It eats light and drinks water. It breathes out what we breathe in.
- —And breathes in what we breathe out.
- —It makes seed. It has gender. Like a boy I know. We need to give you a haircut. A corporal asked me who the pretty girl is in such short pants who waits for me when I go off duty.
- —The green-eyed corporal with carroty hair? He winks at me.

Room with Afternoon Light

Magnus was talking about fields of greengold algae in western Australia three million five hundred thousand years ago and meadows of cyanobacteria in Cuba, Siberias of bluegreen organisms neither plants nor animals, hating oxygen, alive to carbon monoxide and the archaic light that sifted through white mist, tundras of red bacterial gulfs of sulfur and mud, silent as time.

- —Golly, Mikkel said from his pallet on the floor, around which his comicbooks were spread, and elementary botany text, sneakers and jeans.
- —This was the old life that gave, still gives, all other life its being, for these animal plants or vegetable animals, learned how to eat light and by photosynthesis convert themselves into carbohydrates exhaling oxygen. They were there for a million years, alone, the only beings in the whole of creation.
- —Breathing oxygen into the air.
- —What we call disease may be this old anaerobic order of things, on which we will be dependent forever.
- —How can you stand me, moving in, sort of, like this, with my pallet and my corner, my *place*, which I keep neat, don't I? What kind of god would create this purplesilver gunk and lay it down for a foundation, one million years, to get things ready for Silurian catfish the size of submarines, the silly dinosaurs, and us? You can throw me out, you know.
- —The kind of god who did. I don't want to throw you out.

Sleet Against the Windowpane

The first night Mikkel slept on his pallet in Magnus's room he rolled himself naked in two blankets and was sleeping soundly at six the next morning. Magnus put a hand on his forehead to see if he had a fever. Mikkel opened his eyes and smiled.

- —Why would you think I had a fever?
- —I don't know. It's a thing you do with children. They seem to get every disease in the book, whooping cough, measles, mumps, asthma. Nature trying to see if you're tough enough to make it. Are you used to sleeping on hard floors? And where are the pyjamas we bought you?
- —I didn't want to wrinkle them.
- —Winter's here. Sleet. Ice mush. Tonight you sleep in the bed with me. In your pyjamas.
- —Something, Mikkel said with his raisin roll and coffee, to think about all day.

Elbow and Knees

Magnus's experience of sleeping with friends was of two hot naked bodies in a sleeping bag designed for one, comfortable because companionable, tolerable because sensual, delightful because naughty, and sleep was not why they were there.

- —We're strangers, you know, he said to Mikkel bathed and in his pyjamas. That is, though we're making friends fast, we know very little about each other. I don't see why you should spend the night on the hard floor when there's the bed.
- —I squirm, Mikkel said. Do I have to keep away from you?
- Magnus, sitting by the last of the fire, still dressed in fatigues and heavy military socks, patted the hearth rug for Mikkel to sit beside him.
- —You've run away from wherever you belong, right?
- —I thought you said you weren't going to ask questions.
- —No questions. You don't know who I am, either.
- —You're a soldier and my friend, and last summer you were some kind of scoutmaster who was not like our keeper. You were different.
- —I'm a soldier doing my national service for a year, out at the Fort. I'm also at the university, where I'm going back when I've served the Queen. These quarters, officers' housing back a century or so, are for married personnel, though nobody likes them, they're too much like a movie set for Napoleonic times, with their old fireplaces and archaic plumbing. This big room is actually not part of a unit, and was being used for storage when I asked to have it. So here we are.
- —Ha! Mikkel said, putting a finger to Magnus's cheek.
- —You look great in your pyjamas, and with a haircut. And smell like a bar of soap. I'll find a clean T-shirt, which is what I sleep in. Is that OK with you by way of protocol?
- —What's that, protocol?
- —The way things are done. The way two people, or lots of people, agree on how to act toward each other, speak, dress.
- —Protocol, protocol. It sounds like a medicine. And protocol is what you wear to bed. Your underpants are littler than mine, I mean for somebody your size. I don't know what I mean.
- -Buy you Mikkel-sized underpants tomorrow.
- Mikkel ran his hands along the clean sheets and felt his pillow, furtively watching Magnus taking off his briefs and pulling on a T-shirt.
- —I almost got up last night to pick you up off the hard floor and stick you in the bed, but thought it might scare you. I also figured you were proving something, and that you needed to prove it. And now we have to learn to sleep together. We can't be in the same bed without rolling against each other, so let's get used to being close, to be comfortable about it.

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Mikkel wriggled closer, feeling Magnus's legs with a foot, putting splayed fingers out to explore. Magnus put an arm around his shoulders and a hand on his small butt. Mikkel snuggled tighter, nudging Magnus's chest.

- —You're not edgy that we're being puppies in a basket?
- —Not me.
- —What are you doing, scamp?
- —Taking off my pyjama pants, to be like you.
 - Magnus with a long reach turned on the table lamp.
- —What kind of knot is this you tied in the string?
- —Pull both ends and watch it fall apart. I'll teach you lots of knots. And the protocol of shed clothes is that you fold them, like this, and put them where you can find them. Not wad them up and throw them on the floor. We're soldiers.
- —I'm a goof.

Peapods

Magnus and Mikkel eating peapods from a paper bag.

- —The animals, where are they?
 - Mikkel thought about this, rubbing his nose with a knuckle.
- —No polar bears on the equator, no giraffes in the Faeroes, is that it?
- —Tigers in New Zealand?
- —Where's New Zealand?
- —Maoris, mountains, one island north, one south. The atlas we bought is, I know, terrific for keeping your drawings in, but it also has maps.
- —Can we go and stand on the Arctic Circle? There's a picture of that, scouts who look like Swedes, camping on the Arctic circle.
- —Tomorrow. Today we're doing laundry, buying groceries, looking in at a bookstore, maybe a good long walk out to Ordrupsgaard.

Sunday in the Park

—With friends, real friends, Magnus said, the space they fill belongs to them both, as at home in the other's space as in their own. I don't think you got a burn. You're going to radiate heat for awhile, but this lotion should soothe the more scorched parts. Do I include your piddler, or is that reserved space?

Grin and unbelieving look.

- —Smear me everywhere. I'm cooked. I get to do you next, right?
- —When I was a Scout shining with industrial-strength testosterone and full of sperm, we explored each other in honest Danish ways, wore our buddy's underpants, sniffed, licked, and hugged. We were companionable animals.
- —Your briefs would fit me like socks on a rooster. I can wear your sweatshirt. It smells like you.
- —You didn't get on with that bunch you were with last summer, did you?
- —They picked on me. I heard what their teacher said. He said they had to make allowances for me as I'm lower class.
- —Yes, but does this paragon of the consuming classes have a handsome soldier smoothing cucumber almond salve on his legs and bottom, and has he spent all day with his best friend, and has he eaten a banana split and a sausage and pepperoni pizza at Mama Gina's?

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- —Nah. And neither are the snot-nosed sissies I was with. I quit talking to them after awhile. They said back to me whatever I said.
- —Other people, Magnus said. That says it all, *other*. We have to look around and find the people we're really kin to. They're only rarely our family.
 - Mikkel looked at Magnus out of the side of his eyes.
- —Leonardo da Vinci, Magnus said, the painter and inventor and the most intelligent man in all history, owned and operated a boy your age, and liked him so much he made him a bicycle three hundred and ninety-eight years before the next boy had one.

Windflowers

Mikkel and Magnus snug before their fire, Mikkel on Magnus lap.

- —The first four are pretty hopeless. No other gods, no idols, no saying God's name except when praying, no working on Sunday. As we don't talk about your parents and I've promised not to ask, you can't do much about the fifth except be nice to others' parents.
- Not me.
- —Fine. You're your own man. You may not even be human at all, but the godling Eros with smuts on his nose, in disguise as a Dane.
 - —You'd better believe it.
- —What do you make of number six?
- —What it says. Don't kill. It's mean to kill anything. Everything wants to live. What's the next, Magnus, being grown up?
- —Adultery means fucking another man's wife, or the wife fucking a man she's not married to.
- *e* —What if they want to?
- —Well, God says they shouldn't.
- —Big deal. But the next one is good. Stealing is mean. You might take something somebody needs, or likes a lot.
 - —False witness is fibbing when you ought to tell the truth.
- —Like in court.
- —Anywhere. *Covet* means to want something so bad that you're liable to steal it, or seduce, or be sneaky about getting it.
 - —But all that's already in the other don'ts.
 - —So there are really only three commandments. Don't kill, lie, or steal.
 - —Yes, but you might have to do all three. We have to kill Germans in a war, and you might have to kill somebody who's trying to kill you. You lie if the truth is going to get you or somebody you like into big trouble. You steal if you're hungry. If you were sick, Magnus, and needed a medicine, I'd steal it and be proud of myself.
 - —What a moralist!
 - —What's a moralist?
 - —Somebody who knows what's right and what's wrong.
 - —But everybody knows what's right and what's wrong, don't they?
 - -No.
 - —They don't?
 - —Absolutely not.
 - —So they don't. Where's that leave us?

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- —Well, there's the rule for fair play: don't do to anybody what you wouldn't like them to do to you. Silence. Scrounging in paper bag for more peapods.
- -And there are laws.
- —Don't walk on the grass.
- —Exactly. And then there's the undeniable fact that some of us love each other.
- —Is love sex, Magnus?
- —Nope.
 - Silence. Wiggling.
- —Love is eating peapods out of the same bag.

Rietveld Table

- —You've played it so fucking cool, Magnus, that half the school is in shock, gossip swarming like bees. You come into class with Mikkel here, and nobody knows who he is or where he comes from, and him neat as an ad for kiddy togs, in a red-and-blue-checked shirt, stone-washed jeans we would all kill for, black trainers, and, oh sweet Jesus, those wide yellow braces the likes of which nobody's seen, *and* with the textbook and a notebook that maybe the Crown Prince gave him, and him as cool as Daniel strolling into the lions, taking a seat not in the front row, where you could save him when we started to eat him, but back in the third, with Asgar, Ole, and Ejnar.
- —Is Ole the big round specs and flop of hair down to his nose? Mikkel asked. *Just who the fuck are you?* is what he asked me. I said I was Mikkel Rasmussen and did he want to make anything of it?
- —Holt is a social critic, Mikkel. He likes to talk.
- —*And* the disappearing act after class, when there was practically a queue to quiz Mikkel, smell him, find out what his jeans cost and where the yellow braces come from, but he'd melted away into thin air.
- —To be decanted again in geography, Magnus said, with the same effect, except that word had already spread that a new boy of unknown origin and status had been turned loose into the order of things.
- —You *made* this table, Magnus? Dutch De Stijl design, you say? And this room, apartment I suppose it is, O wow! You realize that I'm the most hated person in the whole school, getting invited here for lunch with Mikkel and you, getting to ask all the good questions. Start answering with the nifty yellow braces.
- —They're a present from Corporal Redclover, who was with Magnus at the Fort. We came up for the weekend once. He's from the Faeroes. He's my other best friend. Magnus sent him lots of money and told him to take me around to Jespersen's and say that I was going to Oak Hill Boys School. Thomas, that's Corporal Redclover, was in his Class A uniform, parade dress with all the insignia patches and stripes and buttons, and for the fun of it a big pistol in its white holster, and his baton. And I was in my rattiest jeans, my barracks rat's pants as Magnus calls them. Well, and well, ha! this snooty department-store snob would have been happier if I weren't there, and when he asked, to make sure he'd heard right, the Oak Hill School? Thomas gave him a look that meant that if he didn't get on with it the Royal Artillery, Second Battalion, Company B, would not like it at all, and would roll up their howitzers and take his department store out.
- —It's great to have friends. I've never had the Army with me to buy socks and shirts.
- —Eat up, Holt. You're our second guest, after Solveg.
- —Solveg's been up here? I suppose he took in the one bed, which, by the way, I know I'm not to peddle as paparazzi dirt, none of anybody's business.
- —Hr. Solveg showed me how he's dressed for teaching swimming, wearing a red cap and whistle and nothing else. Magnus says his red cap and size XL hang-down are all the authority he needs.
- —That's for sure, Holt said. If I know Sten, he asked to see yours.

- —Because I haven't been to his gym yet. He's an empiricist. That means somebody who has to see for himself.
- —I'll bet it does.
- —Sten, Magnus said, says that Phys Ed is the only place for a philosopher anymore.

A Sense of Place

- —I like Holt, Mikkel said. He's neat. I like all the trees and the walks. I guess there's every kind of person in the world here. Everybody's from somewhere else, aren't they? Some boys talk real funny. There's a library with about a thousand books in it.
- —We can check out any we want.
- —They call barracks dorms, and when people ask me what dorm I'm in I say I'm in private quarters. Most of the boys I've met are friendly, but some are snooty, you know. And some try to talk English to me.
- —You aren't feeling out of place, are you, Mikkel? I am, sort of.
- —I don't think so. I'm at home, here, with you. Everybody else is away from home.
- —We're going to make our big room here a home like nobody's ever had before, a place that's all ours, exactly the way we want it.

A Rose Is Also Its Thorns

- —Well, Mikkel said, I was going from your classroom over to the gym, and there was this shit, I think his name's Peder Hanssen, said something real nasty to me. I wasn't even looking at him. What I didn't know was that Holt heard him. I didn't know Holt was anywhere about. I suppose I said something nasty back at him.
- —We're not asking what, Magnus said. Meanwhile, he's in the infirmary and Holt is in Rask's office. I have several versions. What did happen?
- —Well, before I knew what was going on, Holt was on him like a tiger, had his face against the walk and was kicking his butt, I mean hard. *Ka-whop!* Hr. What's-his-name, the Social Studies rabbit with the little eyes, threw his books down, actually up and they fell in front of him, and he danced around trying not to step on them. He came over and demanded that Holt stop *this brutality.* Well, Holt looked knives at Social Studies, and gave
- Hanssen one more kick, for good measure. Hanssen by this time was crying and saying that he was being killed. His legs didn't work when they tried to walk him, to the infirmary I suppose, and some snitch had gone to bring back the Headmaster. Nobody knew I had anything to do with it. Poor Holt. Is he in big trouble?
- —I'm going over to find out. You stay here.
- —I'm going with you. I've got to thank Holt, if only through a window. He can read my mind.

Soldiers

- -Sergeant.
- —Colonel.
- —What do you know about any of this?
- —Hearsay only, Sir. But I know Holt Rasvinger to be a boy of excellent character, and can't think that he would attack another student without real provocation.
- —He won't talk, you know. He's in there. He won't say a word to me, stubborn as a mule. Hanssen, the boy he kicked, quite viciously I understand, is in a bad way, under sedation. So we have nothing from him, either. Is Hanssen one of your students?
- —No sir, but Rasvinger is. I know him quite well. He's in the discussion group I'm advisor to, and we run together

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cross country regularly. He'll talk to me, but perhaps not with you or anybody else present.

- —Will you tell us what he has to say for himself?
- —No sir, I will not.
 - Colonel Rask moved some pencils on his desk, rubbed his chin, and stared out the window.
- —I'm certain you have an excellent reason for refusing? Is it that you know more of all this than you're letting me know?
- —I don't know if I do, Colonel. What I mean is that I can't betray to you what he won't tell you himself. That's common decency. I want to talk with him, privately, to see what happened, and to discuss with him what he ought to do.
- —Why do you think he will talk to you?
- —I know he will.
- —Very well. But perhaps, in some indirect way, you can tell me why he kicked Hanssen, and if Hanssen started it. Through here.

Holt was in a locked reception room, sitting on a leather couch, his hands on his knees. Magnus sat on the floor, with his hands over Holt's.

- —I'm not ashamed of myself, and I'm not sorry, Holt said. He called Mikkel a pukey little faggot. I'll kick him again when I can get at him.
- —Why won't you talk to Rask?
- —Because it's none of his fucking business who you love. And anybody you love, I look after. The next shit who wants to smart off and call Mikkel names will think twice about it.
- —Mikkel is outside. He says to thank you. He was hoping he could thank you with cryptic signals through a window.
- —Sweet little squirt. Kiss his dick for me.
- —Right now Rask wants to put you before a firing squad. I will of course tell him nothing you're saying, and told him I wouldn't. But may I say you were teaching a bully a lesson? Will you come into Rask's office and listen to what I say?
- —He called me a barbarian, and said I'm a bully.
- —Headmasters and colonels don't always get things right. What I want, Holt, is to take you over to my place where Mikkel and I can make on over you. Counselling, we'll tell Rask. Let's go.
- —I'm saying nothing.
 - Magnus had his hand on Holt's shoulder when they entered.
- —Well? Have you come to your senses, young man?
- —He has not come to his senses, Colonel. He doesn't feel that he should have to defend himself in what he considers an honorable act of chastising a foul-mouthed bully. I will put in as from myself that his chastising Hanssen was indeed barbaric in the sense that a recourse to violence was the only response. To call the bully names would have resulted in a slanging match. To have reported the incident to you would have pitted one word against another. Barbarity is outside the law because the law is not interested in its honorable rages. Holt heard an obscene insult gratuitously inflicted on an innocent younger boy who was leaving my geography class to go to the gym. He felt that the bully needed to be taught a lesson, and kicked him in the behind.
- —Is this the truth of the matter, Rasvinger?
 - Holt stood mute, looking straight ahead.
- —Rasvinger, sir, does not feel that he needs to explain, or excuse himself, when he has come to the defense of someone being hurt.

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- —Should we hear this younger boy's account?
- —Whether we should or not we aren't going to. I've talked with him. I don't want him to relive the experience by telling it as a witness. And now, sir, if Rasvinger is willing, I'd like to take him over to my place to play checkers, or have a walk, or whatever it occurs to us to do. As for Hanssen, it's my experience as a scout and soldier that a kicked behind is very sore, and very bruised for some days, but is not otherwise harmed.
- —Thank you, sergeant. The two of you may leave.

Daffodils from Holland

- —The world's wonders pile up, Magnus said, unbuttoning Mikkel's shirt.
- -Now what?

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- —Well, Dr. Havemand, Marcus's mama, had lunch today with the Rasks and sang praises about the school. Seems that her once shy son, and once fastidious about his clothes, met her in a pair of scruffy jeans, deplorable sneakers, and a sweatshirt that has been a stranger to detergent and hot water for several months.
- —My clothes, Mikkel smiled.
- —She said he smelled like a gymnasium, and that his ruddy face, much more mature conversation, and confident walk gave him the authority to wear anything. I'm quoting Rask, who was considerably bucked. He was, however, a bit confused by her approval of Marcus's best friend who lives in a neat place with a soldier. This shirt's good for another day. Dr. Havemand seems to approve of boys being whiffy. We don't have her opinion on underpants.
- —These go to Marcus, and are just getting good and nasty.
- —Marcus will be with his mama until about five. Do I stand in for him, or do we have a walk, or draw, read, or go shopping for groceries?
- —Feels great, what you're doing.
- —A friendly working in of tone, for later.
- —Nobody's objecting. Marcus says he doesn't know *who* his folks are. His father notices once in awhile that he exists, and talks cars and soccer scores with him, boring Marcus into a fit. His mama talks clothes and being popular.

Orange and Blue

A sheer mist made the players look as if they were behind gauze. The soccer field was still summer green, though the trees on the far side were bronze and yellow.

- —All the playing fields in the world on an autumn afternoon must remain the same forever, Major Mikkel Rasmussen said to Colonel Rask.
- —You feel that, do you? Rask said. I wholly agree. You put it very nicely.

The ball flew wide out of the mist toward them. Major Rasmussen butted it back, losing his beret. A player in an orange jersey and blue pants caught the neatly returned ball between his knees, rolled it down his shin to his boot, and waved thanks.

- —Look here, Major, Colonel Rask said, it's wonderful that you've dropped by like this. I've not completely recovered from your surprise visit back in the summer, when you filled me in on your extraordinary time as one of us, as Sergeant Rasmussen's lively rascal and your friendship with the Havemand boy. My old eyes water every time I think of it.
- —There's the whistle, Major Rasmussen said. Olfactory memories persist, you know. I'm remembering the smell of the showers they're headed toward, wet tin and that soap the school provided, surely meant for horses. Would it be *mal apropos* for me to look in, as a visit to the past?
- —You'll find it all thoroughly modern, thanks to the generosity of the Havemands. Tile instead of wood, lots of hot

water, and would you believe washing machines?

The boy who'd taken Major Rasmussen's butted return came grinning out of the mist and gave a high sign of solidarity.

- —Oh, Mikkel, Colonel Rask called. Come and meet your namesake Major Mikkel Rasmussen, an alumnus who's dropped by to have a look at his old school. Major, Mikkel Havemand.
- —Hej! You were Dad's best friend! I'm named for you!
 - They shook hands.
- —Sorry about the mud, Mikkel Havemand said.
- —Mikkel, Colonel Rask said, Major Rasmussen would like to see our new lockers and showers. He was remembering just now the wooden shed and ice-water showers from his heroic days here. Me, I've been out longer than my arthritic knees will thank me for. We'll expect you for tea, Major, after you've quenched your nostalgia.

On the way to the locker room, Mikkel Havemand said with searching, anxious eyes:

- —Don't you recognize me?
- —Of course I recognize you, Major Rasmussen said. How not?
- —I saw Magnus on television, the search in Kallalit Nunaat for the meteorite from outside the solar system. He doesn't look older, you know?
- —He isn't. He sometimes forgets I'm not eleven anymore, but he has my boys Adam and Henry to adore.
- —Our boys. And I'll have a Scottish wife from the Hebrides. Dad talks about you, and keeps up with you. He doesn't want to meet you. He still feels the hurt of our going away in the middle of the night, with Magnus and without a word to him.
- —You've reconstructed it all from Marcus's talk? You and I have a budget of things to discuss. But you need your shower and warm clothes.

Steam vapor in the shower stalls took up where the fog had made a screen of mist outside. There was a muddled controversy afterwards as to whether there had been a tall soldier (beret, blue uniform, infantry boots, dog tag, athletic build, the grandfather of all chronometers on his wrist) who undressed quickly and got in a shower with Mikkel Havemand, the two of them speaking Copenhagen dockside Danish. Some hadn't seen any tall soldier, and charged those who had with being psychotic.

- —The soap in my day was carbolic, Mikkel Rasmussen said, and we smelled decidedly chemical. The water was at best tepid.
- —To discourage self-abuse, Mikkel Havemand grinned.
- —Didn't discourage your dad.
- —Grandma tells about visiting dad in his first year. When he went off to school he was shy, vain, and stuck-up. Old Colonel Rask, the Head back then, sent for dad, who turned up looking like an urchin and smelling like a gymnasi-um (I'm quoting Grandma) in ratty jeans and filthy shirt.
- -Mine, Major Rasmussen said. He would have had on my underpants, too.
- —Grandma was delighted. She said Dad was confident, full of self-esteem, and was speaking *real Danish!* So you're responsible for the Havemand Endowment. Soap my back, huh?
- —So do you want to know what Magnus and I did after we skedaddled in the middle of the night?
- —I know some. You kept me, and grew up around me. There was that trigonometry exam in officer's school, when you asked me to help, and I did. And when you told Magnus that you were going to marry Susanna you used my voice.
- —I couldn't have done anything without you. I thought for years that I couldn't be out of Magnus's sight. We still talk almost daily on the phone. He's in my command, you know, in Special Forces. Every time, in front of others, he

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calls me Major Rasmussen, a lizard runs up my spine.

- —We can't see the long room over the stables. There's a young couple there now, with a baby. Dad says it was the most wonderful room in the world. It was.
- —We'd had no other home.
- —I think I've seen the Sortemosen house, not clearly. I could recognize Susanna in a supermarket. You'll have to show me pictures of Adam and Henry.
- —The willow oak at Kastellet.
- —A quintillion photons on every square centimeter of leaf per second.

Still Life with Tea Pot

—You must think me daff, Major, introducing you to a boy whose name I cannot think of as Mikkel Havemand. Havemand sprained his ankle early on this afternoon and was in the infirmary when we walked over to the practice field.

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