

The Last Waltz

Original Title: *Den siste valsen*

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PART I

Marita (the retelling). 1992-1997

Andreas. 1988-1997

Oh, Johannes. 1991-1997

PART II

Marita (the retelling). Spring and summer 1997

Andreas. 1997-2001

Oh, Johannes. Night's end. 1997-2007

PART III

Marita (the retelling). 1997-2004

Andreas. 2004-2010

Oh, Johannes. Possibly New York City (Serenade)

THE LAST NIGHT

Endgame

PART I

Marita (the retelling)

1992-1997

After the accident, I was admitted to a private clinic for a few days before I could go home, then I spent months lying in Dad and Tina's guest room with the curtains drawn. I'd gotten a nasty concussion and would need as much rest as possible if I wanted to get better. It would take time, the doctor said, but she assured us – Dad and Tina and me – that I would most likely be okay as long as we followed her instructions. I'd really been through the wringer, but I was happy that it hadn't been any worse, that my head injury wasn't more serious. Rest, the doctor said. And patience. Nothing strenuous, neither physical nor emotional.

And so I lay there.

It's only when you hit your head that you start thinking about your head, about the brain's fragility, about the thinness of the skull that's supposed to protect what's inside. And inside: you're acutely aware of all the sounds your body makes, the pumping and the rushing. When you have all the time in the world you notice, you listen, you put your ear up against your

own breath. My head never stopped aching during the months I was bedridden, as if someone had taken hold of my brain with an iron claw and tightened their grip. It was the same heavy, cold feeling I got as a kid when I ate ice cream too quickly and got a brain freeze, that's what I used to call it. And I heard these saw-like sounds that rose and fell in intensity. They left a terrible pain in their wake, like a shining, jagged scrap of iron was being dragged across the inside of my cranium, my forehead, the backs of my eyeballs. What a peculiar darkness inside me, I remember thinking, because I mostly kept my eyes closed, except at night, when the darkness made it possible for me to open them and see some shadows, at least. When the sawing sounds were at their most intense, I lay there and tried not to screw my eyes shut too tight. And since the idea of opening them was even worse than the pain, I just lay there and watched the scraps moving back and forth inside my head. All I could do was let it happen. Sound and sight collided, recast into a pressure that terrified me. I thought I might have a stroke at any second, that my skull would simply explode all of a sudden and my eyes would pop out, that my cerebral matter would boil over; it felt like my head was a sleeping, dormant volcano. I imagined the burning, sizzling lava that was my melted brain while the sounds sliced into me – jagged, sharp, piercing, translucent, like quicksilver. Sometimes I'd panic, I couldn't catch my breath, I thought I was going to suffocate.

One day, when things were at their worst, when the hopelessness was bottomless and omnipresent and I was done wailing, done crying, I started to chant. It wasn't a deliberate act. It was more like my body took over, like my voice came loose and I became an observer, someone listening intently and absentmindedly all at once, if that makes sense. Very present, yet still distant and numb. It helped the pressure in my head a bit, even though it only lasted a short while before I got self-conscious and started straining *not* to be self-conscious, and as soon as I started thinking that way the spell was broken, the panic rose and my breathing got tighter and thinner and faster, and I felt so exhausted and desperate and miserable and I thought I was going to die, I thought I might just stop breathing at any second. I pounded on the wall, and Tina came in and sat me upright, stroking my back as she calmly told me to breathe through my nose, in and out, in and out, and I gradually got access to a tiny thread of air, and then, after a long, narrow gasp, another thread, and so on, until I could breathe normally again. The panic relented and was replaced with a strange lightness, a relief, almost, at the thought that I could have just given in, stopped fighting against whatever it was that terrified me, and let everything simply overcome me.

I hardly ate at the beginning, but after a while I got so thin that the doctor who came to see me emphatically insisted that Dad and Tina had to get me to eat, no matter what they had to force inside me. I'd need to be admitted to the hospital otherwise so they could do it there, she said.

After a few months, I was able to sit upright for more than a few minutes at a time. I could even shower almost every day. I remember Christmas Eve of 1992 especially well because Dad left my bedroom door open while he and Tina ate dinner, and I could see some of the ornaments shining and sparkling on the plastic Christmas tree out in the living room. I slept a lot. In the mornings, I heard seagulls and pigeons and imagined flocks of cranes, geese, all kinds of birds with open orange beaks that pecked against my skull before they disappeared somewhere behind my brow. Tina put damp washcloths over my eyes. Will I never get better? I thought. Will these sounds never disappear? I thought. Am I going to die now, in this ridiculous, self-inflicted way? I cried. I said I wanted to die. Rather than suffer like this, I said to Dad, and he, the poor thing, he just sat there. I mean it, I said. If I'd had the strength to kill myself, I would've done it. Tina came in with soup and I heard Dad go out the door, I heard the car start, and he came home a little while later with yellow protective earmuffs I could wear when the sounds in the house were too much. But it was already evening by then, and I felt better. Tina and I sat in the living room and she read to me, just a few paragraphs from a book I've otherwise forgotten. But what I do remember is that it felt like a huge victory.

Sometimes Dad would call Mom in Norway. I heard them talking through the walls, through the earmuffs, through the noise that filled my head. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could tell from the tone of his voice that he was talking to Mom. He came to my room afterward, wondering if I was asleep.

No, I said. Just come in.

Your mother called, he said, but I knew that wasn't true, I knew he was the one who'd called her.

Oh? I said. What did she say?

She just wanted to know how you were doing.

Okay.

Maybe we should call her one day when you feel up for talking.

Yeah, sure, but not right now.

No, not now. We'll take it at your pace. Mom's doing well, by the way.

Why do you call her *Mom*, anyway?

Hmm, good question, Marita. Old habit, maybe?

Really old. But sure. We can call her. Another day, maybe?

Yeah, he said.

But are *you* doing okay? I said.

I am, he said. I have you here.

Sort of, I said.

Don't say things like that, he said.

When I finally had the energy to call her, it was clear she'd been told not to say anything that might upset me. She spoke calmly and quietly, even asked me questions. But I didn't have much to say. First of all, I got exhausted from the slightest thing. Second of all, I didn't remember much of what happened when Lou and I were attacked during the riots. *Well, alright then*, she said, and I could hear her struggling not to seem displeased, offended. We hadn't spoken in ages, and she must've been thinking about that, too, that this conversation was sort of special, and that it came with some demands, demands I didn't take seriously, and it was as if her pointedly calm voice was saying that somehow. But she seemed intent on being generous, even though her generosity always had something accusatory about it. It stressed me out. And not only me. Dad strode in and out of the kitchen throughout the conversation like some kind of song-and-dance man, nervous and unprepared, I thought, while the silence between Mom and me swelled.

It wasn't very smart of you, was it, she said after a pause that was slightly too long. I honestly don't know what to believe, Marita. What on earth were you thinking?

I don't know, Mom. I'm sorry. I didn't think it would be dangerous, otherwise I wouldn't have done it, would I?

She fell silent. Then she said with a sigh: Well, I guess you are an adult. I can't tell you how to live your life.

How's everything over there? I asked to redirect the conversation. With you and Svein and Grandma and Grandpa?

We can talk about that some other time, she said. But then she just *had to mention* that the last year hadn't been that easy for her, that Svein was gone a lot, that she was alone a lot and that was pretty hard, and then I guess Dad heard that I hadn't said anything in a while so he took the phone from me and I went and lay down again.

I heard his voice get stern and uncertain at the same time. He hung up abruptly and carefully knocked on my door. How's it going? he asked.

I'm tired, I said. I'm so tired of all this.

I guess calling Kari today wasn't such a good idea, he said.

Sure it was, I said. It was kind of nice to get it out of the way.

You need to take care of yourself, Marita.

Yeah, I said. I know. But I don't want to talk about this right now, is that okay?

Of course.

Thanks, I said.

You don't need to thank me, he said.

Yes, I said. I do.

I woke up one morning, and the pain in my head was gone. Not for long. Just a few minutes. But long enough to give me the slightest hope that what the doctor had been saying all along was actually true. I was going to get better as long as I rested enough, as long as I stuck it out and didn't put too much strain on my eyes or ears. The next week, Tina and I listened to a short radio program about birds in Southern California. Dad started to cry when we told him about it, and two days later I joined him for a drive – with sunglasses and earmuffs, to be fair, but still. I wanted to drive to Malibu, and we were out for almost two hours. We walked slowly down an empty beach and sat down on a big, black rock where Dad stroked my hair and said he'd been terrified of losing me, *that I was also going to disappear from life*. Poor Dad. I guess I hadn't thought much about how he was doing, about what kinds of things got triggered in him when he saw his daughter lying there half-dead day in and day out.

Traffic was bad on the way home, everything moved at a crawl, and it took forever before we finally got off the freeway. I wanted ice cream, so we stopped by a deli where we ate soft serve in the parking lot, leaning against the hood of Dad's car. Him in a worn-out jacket, me in my noise-reducing earmuffs and dark sunglasses.

You need to buy yourself some new clothes, I said.

You always say that, he said.

You always say that, too, I said. That I always say that.

I asked how Mom was, and he said he'd talked to Grandpa a few days earlier. Mom and Svein weren't doing great, Grandpa had said.

But it's probably nothing to worry about, he said quickly. How was the ice cream?

By the time the new year rolled around, I could watch TV for short stretches, and I started reading a little later in the spring since the headache was almost gone. I could also listen to (quiet) music on the Discman I'd gotten from Mom for Christmas, the one she'd asked Dad to buy and wrap for me. She had sent a card, at least. I'm sure it'll be here soon, I said when she asked if I'd gotten it. Those things can take a while. It kept happening: she was angry on the phone, very unhappy (she said) with the American postal service. Crooks, she said, and was sure that someone had stolen her card.

But why would they do that, Mom? I sighed. It doesn't make any sense for someone to want to steal a Christmas card?

What do *you* know about that? she said, and then she didn't say anything else.

When the card did finally arrive, it was already the end of January. I called her to say thank you, but she sounded tired and the conversation didn't last long. A nice, red Christmas card. With a Santa and some reindeer on the front. And her handwriting inside, neat as always. *Dear daughter. I hope you appreciate the gift. Merry Christmas to you. Best wishes from your mother.* I asked Dad if it had been that way when I was little too, that she didn't use my name very often.

I can't remember, Dad said, but I could tell he was lying.

In March, I went out with Alice for the first time since the accident. We had a few beers. I got tipsy, happy, a little sentimental even, and the next day I woke up with a terrible headache and thought it was starting all over again. I cried, I was desperate, I had to throw up. But it got better over the course of the day, and then I realized I'd just been hungover, and that was the best feeling in the world.

My days, from then on. Then unreal sun over Westside Pavilion, where I sit in the car listening to the radio and watching people heading in and out of the mall. I summon my courage and follow Tina, and the glass bridges wind over the atriums and cast shadows on the terrazzo floor and the fluorescent lights and neon signs I can't look at too much, because then the pounding can start behind my eyes and that scares me, and I find a place to sit behind some enormous potted plants, fake and glossy. I breathe calmly. I try. Girls with scrunchies. Boys in Lakers jackets. Mothers in blazers and high-waisted jeans. I'm aware of every single sound. Whitney Houston's voice, the humming from the ventilation system, small plings

from the elevator doors, beeping noises from the arcade that bleed out into the passageway where I'm sitting. A gang of teens messing around on the railing on the third floor. I can't look at them. I feel a tingling in my legs when one of the boys pretends he's falling backward, and the girls shriek and laugh. UCLA students walk past. Focused conversations. White to-go cups and spiral notebooks.

I'm so happy.

I feel joyous.

I know how joy feels. I can sit here and look, hear, smell. That's not a given.

I go to find Tina, who is looking at fabric in one of her favorite places, Sunset Sewing & Fabrics, a small shop squeezed between a shoe store and a RadioShack. I watch her talking to an older woman with long, flowing hair.

Hey, I say.

Hey, Tina says, and the woman gives me a quick smile before continuing: *So. If you're making a sundress, sweetheart, go for the rayon. It breathes.*

Tina's been thinking about making dresses, and later I hear her sewing machine going back and forth all afternoon without it making my head hurt. Dad's out running an errand. I lie down on the sofa with a book and listen to Tina sewing, back and forth, the green dress, the yellow dress, and a few days later, she asks me to stand on a chair while she sticks pins in seams and hems up and lets down and measures and adjusts things.

A-line, narrow straps, thin, combed cotton.

I shut my eyes.

Tina's incense, the scent of old books, coffee and cigarettes.

I love this house. The white brick walls with tiny cracks, the tiled roof that glows in the afternoon sun, the trees that rustle out in the garden. The wild lawn we always forget to mow. All afternoon on the big, soft sofa. I read books. Play records. The smell of cilantro and lime when Tina and Dad cook. The incomparable joy of being able to do all the normal things again, the things people almost don't even notice, I say to Tina one afternoon, and my voice is so intense, so insistent and enthusiastic. I probably sound like I've just found God, I say, a nutcase who's seeing everything in a new light, with new eyes, and who can't shut up about it.

Don't be silly, Tina says, and tells me to stand still, because now she's going to stick some pins in the seam.

Wanna see the ocean, Dad asks one day, and we roll down the windows and it's so loud we have to shout to each other, but it doesn't matter because my head doesn't hurt anymore, it works, I say, my head works, just turn it up, and Dad turns up the car radio and the heat settles over us like a blanket, and all of it – Dad's smile, the sky, the soft sleepiness – brings something to the surface, a kind of gratitude I feel building up, and then I can't hold back and the tears start to flow, I stick my head halfway out of the open car window so Dad and Tina won't notice I'm crying, so the wind will take my tears and spread them over the palm trees that line the median on Pier Avenue.

I remember the woolen sounds underwater in the pool at Griffin Park, which I visit with Dad so he can get a workout in and his hip doesn't get even stiffer. The scent of chlorine. Signs that have gotten so faded by sunlight you can hardly read them. The eucalyptus trees quivering in the heat and frazzled families fighting for the limited spots beneath the umbrellas. Short, sharp whistles from the lifeguards. Children screeching with delight, splashing sounds, music from a boombox somewhere and the skateboard gangs from Los Feliz trying to impress each other with breakneck dives.

Are you getting back in? Dad says as he dries off.

Soon, I say, and afterward I float like a pencil and feel the sun on my face, I duck underwater and kick and open my eyes on my way toward the bottom of the pool and the silence, and my eyes are wide open, and I hold my breath and sink and sink, and then I feel a pressure against my temples and it terrifies me and I hurry back to the surface, and when I get my head above water and breathe, my head doesn't hurt after all, and I'm just so happy, I say to Dad afterward as I'm drying off when he asks what I'm grinning about.

Everyday life.

I pick Alice up from her new job. We drive down Ventura Boulevard with Pixies' "Bossanova" playing on the stereo. The smog is low, almost beautiful, the horizon looks like mother of pearl. Alice takes her shoes off and puts her feet up on the dashboard.

I always think of that Tom Petty song when I'm driving here, I say.

Alice gives me a sideways glance. I've never really gotten into Tom Petty, Andy, she says.

No, I say. But you have *heard* of Tom Petty?

Suck on this, Alice says and gives me the finger.

I know you love me, I say.

When we get back to Dad and Tina's, Alice flops down on the sofa.

What are we going to do?

It hardly matters.

Maybe go out and meet some friends later.

Maybe it'll just be the two of us.

Girls' night here in the house.

Listen to music, chat, drink wine.

Every time I think about what I narrowly escaped, my heart beats a tiny bit faster, I feel my stomach drop.

It feels like relief and fear at the same time, I say to Alice.

My friend.

The person who came by to see me almost every day while I was bedridden, even though I told her again and again that she didn't need to drive all the way up here.

You don't get to tell me what to do, Alice said.

First one time.

And then lots of times, and eventually she just said: *I'm not even going to comment on that, Andy. Stop.*

Are you staying for dinner? Dad shouts.

Oh, yes please, Mr. Richards, Alice says. I'm starving!

Tina and Dad over in the kitchen. Scuttling back and forth between drawers and cabinets over the creaky, white-painted wooden floor. It's peeling off here, Dad says, you can see the old brown wood under here, look.

The red back door makes the afternoon sun glow golden, especially when it hits the glass horse Tina has on the counter, then the kitchen is filled with small rainbows like they were painted on the walls.

The smell of avocado and garlic and lemon.

Do you need any help? Alice and I ask, but Dad and Tina just wave us out of the kitchen, practically shoo us away. Dust hovers in the light filtering through the macramé curtains, casting thin, lacy shadows on the living room floor.

Alice fiddles with a couch cushion while she tells a story and I put on some Joni Mitchell, and Tina sticks her head out of the kitchen and says *ohhhh*, and that's exactly why I put the record on, to make Tina happy, so that she would stick her head out of the kitchen and say *ohhhh*, so that she'd feel something in her heart and say *ohhhh*, because that's what *my*

heart is doing, it's saying *ohhhh*, and it wants every other heart in the world to say the same thing.

Whatcha thinking about? Alice asks, and I talk to my friend about the joy and the relief and the lightness, and she listens to me while she fiddles with the couch cushion, and Joni's in the background, and when I'm done Alice says it makes a lot of sense, that it isn't surprising I feel that way after everything that's happened. And then we're quiet for a long time, and Alice takes my hands in hers and says, her voice serious, that she's really happy for me.

And then I start crying, and she says: *Oh, Andy, come here, you silly goose.*

We eat dinner, and Alice and I do the dishes afterward while the other two drink wine in the living room, now it's our turn to shoo them away. Dad puts on some Miles Davis and smokes with his eyes closed. Tina tidies a stack of magazines. When we're done in the kitchen, Alice and I sit out in the garden, but go inside to catch the evening news.

The Koon and Powell case and its aftermath.

It's only been a few weeks since the LAPD officers who beat Rodney King to a pulp were sentenced to thirty months in prison.

Not ten years.

Not five years.

Thirty months.

A local pastor says *we wanted justice, and we got a technicality.*

People get longer sentences for stealing a stereo, Dad says.

The LAPD will ask for an independent review of its use-of-force training.

We hear the community, says a spokesman.

We are making changes.

Store owners fear more riots and have boarded up their windows just in case.

103 degrees in the Valley.

Children jumping into a public pool.

Elderly people standing in line outside a Red Cross refrigerated truck.

There's still a risk of blackouts. Helicopter images from the fire in Malibu.

Homeowners spraying down their roofs, the wind whipping dust over the highways.

Tina opens another bottle of wine and turns off the TV, Dad puts on music, and we sit there and talk, about *everything*, it feels like: the comically mild punishment, the fear, the LAPD's methods and the heat wave and the traffic and gang violence and Hilary Clinton's

health reform and the differences between the US and Norway when it comes to healthcare and taxes and welfare.

What a world, says Dad.

What a country, says Tina.

Maybe we can talk about something else?

Alice recently saw “Jurassic Park”.

And was it good?

What do you think? she says and laughs.

Dad is on the floor in front of the stereo, that’s usually where he ends up, down on the carpet like a little boy with his legs crossed, putting on records, changing cassettes, looking for *that specific* song.

He shushes us. Tells us to listen.

Don’t talk, *listen*.

But we talk, us *girls*, and eventually Dad gives up and sits there on the floor pretending to sulk while he listens to “Blood on the Tracks” with us cackling in the background. I give up, he says at the end of the record, and then he spends forever getting to his feet because his hip gets stiff and his feet ache, especially his heels.

We light one cigarette after the other.

Alice is too tired to drive home so she spends the night, and we wake up in my bed the next day like two twelve-year-olds, chattering away in the early hours of the morning. About men we like, about what we long for, what we desire and expect, what we imagine life has in store for us.

We also talk about fear.

This fucking town, Alice says, but I feel like I can’t say the same thing, that I’m sort of just visiting and I’m not actually allowed to talk shit about the US, no matter what.

Of course you can, Alice says. That’s the whole point of this country.

She’s my friend, my best friend.

You can say whatever the hell you want. That’s the whole point.

Totally, I say.

Dad knocks gently on the door.

Are you awake, he asks.

He and Tina made breakfast. Scrambled eggs, pancakes, rolls.

English sample translation © [Olivia Lasky](#) 2026