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It takes history
to make a bonfire

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Grete Sen

I don't deny that it was more than a coincidence which made things turn out as they did, it was a whole train of coincidences

~Marx Frisch, Homo Faber~



- The probable and the improbable are not different in kind, only in frequency, Marx Frisch writes in the novel Homo Faber. The other day I ran into an occasional occurrence of the improbable. I met a native, that is, a man who is actually born and raised here in this very state of California. Just to be clear about the facts: More than 30 percent of the immigrants to the USA want to settle in 'The Golden State' resulting in a population of 31 million. - Who would not be attracted to a place with a name from a fictional earthly paradise? The state supposedly got its name from book called Las Sergas de Esplanidian, written by Garcia Ordonez de Montalvo around 1500. Even though everything is big in the US this Western corner of the continent suffers from a severe limit of space. Someone has to leave for others to enter. This has turned California into a true meting pot. People are continuously on the move. No wonder meeting an inhabitant of second generation becomes an object of genuine surprise.

- As you know, I come from this remote country, Norway, frequently mistaken as the capital of Sweden. Born at a tiny island in the North, such a small place, such in the outskirts, that it is unknown even to the Northerners. Imagine when telling people 'over here' that my childhood consisted of 432 scattered people surrounded by the endless ocean, eclipsed by darkness in winter-time and fuelled by the eternal light of day in summer. It is funny to see the reactions. - But how come you ended up here, they ask. By all means a relevant question, not easy to answer though, within the constraints of the American three-minute conversation (Hiiii-how are you-whats up-where are you going-we should get together sometime-it's a pity I'm in a hurry-see you later-take care!). So, I often find myself dropping the Home Faberian phrase "well, life is a train of coincidences...". – A phrase that truly assumed another level of meaning when bumping into Christian The Native.

- Picture this: A young, anonymous girl, from an insignificant island, in a country unheard of, decides to go to Stanford of all universities in the US, chooses one course out of 3000, in which she happens to be seated next to one particular young man out of 20 possible, and to whom she has to engage in a more than three-minute conversation as the professor is late for the first lecture. And then it turns out that of all possible ancestors, he happens to have a great grand father from somewhere in the North of Norway, Ole Olsen, who 130 years earlier emigrates to Chicago, where he decides to change his last name because there are too many immigrants with the name Olsen or Olsson in the city already. Of all names Ole chooses the name of a place where he spent much of his childhood, the name of a beautiful beach. He adopts the name Sandvig.

- But it is strange, I respond, when his grand, grand son Christian Sandvig, tells me about his roots, I do not think there are that many beaches with the name Sandvig in North of Norway. You see, I grew up on a tiny island with a beautiful beach and the name, well, the name is Sandvik. – Isn't that a coincidence, he says, and further: I remember from my childhood a picture on the wall in my parents' house, of a little church that is supposed to be seated next to this beach. My grandmother made that photograph once she went to Norway. Is the church very little and painted white, I ask. Yes, he answers. - I even have a bottle of sand that my great grand brought with him.

- We looked at each other, amazed, wondering what conclusion to make of what seemed to be an improbable connection. And then, spontaneously, he comes up with this wonderful idea: Don't you think we should find beautiful beach here in

California to mark this occasion? What about arranging a bonfire? Subsequently, the following Sunday evening I find myself relaxing by a bonfire on Bonnie Doooms Beach with twenty Californians, listening to stories and looking up at Big Dipper demanding attention among all the stars. – Just as the bonfires at the beach back home.

- So, it is only after coming here I realized that in fact 800 000 Norwegians emigrated to 'the promised land' between 1850-1920, almost half the country's population. From where did the people come? Where did they go? What happened to them afterwards? –These are all questions ignited by the strange experience of how even a small island extends beyond time and place. It takes history to make a bonfire.