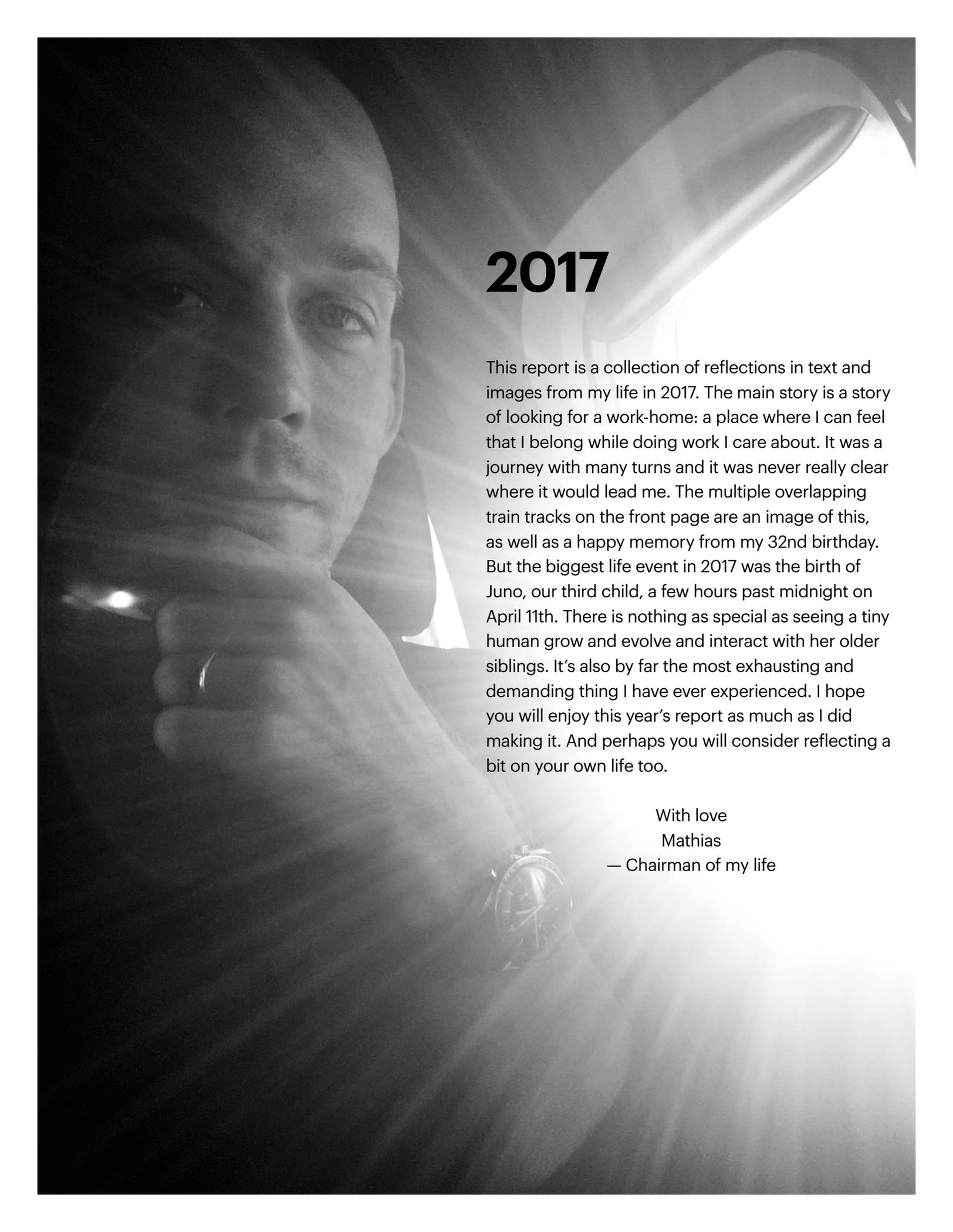


**THINK
CLEARLY**



Annual Report 2017

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2017

This report is a collection of reflections in text and images from my life in 2017. The main story is a story of looking for a work-home: a place where I can feel that I belong while doing work I care about. It was a journey with many turns and it was never really clear where it would lead me. The multiple overlapping train tracks on the front page are an image of this, as well as a happy memory from my 32nd birthday. But the biggest life event in 2017 was the birth of Juno, our third child, a few hours past midnight on April 11th. There is nothing as special as seeing a tiny human grow and evolve and interact with her older siblings. It's also by far the most exhausting and demanding thing I have ever experienced. I hope you will enjoy this year's report as much as I did making it. And perhaps you will consider reflecting a bit on your own life too.

With love
Mathias
— Chairman of my life

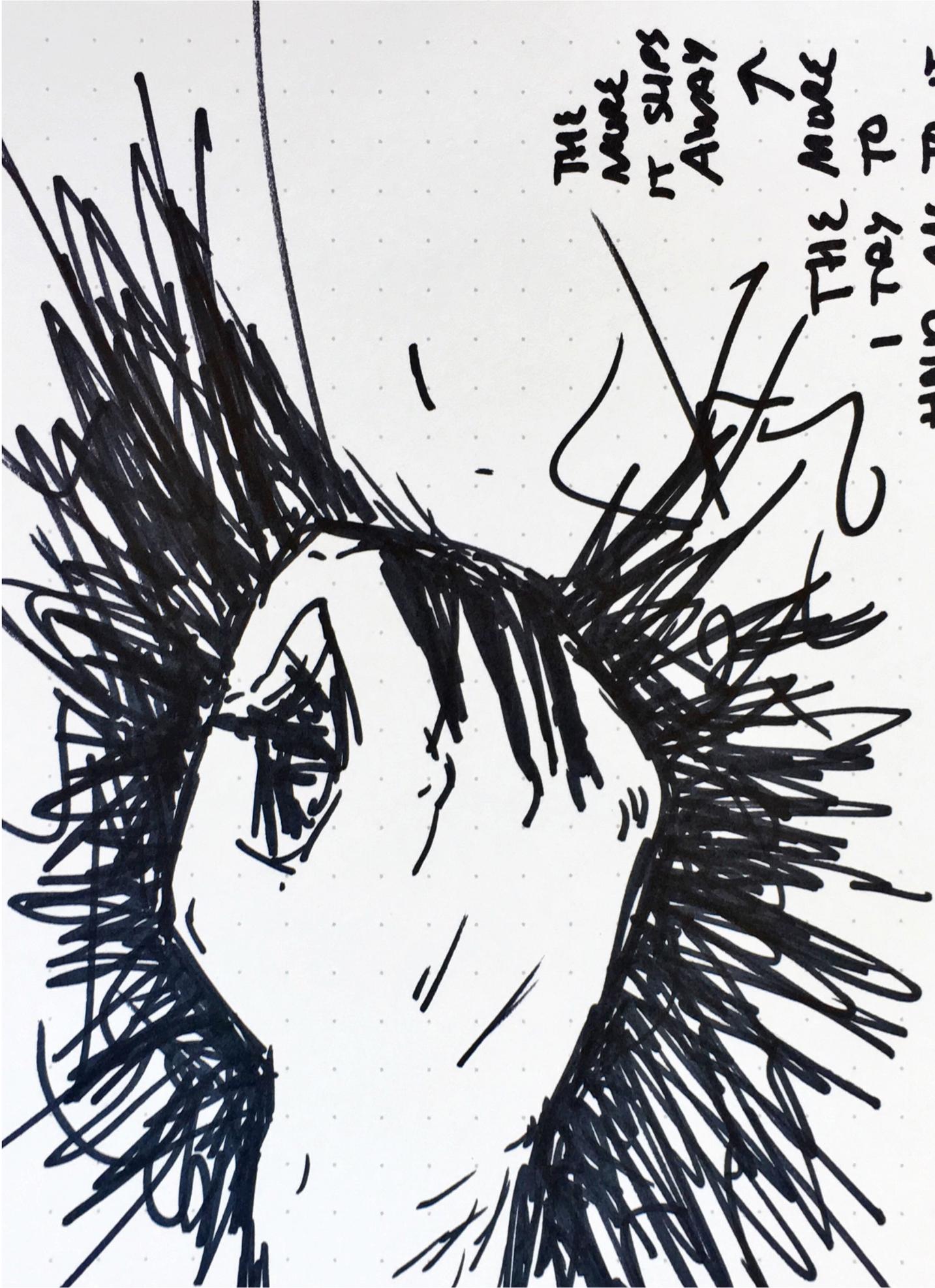
Finding a work-home

The thing I was dreaming of 12 months ago, as I was writing my annual report for 2016, was to find a place to work where I felt I could belong. A place where my diverse interests, skills and networks could become ever more integrated. A place where I would be exposed to new challenges and opportunities. I had recently started freelancing with SYPartners and I felt that the culture really resonated for me, and while I didn't explicitly write that I was hoping SYP would become a full-time job, that was certainly my hope.

And at first, things seemed to be going in the right direction. I wanted to belong, and I felt that I belonged at SYP. In February the company hosted a two-day all-company conference on the theme of Belonging, and around that time I also got asked if I wanted to start working on an additional half-time contract for a client project, so that I would be working full-time (instead of 50%), although still as a contractor. I said yes. And I loved it. I got to focus half my energy on the internal learning of the company itself, shifting culture and perception and building systems to support new behaviors, and the other half of my energy I could focus on client work with a team and a really interesting challenge. I flew out to our San Francisco office a few times and checked off a bucket list item for myself: one time I did a double red-eye, and flew out and back on the same day, bringing with me nothing but my phone, wallet, notebook and a scarf to wrap around my head to sleep. I have always wanted to try traveling so light, and it was really amazing. No worries about overhead bins, breezing through security. I loved it.

So overall it felt like I was in the right place and things were moving in the right direction. However, not all was roses. Being a contractor meant that I never really knew more than 1-2 months ahead of time, and sometimes my contract would only be renewed the last week before it expired, so throughout the year I always had a backup plan. If this didn't work out, I tried to have at least a few conversations that were already happening. This was stressful and distracting, when what I really wanted was to commit and focus. But that's how it was.

It was during this time that our second daughter and third child Juno



THE
MORE
IT SLIPS
AWAY



THE MORE
I TRY TO
HOLD ON TO IT

was born. On April 10th, while watching the season finale of Homeland with Claire Danes, Pernille started having contractions, and a few hours past midnight on the 11th Juno was born. I took some time off, but not much, because as a contractor I didn't get any pay, and we didn't have any savings, so together we decided it was best if I got back to it. About a week after we got back from the hospital Pernille started taking care of all three kids on her own. With a three year old Noah, 2 year old Uma and 1 week old Juno. The first week I would work for a few hours from a nearby coffee shop and I could come home in 5 minutes if things got out of control. But somehow she managed and the second week I was back at the office.

Then in the late spring and early summer things started shaking around work. My contract around internal learning could not be renewed, and shortly after, the firm some big projects and had to cut all contractors. The details are unimportant here. What matters is that the direction in which I had been moving for the past ten months had reached a dead-end: I was back on my own in the middle of NYC summer, when business is slow, hiring is slow, and many people are away and not responsive. And, we didn't have too much of a cash-buffer.

The first week I really dreaded what was ahead of me. I was a bit angry — not at anyone in particular — just at the situation. But I also knew what I had to do: I had to get a bunch of conversations going around potential jobs (I knew I still wanted to get a full-time job where I could focus and belong) while simultaneously building some short term business that could help me while I explored various jobs. And I knew I had to build a routine for myself and find ways to get positive energy, in a process that is demanding on many levels. So I hired a tutor to teach me french. More on that in another chapter.

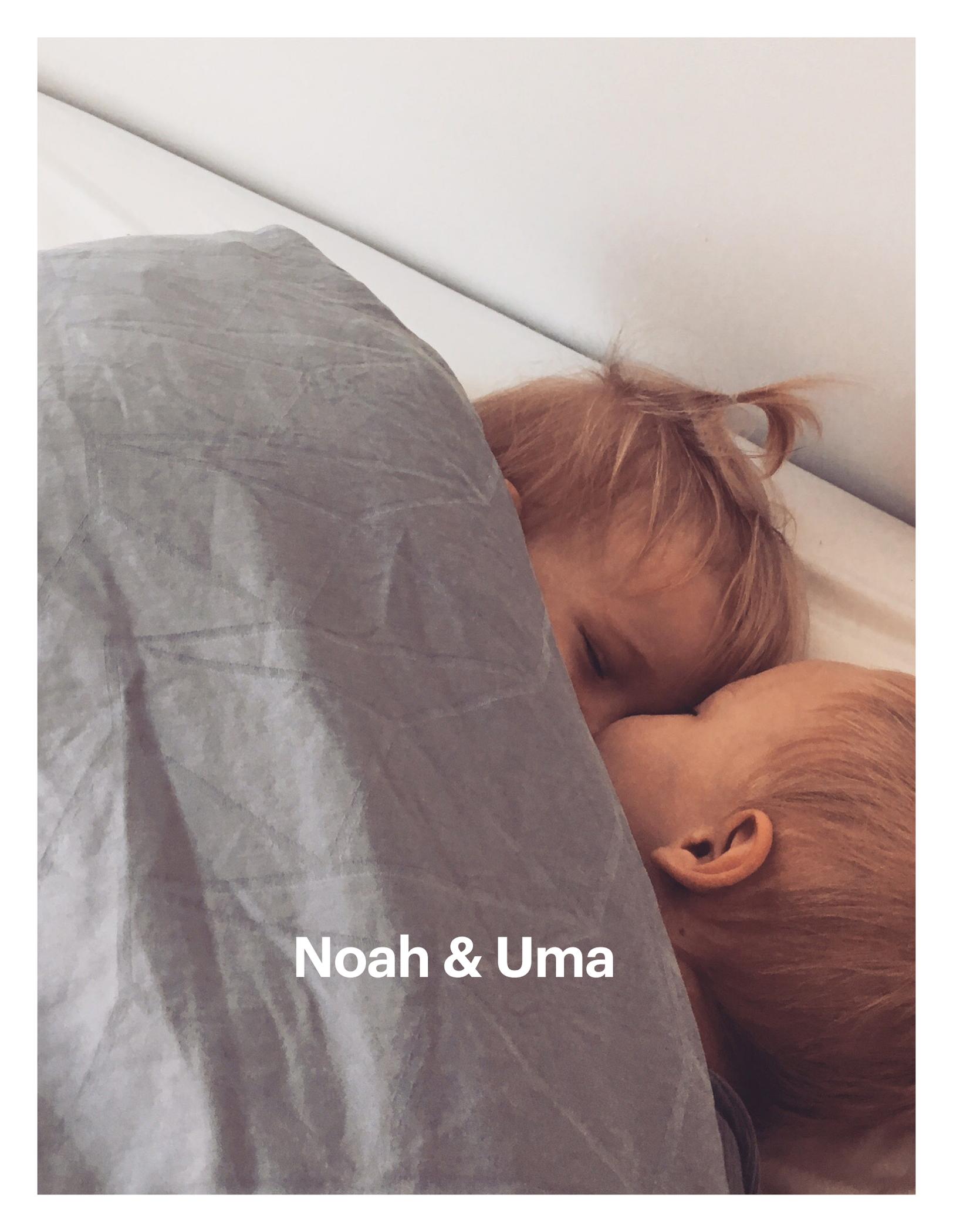
I already had a well-paid speaking gig in Amsterdam lined up for September, and within the first few weeks I got a three months contract with Google, which was not enough to cover our cost of living, but it certainly helped stem the bleeding. I hosted a facilitation master class with my friend Daniel Stillman, which was both incredibly fun and also contributed some revenue. I created a new card deck and launched it on Kickstarter, taught another class at Parsons, started doing some brand strategy work for Etsy, which evolved to become a longer journey about something else.

However, through it all, I felt not great. I felt that I was failing as a provider for my family, and at the same time I felt I wasn't doing a good enough job helping out at home. I was working half-days, and trying to help with the logistics of the kids, taking Noah to school in the morning, picking Uma up at daycare, etc. But with a nursing baby at home it was never really enough. And because I had decided in my head that I should be bringing in \$20-25,000 every month, I always felt that I was falling way short. I was being hard on myself and wearing myself out physically and mentally.

It was only in late November that I really could notice this pattern. "Such an overwhelming amount of negative thoughts" I wrote to myself on November 21st. But around that time it started to shift. I began to see how unhelpful it was to set a financial goal that I wasn't reaching and then be hard on myself. I started to think that perhaps I should celebrate that I had actually managed to provide just enough for our family of five, while working much less, and doing things that I truly loved doing. Even if we were a little bit short on cash, I could accept that.

That week I had an interview with a recruiter for a design agency where I wanted to work, and amongst many other things, she asked me what my timeline was. I told her, that I had built up enough projects in my own business that I didn't need a job right away, so that I could focus on finding the right job. Throughout the fall I had been asked a similar question a dozen times, and I had heard myself give the same answer, while at the same time hearing the voice of fear screaming in my head "I NEED A JOB NOW!" But now I felt that my answer was genuine. It was true: I had (re-)built my own business in NYC for the third time, and it was working. We were doing fine. And I had gotten to be much more involved at home.

And then I got a text message from Jessalin, my former colleague from Hyper Island: "Morning Mathias! My company is hiring and thought I would share in case you're interested in this role. Not sure if you're looking for focusing on your business. Hope you had a wonderful thanksgiving holiday!!" This was Tuesday November 28th, the day after my birthday. I had never in my life heard about the American Association of Advertising Agencies, also known as the 4A's. But the role seemed interesting. I sent my resume and two days later I was on the phone with their head of talent. The following day I had three



Noah & Uma

rounds of interviews. The next week they checked my references. And on Wednesday December 13th, I had my first day in our office, on the corner of Bryant Park.

The job itself, the role, the team, the office, the advertising industry, the challenges and opportunities, these are all chapters yet to be written. However, I want to celebrate this moment in time as a double victory: I re-built my own business and got to a point where it felt stable enough that I truly felt that I didn't actually need a steady job AND after 18 months of looking for a mutual commitment to a long term work relationship, suddenly it came to me.

Perhaps the most important part is that in the 18 months where I was looking, I was constantly trying to make myself fit to other people. I had this looming feeling that I actually belong on a different planet, but I wanted to look normal. I have made around 30 permutations of my resume, trying to fit the role of an Account Executive at Google, another one to fit the role of a Strategy Director at R/GA and one to look like an Experience Designer for Digital McKinsey. And many more variations of these. But for this job I didn't really try to be anything. I spoke from the heart. In the first call I felt I did a really bad job at explaining what I do, but they still seemed to get it. This doesn't mean that I never should have tried to fit myself. I don't subscribe to the notion that there is a singular "authentic" version of ourselves and that it naturally just comes through. I think it's much more interesting to think of myself as something I can mold like clay and shape and become. And I'm sure that all my experiments with fitting myself to others still helped me become who I am today. But it was interesting that what happened in the end was that someone else came to me and said "we want you!"



**In the spring semester
I taught Integrative
Studio 2 at Parsons
with this amazing
crew.**



After doing double red-eye flights to spend a day in San Francisco on a client work project, I felt stimulated and excited. Especially because I decided to travel without any bags. Just what fit in my pockets. But my head was also full.

In 2012 I began imagining how I might build a scaled LEGO model of a Gulfstream jet. See page 11 of my report from that year. In 2013 I built it. See page 19 from that year. This year I rebuilt to be 35% smaller and thus easier for Noah to handle and play with.



The smallest biggest change

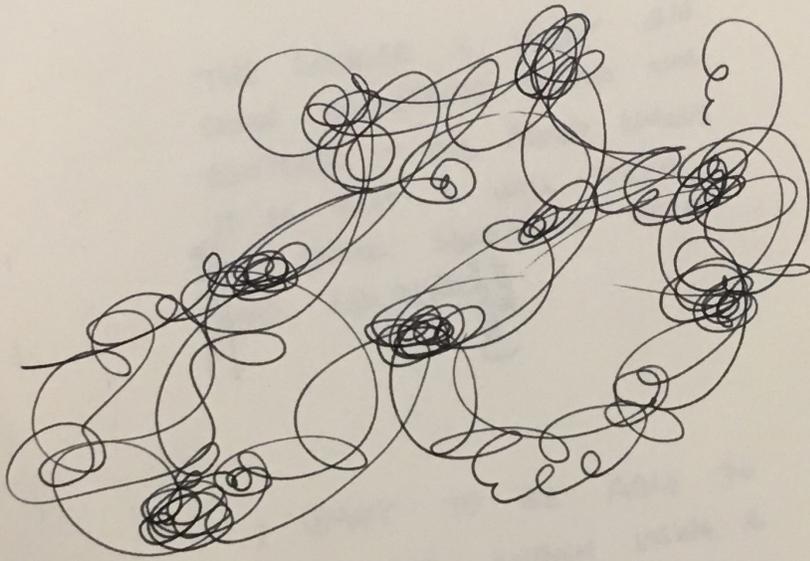
In 2016 I flew to Australia and sat next to Richard, a retired surgeon, who taught me perhaps the most valuable lesson of the year: he taught me how to hold a pen! I had been writing with pens for years. I literally made a living writing with pens. And yet, he saw that I was holding it too tightly and offered me just the right advice to change my grip. He also told me to be patient with myself. It could take 6-12 months or even more to become fully confident with a new grip. But he promised it would be worth it.

So I started practicing. Holding the pen more lightly and specifically squeezing it between middle finger and thumb and having virtually no pressure on my index finger. Try it for yourself. It feels quite different. The reason most people hold pens incorrectly these days probably comes from the use of ball point pens and pencils that require much more pressure to make a line, compared with older ink-based pens.

In early 2017 my grip had loosened and I suddenly fell in love with the idea of a fountain pen. I bought a few cheap starter pens to try it out and later invested in a nicer one. While the carbon footprint of my disposable pens is probably negligible compared to the amount of air travel I do, I still really like that I can simply fill the pen again and again. And I especially like that the tip of the pen remains the same. With my markers the tip would gradually deteriorate and eventually need replacement, so the pen felt different to write with through the cycle of use, lasting about 2 months. I'm still not fully adapted to fountain pen writing, but I am so happy that I made the switch.

The biggest reason why this story matters to me, is because it's a reminder that our daily tools have such a huge influence on the work we do and the joy we find in it. And while I certainly felt that my whole notebook and pen routine was pretty perfectly optimized, I want to always remember that in order to get something new, I must first dare to let go of what I have.

I WANT TO KNOW.
I CRAVE FOR SOME CERTAINTY.
I YEARN FOR SOMEONE TO TELL ME I'M OK.
I AM LONGING TO JUST BE AND NOT WORRY SO MUCH.



I HAVE ENTANGLED
MYSELF. CAN I
LET GO? DO I
NEED TO?

WE CAN NEVER KNOW ANYWAY.
THERE IS NO CERTAINTY.
I'M OK. I DON'T NEED OTHERS TO TELL ME,
AND YET THEY OFTEN DO.
THERE IS NOTHING THAT PREVENTS ME FROM
JUST ~~BEING~~ BEING RIGHT NOW. ALL MY
PROBLEMS ARE IMAGINARY.

**On stage in
Amsterdam,
September,
talking about the
future of data.**



soylent
400 kcal

“I don't think there is any racism in america”

I'm quite introverted and I don't find it easy to make contact with strangers, but this year I had a moment where I got over myself and was rewarded for it. I had just landed in Newark Airport after 48 hours in Amsterdam. Normally I prefer to not have much conversation with the driver and just sit quietly and watch the world go by. But I think I was too curious, and I eventually asked him how it feels for him to live in the US, given that he is a person of color, with our new president and everything that's been happening. I have really been struggling to understand, and one advice I got was to ask and listen more.

His name was Charles, and he went on to tell me about his life. He had grown up in Belgium. He had been the only dark skinned kid in his class. Nobody wanted to sit next to him. Nobody wanted to play with him. Even the teachers didn't really engage with him. He didn't get into much detail but this had clearly been extremely painful. As a young adult he traveled back to visit his extended family in Ghana and on the plane he sat next to a young lady from Russia. She was uneasy with his presence, but eventually spoke to him. She asked if he was going to hurt her. He said that he would never hurt her, and asked why she would even think so. She had never met a dark skinned man before and had always been told that they were dangerous and would hurt her. On that trip he had decided that he never wanted to go back to Belgium. Fortunately he had an uncle who lived in New Jersey and he moved here when he was in his early twenties. He loved it here. He worked, spent time with his friends, parties.

Then he told me a story about his life here. How his friend and room mate had gotten into trouble with their landlord (white). Charles had tried to help and mediate. The landlord eventually called the cops. Still he tried to mediate and help out. At first it seemed that it all got resolved but then the room mate damaged the landlord's grill. Again, Charles tried to help. The police came again and this time the so-called friend blamed it on Charles and so did the landlord. At first the police officers (white and hispanic) were hesitant to do anything, but

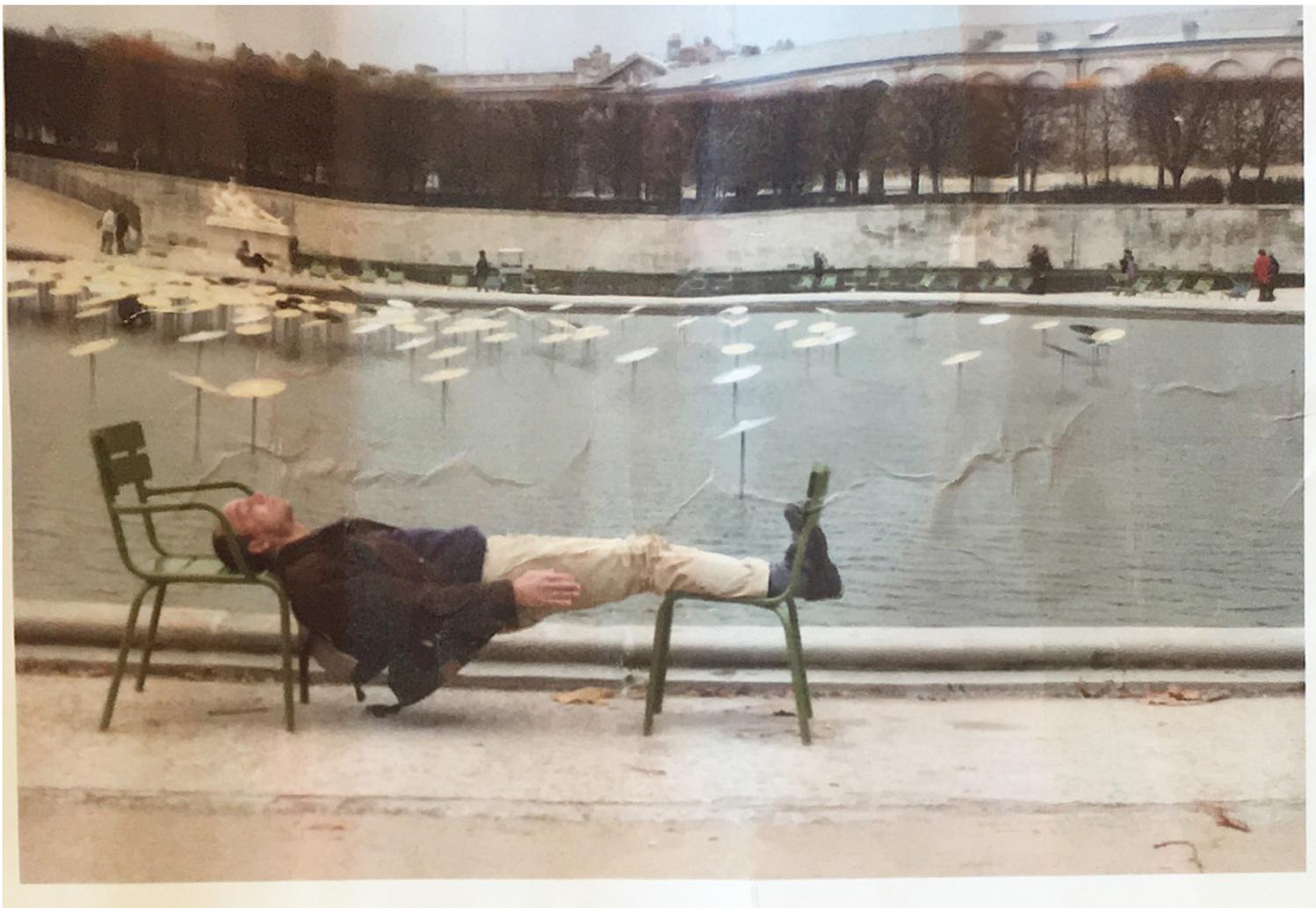
they ended up arresting him and taking him to the station, charged with damaging property. Of course all charges were cleared, Charles borrowed money from his uncle to buy a new grill (\$150). And yet, his criminal record still shows that he has been arrested. This has been a problem when looking for work, because even when there is a perfectly valid explanation and he has the papers from the judge that all charges were dropped, he has still been arrested. It is even getting in the way of his pending green card application.

Listening to his stories made me feel both sad and frustrated. He had been wrongly accused of doing something and even if he has actually done it, something so small that it seems improper to arrest anyone for it. He was now suffering the consequences of a system that is unforgiving even if he wasn't the actual sinner. Yet, what was most surprising was that he didn't complain about any of this. It didn't seem to bother him that much. He talked about it more just as a fun story that had happened and now it was a bit frustrating with the paperwork. A nuisance, like having a neighbor who plays loud music. The pain that had defined his scale of suffering was in his childhood. I will never forget the last thing he told me before he dropped me off. Almost as a way of summarizing the whole story he said: "I don't think there is any racism in the US."

I certainly don't believe that this statement is correct. But I believe that in his personal experience, what he saw here was on a different scale than what he had experienced before. What this helped me realize was that we can never understand someone's experience of their life and situation from the outside. Only by asking and listening.



In 2017 I had some challenging fatherhood moments. I shared this on Instagram and Martijn reached out, offering help and counsel via Skype. Five months later we met for coffee in Amsterdam. A new friend.



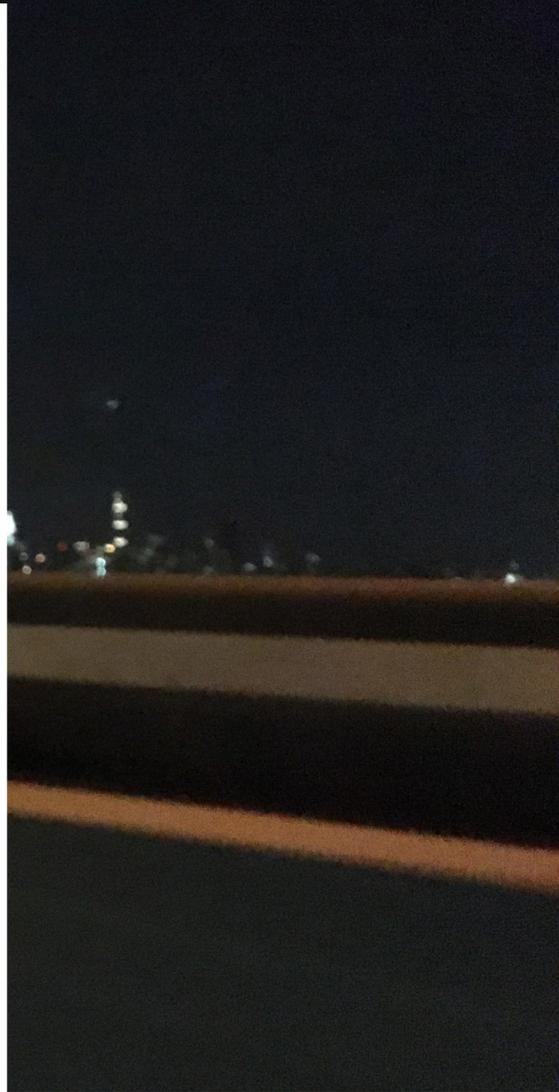
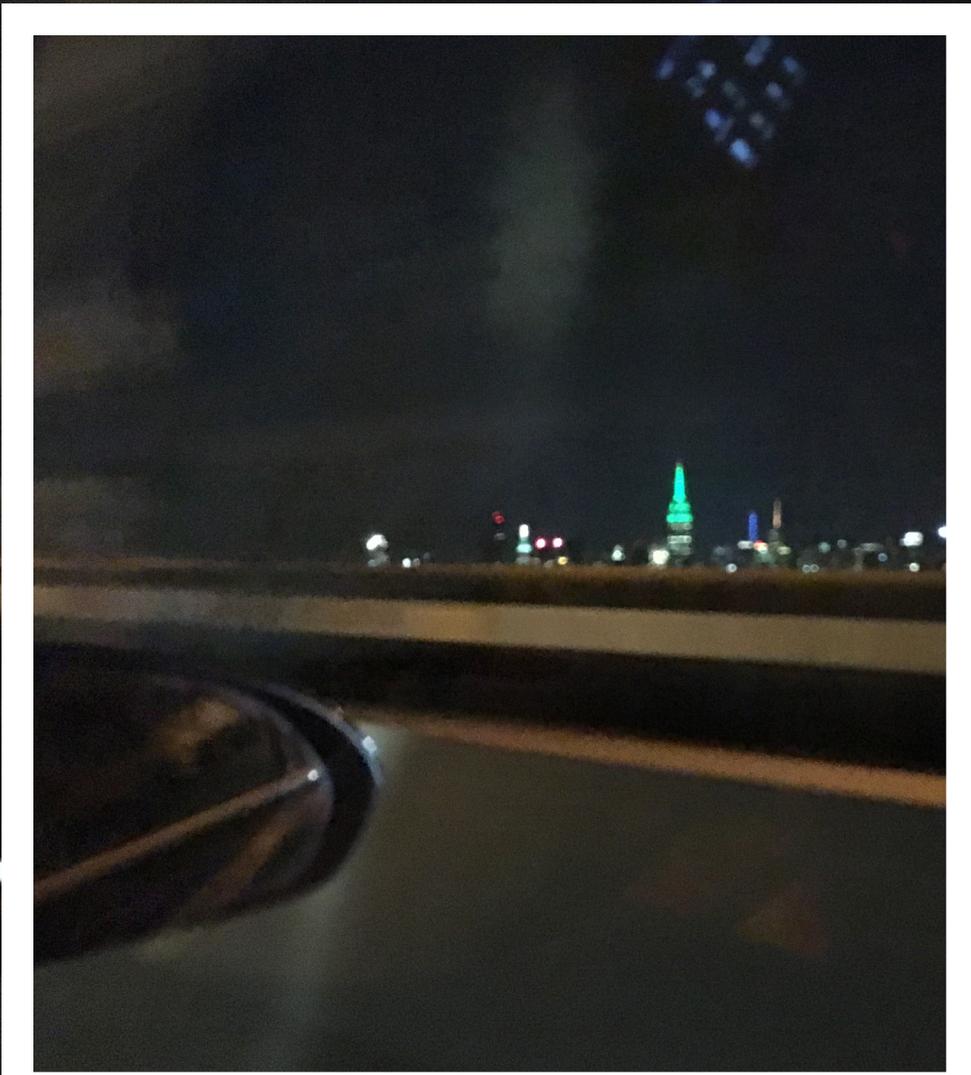
I'm still much inspired by my own father. On the next page you will find a short homage I wrote about him for father's day.

Father

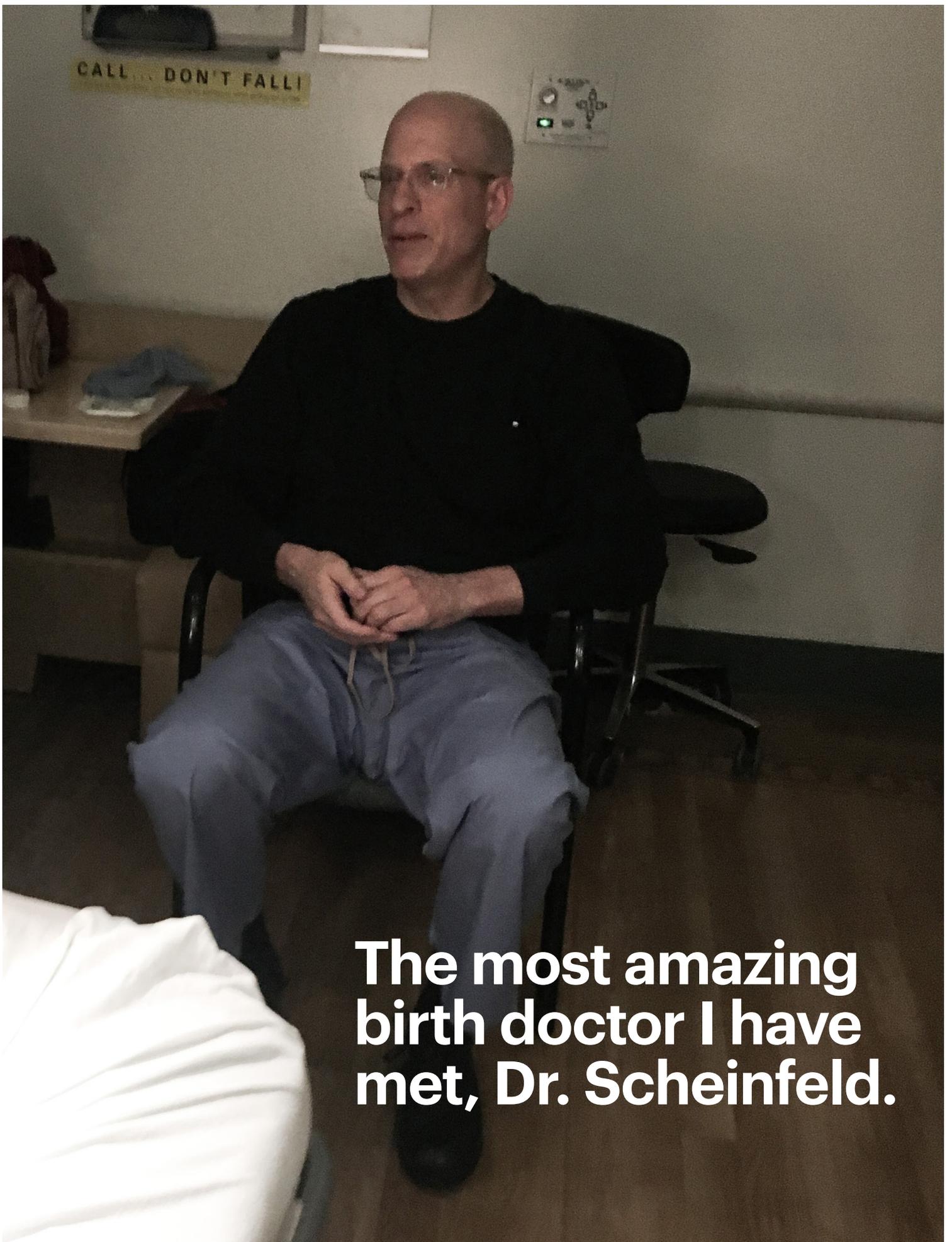
Today is father's day in Denmark so I want to tell you about my dad, and what he has taught me. All kids, of course, see their parents as super heroes. My dad, however, is an actual superhero :-). I think this photo captures it perfectly. Here he is, in his late 50s, on vacation in Paris with my mom Birgitte, enjoying the comfort of a make-believe bench. What does this moment reveal about him? What do you see? Certainly he still has significant core strength, because I'm certain that he was there for a good few minutes. His physical strength, however, is easily dwarfed by his mental and spiritual strength, even if he never talks about that stuff...It's just obvious. Anyone who has met him will probably agree that you always feel safe when he is around. His strength is obvious. But it's not actually the most important thing about him. More important than strength, in this photo I see a man who is playing with life itself. He doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks. He sees two chairs and imagines a bench. He thinks it's funny. Is it funny? Even if it's not funny to you, he doesn't care. Because he doesn't do it to make you laugh. He doesn't do it to please anyone. He thinks it's fun. He does it. He becomes a bench in Paris. With no higher meaning. No deeper purpose. It's not an act. It's not really something he does. It's simply who he is and how he moves through life. He is dedicated to this moment. He has raised six kids. Pursued a long career in agricultural research. I love him. I admire him very much. He makes me feel safe to play in my own life, and know that he always has my back. And he teaches me what I most want to give to my own kids: a father who is excited about life, pursuing his dreams and playing in the moment, with whatever and whoever is there. Every day I try to be that.



Life frequently felt like this. It felt like I often had to carry a lot. It also gave me a chance to feel really strong.



**April 11th on the way to
NYU Langone Medical
Center**



**The most amazing
birth doctor I have
met, Dr. Scheinfeld.**

A new baby and a
happy third time mom





**Taking all three kids
to the playground
alone for the first
time.**

Accelerated learning

As I transitioned out of a steady work routine at SYPartners and into job-searching and consulting with more flexibility, I knew that I would need some weekly check-points to calibrate and plan around. It's much harder to plan something in a completely open calendar. I also knew I needed something that would give me some good energy and stimulation and last but not least, that would be a great story to tell whenever people ask me "what's new?" Especially when job searching, that question can be tough. All that's new and important to you, is that you still don't have a job. So, I decided to hire a private tutor to teach me how to speak french. Private lessons twice a week via Skype. It was incredible. I had never had any formal training in french, but my teacher had such a powerful way of teaching, based on how kids actually acquire language, as opposed to grammar and spelling and rules.

I did decide to take a break after 15 lessons, because at that point my consulting and family life, was so demanding that learning a new language on top was just more than I could handle. But I really can't wait to get started again. Especially because so much of what I do, including my new job, is focused around how we learn, so being actively engaged as a learner myself is a critical point in remaining humble about the process and to have empathy with the learner's experience.

Other things I have learned:

I still worry too much. And I understand rationally that I don't have to worry so much. That it doesn't help me.

I also often get stuck in a holding pattern, waiting for something from someone else. It's always better when I stop waiting and just begin doing what I want to do. Close to the end of the year I started a podcast. It's still so new and evolving so I will reflect more on it next year. For now, what matters is that it is very fun to do.



During the summer Pernille travelled to Denmark with Juno and I was home alone with Noah & Uma. My friend Omri came to visit us. He was a big hit!



I'm still baking. On January 1st I baked #583. However, the most special event was when a man named Peter reached out, asking if he could check Kershaw, his sourdough, into the Sourdough Inn while he travelled Europe. What began as an elaborate joke in 2014 is now a legitimate hotel for sourdoughs.

A photograph of a man with a beard and a young child sitting on his shoulders. The man is looking down and to the left, while the child looks towards the camera. The background includes a window with a red chair and a wire shelving unit with books. The text "The best. And sometimes the worst." is overlaid at the bottom.

**The best. And
sometimes the worst.**



It's in the way he looks at me.



Juno



**I created a new
deck of visual
cards called
Strategy Cards.**

FaceTime Friendship

I've always preferred spending time with people face to face rather than talking through technology. It's like those marginal milliseconds of lag and the lower resolution are still enough to significantly impart the experience. However, I found this year that in certain situations this can be offset by an increase in frequency of contact. Here's what happened: Helle is one of my best friends from Denmark. We went to college together, co-wrote a bunch of articles on fashion and eventually built a small business. She lives in Copenhagen, and we have stayed in touch after we moved to NYC. She has been here to visit several times with work and I always see her when I'm there. But in the end it's only once or twice a year. This fall we tried something new. I'm not sure how we got it started, but we simply agreed to call each other frequently, without planning it first. Zero scheduling. Just call. 95% of the time the other person is unavailable. And there is no obligation to pick up or to try to call back. And if you only have a minute to talk then that's fine too. Just try whenever one of us feels like it. It's been such a blessing. Some weeks we have spoken at length almost every day. It feels so fluid and natural. And because we now speak frequently there is no time spent on catching up. We can jump straight to talking about what's immediate. It quickly began to feel like back in college when we would naturally see each other almost every day. Obviously we can't have relationship like this with most people. There are just not enough hours in the day for that. And neither do I want to. But for a very special friend who lives far away, this has been such a gift.

THE THINK
CLEARLY
NEWSLETTER



THINK CLEARLY
AS A BOOK

**I haven't written a book,
yet. But I have a clearer
idea of how I want it to feel.**

FREE YOURSELF
OF ~~A CONST~~ THE
NEED TO HAVE
A CONSISTENT
SELF-NARRATIVE

- SMALL SET OF MATERIALS + PRINCIPLES
- FOCUS ON REASONS AND ACTIVITIES
- ORIGINAL BUT IMITATIVE PRODUCTION
(E. THAIL, MADE WITH LOVE)
- FAST IS JUST REMAINING WITH SOME
- SIMPLE AND CLEAR PRODUCTION
TIMELINE AND DELIVERABLES
- VISIBLE CRITERIA
- SIMPLE, TACTILE, FUNNY,
BRIEF, AND SOME ENERGY



All the kids

During the fall I taught Managing Creative Projects and Teams at Parsons, and one team created a set of cards that captured their learnings from the semester.

LEARNING CARDS

*Tanvi Kanakia
Abhishek Nair
Jennifer Hsieh
Cristina Robles*

The cards
the Des
followed
we had
The cards c
that could be
ent stages of
plan



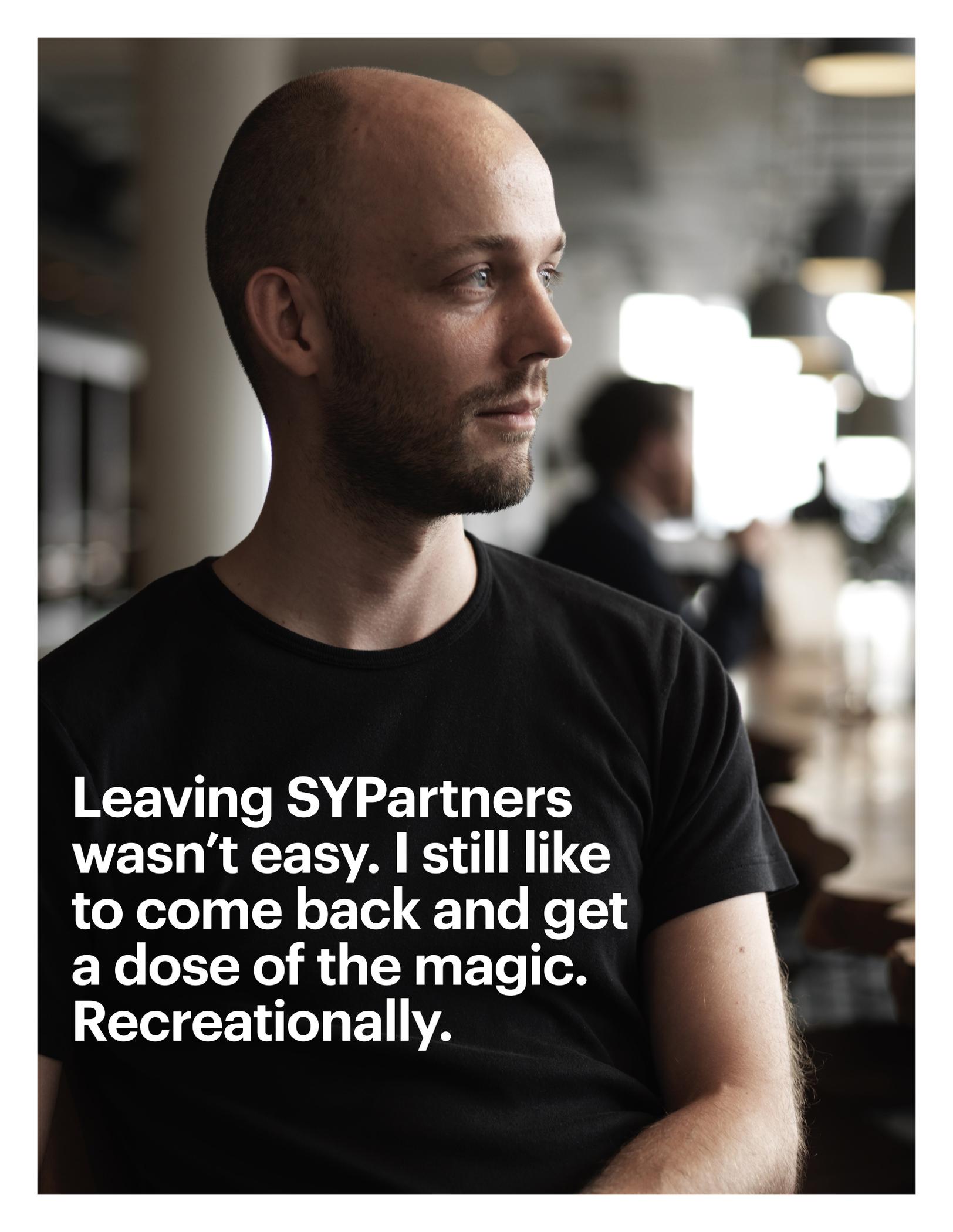


MATHIAS

Together with Daniel Stillman, I ran a 2-day master class in facilitation. One exercise was to draw our coat of arms, and I drew this: heart to heart connection, my core tools, my spirit animal, and a quote from Jørgen Leth that translates to "See what happens" which is becoming a central motto for me. When he says it, the stress is on the "see" so it's not a passive sentiment. The active part is to see. To really see and experience what happens. That resonates a lot for me.



Crew

A man with a short beard and balding head is shown in profile, looking towards the right. He is wearing a black t-shirt. The background is a blurred indoor space, possibly a cafe or office, with warm lighting and other people out of focus.

**Leaving SYPartners
wasn't easy. I still like
to come back and get
a dose of the magic.
Recreationally.**



In 2018 I want to really explore working within the frame of a steady job. To lead and grow a team. To share and teach and coach and guide. I want to take my kids climbing. I will fly much less, and trust that this is something I will do again later. I want to sing and dance more. Both literally and metaphorically. Be silly and laugh.



**Thank you for being part
of my life.**



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