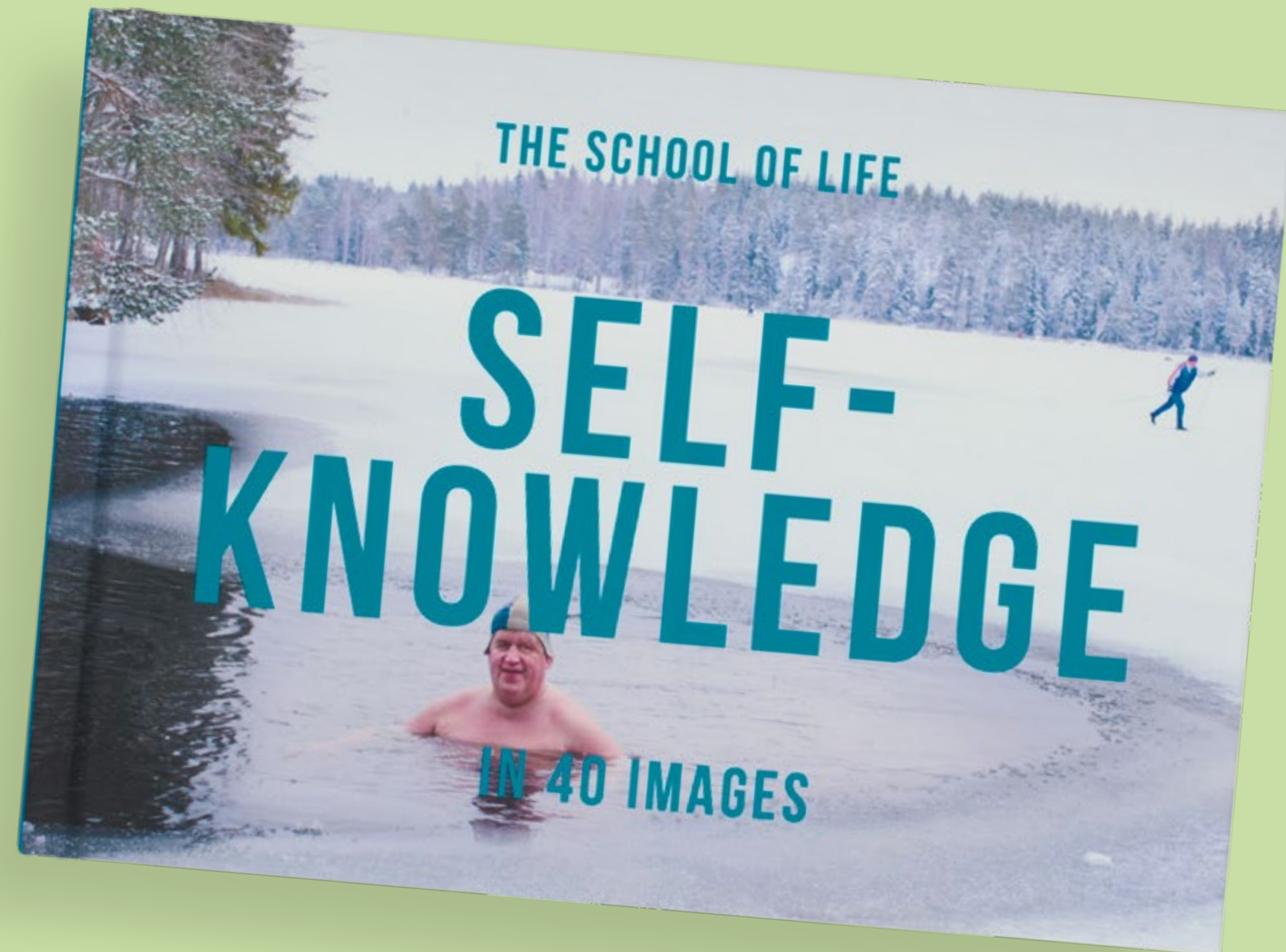


An extract from



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EARLY ON IN EVERY LIFE, a child will look up and – implicitly – ask the world: ‘Am I OK? Do I deserve goodwill and sympathy? Am I on track?’

And, most commonly, the person who first answers these questions is a parent. Perhaps this parent happens to be generous and sympathetic; they are warm and understanding of the challenges of being alive – in which case the child develops an easy conscience. In the years to come, they appraise themselves with benignancy; they don’t continuously have to wonder whether they have a right to exist. They are comfortably on their own side.

But if the parent is more punitive, the picture grows darker: approval is always uncertain, there is a constant fear of being called arrogant or of being upbraided for something one hadn’t thought about.

What’s tricky is that consciences don’t stay neatly identified with those who kick-started them. It’s rare to find an adult who actively still wonders what their parents think. But we still wonder about our value in more general terms. It’s just that we may, without noticing, have taken the question somewhere else – very often, to a particularly harsh modern figure of authority: media and social media.

To this pitiless arena, the self-doubting person now directs all their fears of unworthiness and panicked desire for reassurance. To a system set up to reward sadism and malice, they constantly raise their phones and implicitly ask: ‘Do I deserve to exist? Am I OK? Am I beautiful or respectable enough?’

And, because social media is built on the troubles of the individual soul, the verdict is never a reliable yes. One is never done with cycles of fear and reassurance-seeking. Every time their spirits sink (which is often), the self-doubting sufferer picks up their phone and begs to know whether they have permission to go on.

If this might be us, we should grow curious about, and jealous of, people who are free. They are so because someone long ago settled the question of what they were worth, and the answer has seemed solid ever since. Social media is a roar in the next valley, not a mob in their own mind.

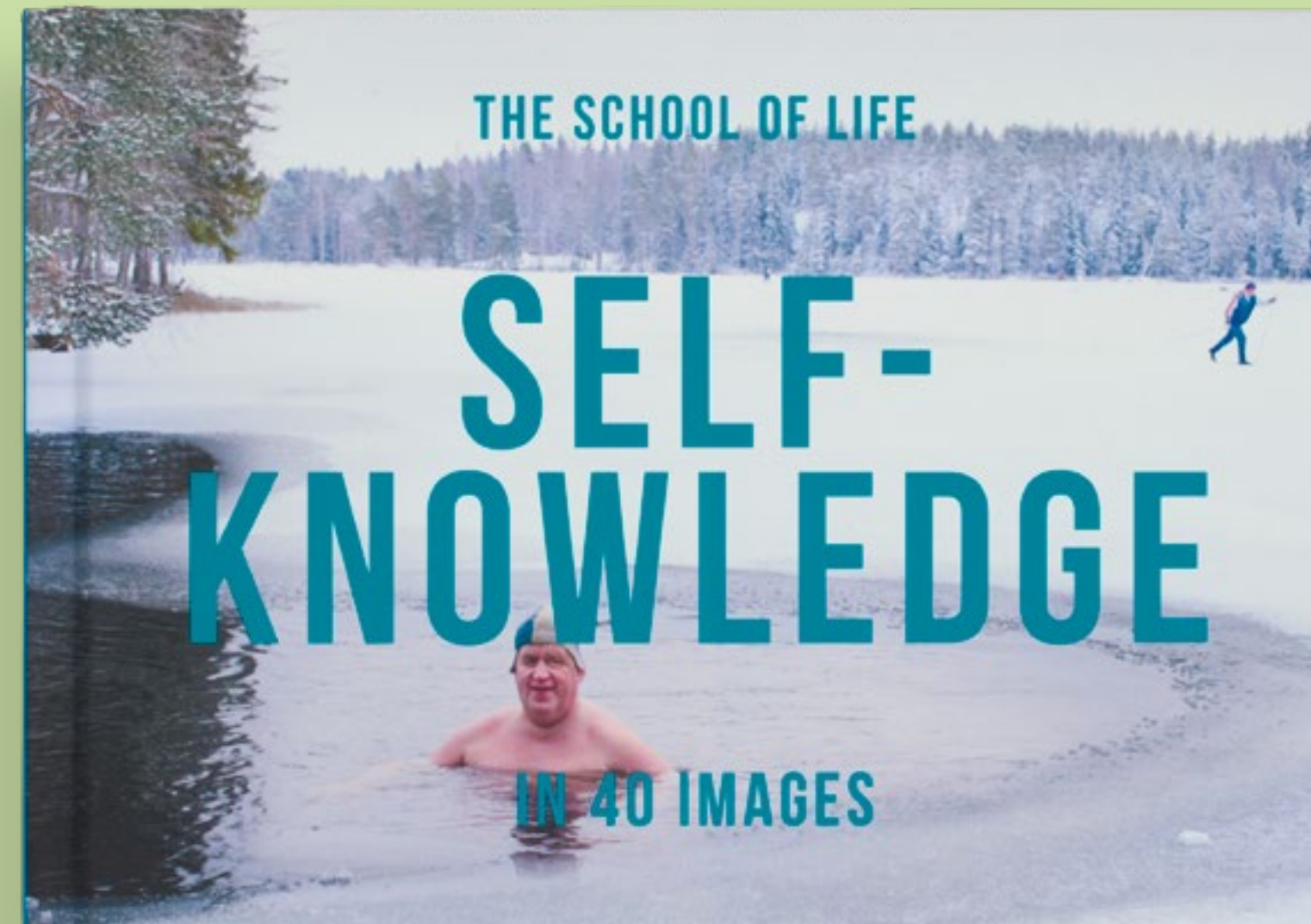
Learning from these calm souls won’t just involve deleting a few apps. We will have to go further upstream, back to the baby self, whose alarmed enquiries we must quiet once and for all with ample doses of soothing and longed-for kindness.



Catherine Balet, from the ‘Strangers in the Light’ series, 2009



Nadav Kander, *Interruption I*, from 'The Parade' series, 2002



IT'S AN ENORMOUS PRIVILEGE to have an adolescence – and, to an extent rarely spoken about, not everyone gets the chance to have one. Adolescence isn't just a particular time in one's second decade, and it won't unfold automatically simply when one reaches 14 or 17-and-three-quarters.

Adolescence properly understood is a state in which we're able to explore – with courage and newfound independence – who we might be outside of the projections and mental dictates placed upon us with enormous ingenuity and great force by our parents.

Parents are the greatest propagandists that any of us will ever meet – and part of their genius is that we rarely know what they are up to. Below the surface they are engaged in a ruthless and ongoing attempt to sell us a version of reality: to tell us what we are 'really' like, what life is truly about – and who they have been and what their motives are. It goes without saying that some of their ideas will be eminently correct, but the function of adolescence is to take a good long look at, and deal with, the ones that aren't.

Adolescence is an initially inarticulate and then gradually more discerning protest against everything that has come to feel false, ill-fitting and superfluously applied to our identities since we were born. We may realise, as we progress through adolescence, that we really aren't interested in particular sides of the workplace that our parents have held in high esteem, that we don't care about a given approach to morality or vision of politeness and goodness.

Good parents are secure enough not to mind; they can accept that their child has turned into a separate person. They can even take it if their children are furious for a while and see all their incompetence and stupidity without a filter of sentimentality or fear: what clever people they are to be able to perceive things so distinctly! What a tribute to one's parenting to allow such loathing to play out!

The difficulty lies with the parents who brook no such opposition, who are too vengeful, depressed or anxious to tolerate dissent and who force us to disown bits of ourselves in order to retain their love.

The good news is that it's never too late for an adolescence. We can start to have one as soon as we realise our right to define ourselves away from parental laws. We can even do it in secret. No one will have to know the critical task that is at play beneath our sober, middle-aged facades: a belated search for our true selves.

56

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