

Laila Ingrid Rasmussen: The Star

My father was a hero. He was a sailor. Just think. Sailing the seven seas, beneath the stars. Feeling the ship forcing its way through the waves. Ten thousand tonnes of metal beneath the endless overarching sky, distant planets, galaxies.

Hear the engine throb, imagine the huge rotating blades propelling the ship onwards through the waters. Picture the hull of the ship, the rust-red iron with shellfish and long rippling streamers of seaweed. Shoals of glinting fish with transparent fins, and look further down in the depths, far down into the bottomless dark; creatures whose names we don't even know live here. They fight, they eat, get eaten and breed. They live and die. Just think what dramas are played out between life and death. Just think ...

My father, the hero, he didn't think about it. The skies or the sea, infinity. He lived his life deep in the ship's throbbing heart. He was first engineer. Sweat trickled off his brow and ran down into his eyes. He shovelled coal. He kept all the machinery moving. The engine room was his domain, his kingdom, where he reigned absolutely and tirelessly on his journey between the continents of the world.

Here he ate tinned mackerel in tomato sauce, and he fried eggs on a primus stove. Here he rested, hands clasped behind his head, on his bunk in the little cubby-hole at under the iron stairs, behind the oval door that couldn't be closed.

Here he sat at the scratched mahogany table and rubbed his stubble while he smoked a cigarette, and after a while he leant back and rested his head against the grey iron wall and smiled with the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and his eyes screwed up against the smoke.

It would be a long time before I was thought about – and perhaps you, reading this, weren't thought about either – or his grandchildren, who would one day boast of his exploits, just like I have in mind to do now.

Patience, dear reader. This is the candid story of a father, my father. Even though I wasn't yet born – and according to my parents should just have been a stain on the sheet below the red ceiling light in the bedroom behind the yellow oilcloth curtains – I know everything, as if I was, although it sounds improbable, with him throughout his entire life.

And is it not, if you think about it, actually probable that I *was* there – let's say as a possibility.

Could it not be that the creation of the world, this galaxy we call the Milky Way, the creation of the whole universe, Big Bang itself held the possibility that you and I and all humankind were there already, if nothing else then as a potential, a possibility.

But is everything really so predestined?

The glinting blue ocean to every side, as far as the eye could see, waves gently pitching, rocking and sighing like a huge intake of breath and the sun at its zenith above the equator.

My father didn't see any of this. Because my father was busy shovelling coal, and no one could beat him at that. One shovelful after the other.

The furnace roared and thundered. The light from the flames danced restlessly across the floor, and the rhythmic twisting and turning of brash colours even carried on up the walls and across the ceiling. Red and orange, fluttering, coiling in close embrace or, with an affronted evasive manoeuvre, dashing apart again. See them ducking, tiny little teases, and then quick as a flash up again to crane their necks. The drumming unremitting throbbing and the sound of the shovel digging deep into the mound of coal, brief pause, and then the rattle as the lumps slid off the blade and blazed a strident yellow.

It was much like that when my father met my mother at an open-air dance held in the centre of Copenhagen. Oh, that hectic glowing city, setting for the sailor's excesses when dreams and longings saved up on the vast open sea can finally be released.

Hear the music, the rhythm to quicken the pulse; highhat, highhat. Drum rolls. A compelling saxophone. A strident trumpet. Long strings of rocking, hopping Chinese lanterns. Red, orange, yellow and the fitful bobbing of headlights as cars drive past and someone hoots and shouts something bawdy out of the window.

The beat of the bass drum. Copenhagen by night. How exotic. Think of that. Think and feel how your blood courses faster through your veins at the thought. How it flows freely and rises, until your cheeks are no longer sunken, pale, but stained with a hectic flush. It roars, it buzzes. The electric wires quiver, telephone cables crackle above the cobblestone streets, signals between pylons hailing a star in the sky.

Come. Come to the party. Come. There's a dance in the city hall square, grab yourself a girl and swing her high into the night air, feel her waist between your hands. The shiny fabric of her frock stretched across her hips. The glinting sandals with improbably narrow gold straps.

What a feast of painted toenails, slender ankles, long and slightly curved calves, and the knees, exotic, almost primitive, angular or pointed, like something that pops up unexpectedly from the sand drifting in the desert, and onwards ... further up, hardly visible suspenders under petticoats, and the moon, the good-old almost-full moon hanging right above the tower of the city hall, and a little way off: the lure players stand on their column gaping, verdigris green behind the ears.

My father, let's call him Thorkild, a Don Juan who should be able to light the fire of any girl, and doesn't a sailor have a girl in every port? He's standing at the bar, of course, his broad hand around a glass of beer and the other deep in his pocket, nonchalant, and he spots her instantly in the crowd, catches her innocent eyes across the tightly intertwined couples on the dancefloor, she looks away at once, and he is touched. Feels it in his heart, an extra beat, an irregular rhythm.

But she is young. Not much more than 16-17 years old, her cheeks are still plump, dimples appear now and then when she talks to her girlfriend,

tilts her head, listens, casts a fleeting almost random glance across the dancefloor towards the bar, smiles shyly, looks down and smooths a crease in her dress.

He prods his mate with his elbow. And she's gone, vanished behind the swaying, pitching mass of shimmering dress fabric. The hard gleam of paste jewellery hurts your eyes. And close by, so close that he can feel the heat spreading in waves: a woman's hectically wriggling backside, her pouting lips and ice-blue gaze, mysterious behind their eyelashes, as she firmly half-turns her dance partner so she has a better view and can size him up. My father leans to the side, looks past her and cranes his neck.

– And where did the girl go? He rubs his chin.

– Damn it. His mate turns round. It's Harry, his sailor friend, his crony. His companion in uninhibited thirsty drunkenness when the good ship Teddy calls in at port, and they swing onto the wharf with eyes fixed on the next harbour watering hole. Singapore. Manila. Havana. Cigar in the corner of his mouth. My father smiles broadly. They clang their glasses together, the beer froths.

– Cheers, mate. Bottoms up ... They empty their glasses and slam them down on the bar counter. My father raises his hand and embraces the whole universe with that simple, familiar gesture. The twinkling of the stars at the bottom of a glass. Cigarette smoke meanders in upward spirals, outwards, as if driven by a mysterious force, maybe the same one that at the beginning of time caused the planet to spin, and look, it's still spinning.

– Waiter! Another round ... I spotted a girl. He turns his back to the bar. The dancing couples gesticulate in time to the music, their hands whirling above their heads.

The waiter rings the bell. Someone jeers and drums the bar counter with his fists.

– I can't see her now. He looks from side to side, his eyes wander along the rows of parked cars and the white railing around the dancefloor. It

bounces and rumbles with a hollow sound, the girls are swung round and land in an embrace. The lanterns bob up and down on the cables.

Harry nods and slaps my father on the shoulder, mumbles with misty eyes, hums a tune while he pats his pockets, cigar ash drops down the front of his shirt. My father catches the melody, they press their foreheads together, laugh, sing ... *and a bit for Susanne, Birgitte and Hanne ...*

The waiter bangs a tap into a fresh barrel. The Tuborg woman smiles in her cardboard dress behind the bar, the tap hisses, and the waiter fills glasses and puts them in rows on the counter.

The cool glasses, familiar and smooth to the touch. A gleam of light, golden and warm.

– Cheers then, my friends. My father tips back his head, drinks.

The bar is awash with beer, transient froth that flares up, collapses, disappears. The edge of the bar is dripping. Coolly tempting. The sea is still in their bodies. The rolling movement of waves ... *and Anne-Merete and Molly and Lis.*

– Drink up, my friend. There are plenty of girls here. Harry tilts his head back and drinks. The cigar stub smoulders in the ashtray. The glow ebbs into itself and dies out pitifully. He dries the corners of his mouth and fumbles in his breast pocket for a fresh cigar. He pulls one out reverently, holds it in both hands as if it was a kitten, he sniffs it with heartfelt satisfaction and kisses the red band.

It occurs to my father that Harry has lips like an African. He is pale and white as a painted clown in a circus ring, but his lips are ... big, enormous, and that's not an observation he's going to keep to himself.

– You've got lips like an African, he says.

– Like hell I have, growls Harry, and thrusts the cigar in his mouth, still looking at it, wall-eyed.

– You've got lips like an African, insists my father and points. I've never noticed that before. He laughs. – Hah hah, he calls Knud over, the waiter,

shouts to Bent who is standing on the other side of the bar making up to the waitress.

– Has he or has he not? he shouts.

– Look. He holds Harry by the back of his neck, twists and turns his head and points.

– He's got lips like an African! He's half Hottentot.

– He has too, says Knud admiringly. – Cheers to that, they bang their glasses together.

– I object, says Harry, but makes no attempt to get free. My father has a firm grip on him. Harry chews on his cigar and rummages in his pockets.

– He's got the thickest lips north of Cap Horn, he has, bawls my father. – He's a gob. The waiter nods.

– A round in the gob, shouts my father. The waiter serves up.

– But where did you get them? shouts Bent.

The girl with the wriggling backside snuggles up to the bar and looks at my father sleepily with her ice-blue eyes, a hand on his shoulder.

– He won them at poker, says my father. – Last time we put in to Havana. We were right up the creek. We were fleeced. I lost my watch. He shows his bare wrist. – Pay packet went the same way, into the pocket of that enormous African, a trumpeter in a brass band that had just played at a rather shoddy tavern with outdoor tables and stained tablecloths.

It was getting late, the other musicians had already pulled out ... a weird bunch they were, the bass player only had one eye and the drummer didn't have a thumb on his right hand, no, he damn well didn't, he had a special technique when he played, held the stick in a funny awkward kind of way. It gave the band a distinctive sound, a distinctive irregular lightness in the rolls. They were famous for it. He was brilliant with his four fingers. But he held the cards in a suspicious way.

Heinrich von Knudsen, you know, the one who was second mate on Brush, he didn't like it. He claimed the drummer was cheating. They got into a scrap, Heinrich got one in the gob, the drummer got one on the chin

and keeled over, so then Heinrich grabbed the stick and smacked him one over his four fingers.

Later on they went to the bar to have a glass. He drank with his left hand ... Cheers to that! Cheers ... with his left hand ...

– And now the right, shouts Bent. Everyone drinks. The girl takes the glass out of my father's hand and drains it. She looks at him over the rim, puckers up her lips and shakes her head, as her hand creeps in under his shirt. She's got damned long fingernails.

– Harry and I were left with the trumpeter. He was determined. He was on a winning streak. We'd had a few, but I was clear-headed as the day is long, I was sure it would turn at some point. It always turns sooner or later. I could feel it in my big toe, my poker toe. It was aching and it's never wrong.

Want a bet? Anyone want a bet? No, right ... Trumpeter got a straight, it occurred to me that he always won on a straight.

I felt my inside pocket, the wallet was shrinking. I gave Harry a look to ask if we should carry on. He nodded faintly without taking his eyes off the trumpeter ... he was very interested in those lips.

– Isn't that right, Harry? My father brushes a finger across his lips. Harry lolls and nods. The others laugh.

– Yes, it's not that ... he had some incredible cheeks too ... well, but the night was warm and humid, the Caribbean girls so pretty, so pretty, only now it wasn't us but the trumpeter they were hanging on, fiddling with his shoulders and tugging at his hair.

– So we carried on with the game, and then there was this monkey that kept jumping down onto the table and nicking our drinks ... do you remember that, Harry? He shakes Harry by the scruff of his neck. He looks into the girl's ice-eyes and puts a finger to her mouth.

– It sat in the palm tree hanging down over our table, screeched, scratched itself so the air was thick with fleas.

– At first I hardly noticed it. I was concentrating on the game. There’s a damn thing, I thought, the speed those drinkies are disappearing. I called over the waiter, we drank rum, didn’t cost a bean, he came with a tray, but as soon as he’d put the drink on the table, down jumps the monkey, bottoms up with the glass and up in the tree again. And there it sat screeching, cackling, shaking its head from side to side, like it was laughing at us. Chucked wads of torn-off leaves down onto the table.

It had a mug like a ghoul, black eye-sockets, pointed teeth, like it was Old Nick himself sticking his sneering face at us from the pits of hell. Its screeching went right through you, mocking and malicious.

It was a bit distracting for the game in hand. But the trumpeter wasn’t going to be put off his stride. He just looked at his cards, won on a straight, ordered more drinks and pocketed our pay without a tremble of his hand. The whites of his eyes shone, twin full moons shone in his pupils like lighthouse beacons, but without the flashing. It was hot, the sweat was pouring, we played on doggedly without uttering a word.

Finally the monkey was so pissed that it dropped off the branch and lay like it was dead on the ground ... it was at that point our luck changed. Cheers, my friends!

My father, the storyteller, in the middle of a tall one, raises his glass towards the moon above the city hall tower.

– Cheers. Cheers. We won it all back. The watch ... right, yes, I lost that another time, but we got our pay back. And the trumpeter’s. The girls swapped seats. And he still didn’t turn a hair. The money jangled, changed hands and pockets, it was like he was carved out of black ebony. Not even the whites of his eyes turned pale.

He was a first-rate loser. He was straight. Isn’t that so, Harry? We cleaned him out to his black skin, we even got his trumpet from him ... and even when he had to say goodbye to his lips he was magnanimous, maybe shrugged his shoulders a touch.

But when we got to his cheeks, when Harry was looking very satisfied, slurping up a good drinkie with his newly-won lips, with his eyes already casting greedy looks at the African's cheeks, balloon-like, fleshy cheeks, big and shiny like leather-polish on a newly-buffed shoe ... well that's where he drew the line.

– No, no, no, he said, and stood up to his full, almighty height. I tell no fib, he was gi-normous, broad and solid as a mountain, with rippling chest muscles.

– I can always get hold of a new trumpet, but the cheeks are the whole secret of the trumpeter. Gentlemen ... thank you for the game. And with that he picked up the monkey and left ... lipless.

– I've heard he still plays the trumpet, it makes for a distinctive sound, playing the trumpet without lips. A hollow, booming sound, as if it was blowing from the pits of hell ... He's famous for it. Cheers my friends! Cheers for hell and Havana. They shake their heads and drink a toast, what a cock-and-bull story.

– It's the God's own truth, shouts my father. They boo, thump the bar.

– The bit about the monkey's true ... it was pissed.

– ... and Heinrich ... he's always been a low-down shit, shouts Bent.

– A toast to the shit! He deserves a round and a half.

– Yes, too true, waiter! A round and a half over here, and for you ... and then we'll drink up ... for the Caribbean girls ... *and a bit for Susanne, Birgitte and Hanne and Tove and Anne and Lizzie and Kis ... not forgetting Agnete ...*

Harry wags his cigar. – And might one be able to get a light?

My father finds his lighter in his inside pocket. He shelters the flame with his hand and Harry leans forward, concentrating.

– Watch out, there's a bit of a breeze, says my father.

The lanterns bob up and down. Ragged clouds pass by high above the rooftops. But the girl ... where the hell had she got to. He turns his back to the bar and looks across the dancefloor again.

The music swells in synchronized strident brass, and high-heels and boots beat the time on the floorboards, faster and faster, increasing the tempo, and the man they call The Sailor falls off the wooden balustrade and hits his forehead on a corner post. He's already got a big scar there, he ran into the stove when he was a kid.

He laughs, loud and bellowing. Some young sailors try to get him on his feet again, but he falls back onto the greasy cobblestones glistening with stale beer.

My father lights a cigarette. He can't see her, whereas the girl with the ice-eyes tugs his sleeve and presses her shapely hips against his ... Well.

– Waiter, a drink for this lady.

– Kisser, she says her name with pursed lips close to his ear.

– Can I have a Campari, her speech is slurred. Her hand is a well-groomed boathook latched onto his shoulder.

– Of course, a Campari. A Campari for young Kisser and I'll have another beer, please, why not, the night is still young. And does the lady smoke? He offers her a cigarette as his eyes, followed by his hand, slide down over her hips.

– Lovely legs, by jove, hoots The Sailor, and grabs at the girls, they squeal and draw away. – Hey Thorkild ... Harry, come down here ... Hello, what a view. He grabs an ankle and holds on, his hands fumble upwards, he gets a grip and bites. The girl screams and hits out at him.

– My stockings, oh look, you blockhead. She hits him on the head with both hands, slaps his brow.

Bent struts onto the dancefloor with the waitress. My father does the same with Kisser, who wraps her white arms affectionately around his neck, hangs onto him, puckers up her lips and closes the fan of her lashes over her ice-blue eyes. Good thing too. Umm, not so bad, and what a scent. A smoochy tune. His lips press against her hair. Her waist sways between his hands.

It all swims a bit, too much whirling, it's the music, the phrases are too smooth and sentimental, he slumps a little, leans against her breasts, yes, why not, oh, this humming, the sound of voices buzzing around them, and look how those lanterns are carrying on, dilating showily in red and orange, throb, glide in and out of each other so you hardly know if you're still on your feet.

He tries to focus on something. The city hall tower, which officiously thrusts into the sky. The ticking clock, he turns, swings the girl, and the face of the clock follows him mercilessly with ribbons of white light in its wake. Tick-tock, time passing, but tick-tock to you too, thank you very much.

Harry? Oh, he's slumped over the bar counter. Tight as a lord. And the cigar ... smoking itself in the ashtray. But look, here's Bent, tell me, hasn't he got a smutty smile on his face as he slouches past, nonchalant with white horses and arcs of light in his hairdo, thinks he's a right lad.

My father raises his head and watches him, not without envy. It's in the bag for Bent, sure as amen in church, and hasn't he already got his hand up the bit-too-short waitress-skirt, loosens the back of the white apron so the ties dangle ... the music plays and beyond the dancefloor in the dimness behind the blanket, The Sailor's lips crawl upwards and his tongue rasps against the girl's thigh, and then after a couple more slaps he reaches her breasts, another slap, gentler now, see if she won't give in when he reaches her throat, and her face, which she flings back while she laughs.

There's a loud bang. A boom bouncing between the buildings. The dancers stop and look up, clap their hands together, oh look, shimmering lights, sparkles raining down in cascades over the square.

It's the Tivoli fireworks, so it must be midnight. And indeed, at that very second the tower clock begins to strike.

Kisser has to excuse herself, going to powder her nose perhaps. She disappears, slightly hunched over, her brow resting in the palms of her hands and her backside following her like a barrage balloon.

A chrysanthemum bomb takes off, a whistling sound, an abrupt bang, and it bursts, intoxicating, silent, absinthe-green, and then three fast rockets shriek into the night sky, a pencil of rays, golden streaks cutting through the darkness, slowly disperse and explode with a bang, in fans of shimmering, sprinkling, flickering light, echoing in the windows of the buildings. A billowing sigh goes through the dancing couples, they move closer and put their arms around one another's waists.

A sparkling red Roman candle sails into the night and pours out its light in clouds and smoke as if it was in keen competition with the moon itself, as if it wanted a duel. Glides majestically like a globe, a new celestial body approaching the city hall tower, as if it wanted to wind itself affectionately around the spire and then head-butt the moon. Oh, what a wonderful sharp smell of gunpowder and smoke.

My father thrusts his hands deep into his pockets and inhales, the chilly night air, the exotic scents of the city, stale beer, booze and petrol, cheap perfume.

A sputnik whizzes in a blue corkscrew, and yet another hurls into the sky, lilac, with arms that seize, feverishly embrace the air, quickly, quickly round and round and then it goes out, falls to the ground, sputters a little and dies.

Alas, so brief is life ... but love conquers all.

And then, as my father lowers his pensive gaze from the sky, he sees her, my mother, and she sees him. And her eyes remain steady. Defenceless and without reservation. She smiles wonderingly, admiringly, examines his face. The striking eyebrows, the broad forehead and his eyes, experienced and yet slightly questioning. His broad, somewhat scornful, but nevertheless rather secretive smile.

He walks towards her, without averting his gaze, until he is standing at her side. A stray rocket whistles past nearby and they dodge it quickly, grab hold of one another, laugh and look up. Two other rockets are let off, streak side by side into the sky, they explode high, high up, and light and a flashing rain of stars drift down over the square. She smiles with sparkling eyes. Her hand slips into his, and is he not a hero, a man of the world, and has he not to make sure the stars never leave her eyes again.

[...]

Hear the engine throb, the heart, when he thinks of her as the flames blaze in the furnace and the ship ploughs its way across the Atlantic.

The North Star is shining so brightly tonight that the gleam penetrates the surface of the water and is refracted in the waves to green strips of fluorescent flickering, a shimmering pulse, a gauge, nature's meter reporting the cosmos of the stars, the universe's background rhythm.

The phosphorescence ignites and goes out, blazes up and dies away, is captured and sticks on the retina, in the memory, in the crack between two folds of the brain, and later on pops up in the mind, perhaps as an image in a dream or while you're sitting all unsuspecting at the kitchen table eating cornflakes, with cherry trees blossoming outside the window.

Delayed, well yes, unprovoked, perhaps. Like exploding stars, ginormous masses of gas and cosmic matter flung out in a distant past, the universe's past, the period just after Big Bang, and can first be seen now through the glossy lens of the observatory telescope while we, somewhat bewildered, ask ourselves and each other what has happened, what's going to happen and why.

Water streaming through the gills. Sense the body, it obeys, works, functions, moves of its own accord, onwards with its dorsal fin pointing upwards, erect and a little officious.

I see whales, in schools, inquisitively, playfully sliding up alongside the ship. Coming towards me from the depths, the Big Blue, the dim opaque darkness, materialising in front of my limpid fish-eyes, which see everything without blinking.

They are sperm whales, males, scarred from fighting, scratches and scores all over their huge bodies, the old ones sprinkled with parasites, rugged with shellfish, suction marks from octopus tentacles across their bellies.

They look me over. We swim side by side, I see my reflection in their eyes. – What wonderful creatures, I exclaim in surprise. – Lithe, slender, with overlapping scales twinkling like silver in the starlight. I thrash my tail in contentment, feel the rush of oxygen through the rainbow-coloured gills.

– Look at me, I cry, heady with joy, chaotic with friskiness, happy right into my fish-bones.

– I exist, I am at one with the roaring sea that encircles the earth, cups the land in a fathomless embrace, cradles and lulls continents in its lap, dandles at the knee and tickles them under the continental shelves. I am at one with the sea, the prerequisite for all life. From the mushy broth of the past to the wave motion I set off at this very second with a single and apparently completely unwarranted lash of my tail.

– Look at me, look at me, an odd bod, a queer fish, small? well yes, compared with the cosmos, the booming universe, where heavenly bodies hold one another in check while they graciously allow the light to pierce pinprick holes in all the darkness, all the emptiness, oceans of darkness and emptiness.

Small maybe, but still the very essence, pulsating life, listen to my little fish-heart, not in the least cold, but ticking hot.

– But for how much longer? Ask the whales. Howmuch, howmuch, howmuch longer?

They call and sing, their strange grating click-sound and their long melodious whistling. Turn in loops and clap their flippers, whip up the water with their tails.

I take no notice, swim purposefully beneath the ship, my father's heartbeat a radar signal plotting the course. They'll soon lose interest. Yes, look, now they're diving, one after the other, disappearing into the deep, with slow, theatrical tail movements. But they are famous for their voices, their song, which can reach across the oceans.

– Howmuch, howmuch, howmuch longer?

The vibrations are transmitted through the sea, to Europe, through the amniotic fluid to my mother's belly, which she is holding between her hands. Howmuch longer? Howmuch longer, little you? Onward by thought to my father, standing on the quarterdeck, scanning the horizon as he smokes a cigarette. Water, water. Howmuch, howmuch. Howmuch longer?

– Yes, you just swim on your way, I grumble with clenched jaw, I'd rather see your tails than your great big heads with skull boxes full of too much wisdom, and too much mystifying echo-localising sense for a little pilot with only the sound of its father's heartbeat to navigate by.

– My salvation, hear how it pulsates steadfastly, what a wonderful clean sound, unfiltered but still pure, and with no irregular wobbling it reaches me through the water, I hear it and see everything quite clearly.

Love. You know what I mean. The genuine article, the one that keeps ships steadily on course through all the darkness.

[...]

– Hello sweetheart! My father's voice ... famous for crossing oceans, earnest, with bated breath and laughter behind the soft dialect. It arrived in a brown envelope with my mother's name written in italic script, capitals with twirls and flourishes, and an address rolling on the waves.

My sister opens the door, cranes back her head and looks up along the gold buttons on the postman's coat. He has a beard and thrusts the letter into her hand. The one that's not broken, the other one's in plaster because she fell out of the window in an heroic attempt to put my brother's tormentors to flight with blobs of spit and terms of abuse yelled in a continuous stream that could be heard in the innermost backyard and which Hertha's mynah bird, from its place on the first-floor windowsill, resolutely tries to reproduce between verses of an old squaddie song.

– It shits like a fountain, that bird, says my grandmother. Her window is below Hertha's, leaded with coloured glass and long streaks of excrement.

– Birds eat fruit ... it has to have fruit, says Hertha with her grizzled red hair fluttering out of the window as she leans over and looks down. – It comes from Africa!

My mother appears in the hallway and the letter is instantly in her hand, she glances quickly at the handwriting, the stamp with a picture of skyscrapers, tiny little serrations and wavy postmark, she bites her lip and clutches the letter to her breast. The paper is smooth and soft to the touch.

– Too big for the letter box, says the postman. Viggo Madsen has sold him a lottery ticket and is smiling contentedly in the background while he sweeps coal dust under the mat. Says hello to the Coffeelady, who snorts and stomps her way up the stairs, an enormous checked skirt under the brown coat, distended and voluminous as a whole ballroom, and stockings that keep her calves firmly fixed liked trussed hams. The banisters, which are already loose, rock and the joint between the ground and first floors gives a bit. The steps creak, but my God it smells wonderfully of coffee. Dark roasted, glossy brown coffee beans, with little clefts that fold inwards as if to say they have a secret hidden inside, or ground coffee, releasing the ethereal aroma to hang like an invisible cloud, a fanfare of exotic fragrance that follows this enormous bulk on its way through the neighbourhood, along the street, where someone stops on a flagstone and closes their eyes for a dreamy moment, through the street door and up the stairwell where

the fragrance spreads up from floor to floor and stays there for days. She has been over to Sweden and done a big shop, duty-free. Viggo Mortensen twitches his nostrils. The postman inhales. My sister keeps her eyes on the string bag full of duty-free goods. Tins of cocoa and toffees wrapped in golden paper, which vanish from sight on the next landing. She sighs and shrugs her shoulders, pulls a wry face, but leaves the door ajar so the aroma of coffee can spread through the flat.

My mother can't bear to open the letter. She puts it down on the chest of drawers, goes into the kitchen, stands for a moment in the narrow strip of sun by the cooker, adjusts the curtain and looks out into the backyard, feels the warmth from the strip of sun across her wrist. Listens to the pilot light in the hot-water heater, the small flame, it's blue but leaps into a boom of golden flames as soon as you turn on the hot tap.

Oh, come on, she can bear to open it, rushes back to the hall, sticks her thumb in and rips along one side of the envelope. Looks in between the frayed edges, cautiously, what's that? Not a letter, but a piece of paper, thin as greaseproof, with a hole in the middle the size of a coffee cup. She wrinkles it out with two fingers. It's a record. A single. She takes it out of the greaseproof paper and turns it between her fingers. Black shellac with grooves shimmering in the colours of the rainbow, orange label, but no writing.

She calls the children in from the backyard.

– Come in, come in children! she shouts. – Look at this! She holds the record out of the kitchen window. The children, not just my mother's but all the children, come running or riding their scooters, tricycles, which need a good oiling. They squeak so much that you push up your shoulders and pull a funny face. The children barely hear it, only the grown-ups with jangled nerves or hangovers. Darning Needle, walking across the grey-green moss on the backyard, a hand to his forehead. He's tall. Thin. He nods to my mother. Considers stopping, but keeps going, treading on the hopscotch lines.

Hertha sticks out her head. She's still in her dressing gown and pushes juicy tinned peaches through the bars of the cage to the bird, which throws back its beak and swallows the pieces in huge mouthfuls. My grandmother looks up with clenched teeth from her stockroom.

– What is it? shout the children.

– What is it? My brother wipes his bloodied nose on his sleeve and runs his hand through his wet fringe with its cow's lick sticking straight up.

– It's a record ... a single. She turns it over in the air. – He's sent us an EP.

– Sent you a porky? sneers my grandmother. – So what's new? She gives Hertha a knowing look. They are immediately conspirators – despite the bird, which lifts its hind part, drops a poop that slides over the windowsill, and listens with cocked head and shimmering blue-green splendour of feathers.

– I choose to ignore that shit, shouts my grandmother. They laugh and the bird repays the compliment with a long whistle and a verse of the squaddie song, which the ladies instantly take up.

– *When I marched off to join the throng, my girl she wanted to come along, yes, my girl she wanted to come along ...*

– But I haven't got a record player, says my mother.

– No, that's true, says my grandmother. – The girl doesn't even own a record player ... She's got strange stained-wood masks with evil eyes scowling from the wallpaper above the sideboard in the dining room, statues of long-legged Africans on the windowsill, straight-backed with plates in their lower lips and bits of bone through their nostrils, foul-smelling animal skins in the bedroom, twisted horns hanging above the door in the hallway ... pots, calabashes, ivory rings, strings of amber, snail shells, pearls, jewellery boxes lined with mother-of-pearl ... but she doesn't own a record player.

– Hertha? Hertha shakes her head. The children look at one another. No. The new caretaker's wife pops her perm over the edge of the curtain, no, hers is broken.

– Inge on the fifth floor in the back building? – She plays the recorder.

– Isn't she pregnant?

– Well yes ...

– ... but who's the father?

– ???

– I've got a record player, says Darning Needle from his kitchen window. All eyes are now on him. He tugs his vest up over his head, turns on the tap, which makes the pipe cough, and splashes water in his face, under his arms, dries himself on a tea towel and pulls faces in his shaving mirror. Yanks his cheeks down, and red bloodshot rims pop out below his eyes.

– Well, right, says my mother. – Could we come over to you then ... I mean, when you've got time ... now?

– Yes, just come, he says.

And then there's running and slamming of doors. Diagonally across the yard they go, windows glinting as they are opened from inside. Some have to water the potplant on the windowsill, keeping an eye on what's going on, others hang washing on the line or shake a cloth, the dust whirling in the sunshine.

My mother and – therefore – I are in the lead, my mother strutting triumphantly with the record in best lofty drum major style. Me floating in a yoga position with upturned palms and crossed legs, kept afloat by the amniotic fluid. My grandmother on my mother's heels, which she now and then bumps with her toe, reeking of perfume, newly-sprayed from the little bottle, and boozy breath hitting my mother in the back of her neck. The new caretaker's wife and Hertha come hurrying from the backstairs and step quickly into the ranks. My siblings bring up the rear, noses up, eyes on the other children, of which some – the ones who can't be squeezed into the little one-room flat – are obliged to fill the back stalls. Crane their

necks, the tips of their toes balancing on the iron railings that lead to the cellar beneath Darning Needle's window, and they goggle at him as he cracks an egg, puts his head back and pours the contents, the yellow yolk and the gluey transparent membrane of the egg-white, down his throat and swallows.

– Good for hangovers, he says and raises the shell in a toast, before throwing it in the bin and pulling his shirt back on.

– Right, let's have a look then, he says, rubbing his palms together.

My mother hands him the record. The Pole and little Magda from the back building arrive at the railings and ask for the window to be opened so they can hear better.

Darning Needle opens it and pulls out the gramophone. My mother is sitting on the sofa, holding her breath.

– It smells of the itch in here, whispers the new caretaker's wife, but gets a nudge, an elbow, and then they have to budge up along the sofa to make room for Darning Needle. The empty bottles under the coffee table topple over, the children are shushed, my sister waves her plaster cast menacingly, and one of them ... I think it's Mrs Knudsen's youngest ... takes her finger out of her nose as a little warning smack lands on her hand. There is coughing and the clearing of throats. Over-excited giggling dies away. A motor scooter with a loose silencer is allowed to pass by in the street, a cat finishes its yowling. Wings flap away from the pigeon loft. It falls silent ... only the mynah bird has trouble keeping its beak shut. Damned shit-machine. My grandmother scowls at Hertha and vindictively, but discretely, treads on the pink tassel of her slipper under the coffee table.

And then the record is carefully pulled out of its sleeve, twisted and turned between two nicotine-stained forefingers, blown on to remove any specks of dust and placed on the gramophone with the air of an expert. The speed of the turntable is adjusted, gracefully, and then the carousel starts to spin. It vibrates, wobbling slightly, but round and round with the orange

paper label drawing a hypnotic spiral. It is a magical moment. The loudspeakers crackle as Darning Needle carefully takes the gramophone arm by its little head and pulls it in an arc towards the black shellac edge of the record, his hands are trembling slightly, but then the little needle falls into place, vibrates with the grooves, and my father's voiced reaches us from the other side of the Atlantic.

– Hello sweetheart! I'm in Chicago. I'm standing in a sort of telephone booth, where you can make recordings the weather's fine over here. It's hot. The buildings aren't half big. Everything's brand new here ... and big I miss you.

A sigh goes through the listeners in the room. Everyone looks at my mother, the delighted smile she can't hold back. The mynah bird says something smutty, but no one's listening to it any more.

They're listening to my father, the hero. His confident voice crossing the sea. Delayed, well yes, but welded in shellac and with an orange paper label. My mother blinks back a tear. The children are silent, their dirty hands quite still and their heads tilted to one side. Some gaze out of the window at a distant indiscernible spot.

Think, he's in America, the promised land on the other side of the sea, where newsboys run shouting through the streets, growing up to become car manufacturers, fighter pilots or important, influential members of the Senate.

Chicago, their lips form the word. Gangster Chicago with shiny cars taking the corners sharply, barber's shops where deals are made under a razor, dimly-lit gambling dens where plaintive saxophone solos rise from the narrow alleyways and slip insinuatingly along the fire escapes' eternally zigzagging iron will, upwards and upwards, along the fronts of buildings with flashing neon adverts for soda, chewing gum and nylon stockings.

My father's voice. Strong and calm, with an occasional undertone of shyness, just a touch, and then sturdy again, rich, with self-confident resonance, full-bodied, a blues in the big city's night music. Sweeping

phrases, a sharp humorous blast of the trumpet, a triplet, soft and supple, an endless blue note that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end, the down on your arms, not forgetting your heart, which soars, flies off with the dream of America, sails between these go-getting skyscrapers with the top floor hidden in the clouds. The morning mist, floating in across the city from the sea, where cargo ships put in to port or sound their hooters as they sail away.

My father's voice across the ocean in a brown envelope. From Chicago to teeny-weeny almost provincial Copenhagen, the fairy-tale city with the twisting spires, parks with miniature palaces, verdigris green copper-clad roofs and soldiers with knapsacks and bearskins. In through the cobbled streets with their baker's shops and noisy dustcarts, in along the green canals with sticklebacks and bicycle racks rusting under the water, in through the gateway, across the yard, through Darning Needle's window and into the muggy little room, which does indeed smell a bit ... of beer dregs, leftover food, acid paraffin stove, and onwards, via the dizzy circling of the gramophone, to my mother, who reaches out and pulls the children into her arms.

– ... I don't really know what to say ... The others are standing out there laughing at me ... I wish you were here ... I don't really know if there's any money left in it ... I love you ... I'll be home soon.