



foreign rights

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Mensen was so fast that the dogs couldn't catch up with him. They'd been chasing him since Haraldson's farm but Mensen ran on, over the lush meadows and past the stables, and the dogs weren't closing the gap. He jumped in one fluid movement over a fence and ran through the schoolhouse's orchard. The satchel that his mother had strapped to his back was light and with every stride Mensen tried not to touch the ground again. Each step was another attempt, soon it would work and he'd stay aloft and only leave a trail in the air, that the wind would waft away. Other children came down the lane. He heard them sing the song of the reindeers' journey. He knew it from his mother. She had sung it to him, back when she still spoke. Mensen stood still in the shade of a tree and looked over at them. There were four of them; they were walking along the garden fence, with their arms linked. They were sweating like him, and the straps of their satchels hung from their thin shoulders. He almost called out and ran over to them, but he stayed in the shade while the others went through the gate. Mensen climbed over the fence and followed them.

Inside the classroom, everyone was pushing and shoving to get a seat on a bench in the back row. There was no more space for Mensen there, only at the very front, right by the teacher's desk. He sat down and heard whisperings behind him: 'That's the African's son.'

He took his slate and stylus out of his satchel, and placed them on the desk in front of him. The wooden edge of his desk was splintering. He flicked the lid of the inkpot that older pupils used, making it turn like a merry-go-round—the faster, the better.

The African's son. He'd heard that before. They always said that, but what did they know about his father? Even he didn't know anything.

Now the others were talking about the new teacher. He'd only been sent to Fresvik a week ago, but people knew what to expect. The last schoolmaster and vicar had suffered a stroke himself after the eighth of the fifteen strokes he'd prescribed. The new one wouldn't be much different.

They should know: most of them had been at school a long time already and it was Mensen's first day. But they're wrong, he thought, looking up at the teacher. He had a friendly face and would never hit anyone. Skulberg, the new teacher, looked at him as if he knew him, and Mensen felt good for a moment. Just the bench was uncomfortable. It seemed to be far too close to the desk. His hands drifted over the cracked desktop and he let his head swing from side to side. His feet hadn't arrived at school yet; they were still running and scraping on the wooden floor, taking little steps, as if they were skipping across the swaying planks of the bridge over the stream, plodding up the mountain and jumping, from rock to rock, to the little spring, where butterflies flit at this time of year.

'Mensen!' The teacher sounded like someone who wants to be strict and doesn't quite manage it, thought Mensen, swinging his head in Skulberg's direction.

'Your head!' said the teacher.

Mensen had known that was coming, and he was ready. He'd practised for ages, in his bedroom and in the stables where it smelt pungently of cats.

He stopped his head from rocking and looked silently at the teacher, without moving. Skulberg had blue eyes and blonde hair that was almost white. His mouth was bright red in his pale face with its unshaven cheeks. Mensen looked up at him and began to count quietly. *One, two, three, four.* He wouldn't get far. It was already starting, Skulberg's stubble was becoming finer and finer, transparent even, so that in the end Mensen couldn't see it any more and the teacher's face became as soft as a

child's. *Five, six.* Now he couldn't see the eyebrows, and below them the eyes blurred until only two black sockets remained. *Seven, eight.* The hair had gone now, and the teacher's mouth turned into a gaping hole. But Mensen didn't move, even when the teacher's waistcoat broke up and dissolved. *Nine, ten.* Finally, the holes in the face vanished, and just for a moment a fine mist floated where the teacher should have been standing, and a second later it was all over and Skulberg had disappeared: nothing was left except for a grey patch that couldn't be distinguished from the plaster on the wall behind it. He had practised for weeks; he couldn't get frightened now. If he did, he'd have to start swinging his head again and the world would come back, but that couldn't happen, because he was a pupil now and pupils don't swing their heads, he thought. A pupil, that's almost like being an adult.

Mensen watched a fly buzz around the room: the delicate quivering of its wings, its legs that it had tucked in to its body, and the little proboscis that sniffed greedily in all directions. Then Skulberg moved too, taking a few steps to one side, and everything was there again: his hair, mouth, cheeks, his black waistcoat and fob, and his arms in a grey linen shirt. Mensen was proud, he'd done it and no one had noticed a thing. He could sit still just like all the others. That was important, especially when you didn't have a father and lived a long way out, where few people ever came. Mensen turned around and looked at the other schoolchildren's faces. The more they fidgeted on their chairs, the better he could make them out. Maybe it was the same for them, not all, but perhaps for one or the other of them. He would watch carefully and find a friend here and ask him if the world disappears for him too when nothing moves. Now Skulberg was coming over to his desk and Mensen looked up.

'You're doing pretty well with your head now—but your feet!' The other children turned to Mensen and stared under his desk where his legs were tripping along, like a

horse's would, if you'd try to rein it to a stop when it's racing flat out. Ole Haraldson, the son of the biggest farmer in the area, started to laugh; Mensen could only see an enormous mouth with fleshy lips.

'I'm sorry,' Mensen said. 'My feet haven't learnt to keep still yet.'

He himself was surprised. He knew about his head. *Keep your head still*, his mother would say, when she spoke to him at all. But he'd never noticed his feet. Not surprisingly, because at home he didn't have to sit down, there was always something to do. He ran from stable to meadow, woodshed to pond, and from the house to the fruit trees. Maybe he'd run too much and he had to train the feet, like he had trained his head.

'Why am I the African's son?' he asked his mother that evening. She didn't say a word, just sunk her spoon silently into her soup. Her face was even greyer than normal, and she didn't speak to him for three days.

But at least he knew now what his father looked like. In a schoolbook, one of his classmates had showed him a picture of an African and said *your father*, laughing as he did. The man in the book had black skin and curly hair, a gold ring in each ear and a wide smile on his rosy lips. He held a spear in his hand for lion hunts. Mensen would like to have known how he'd come to Norway from Africa. Someday there'd be someone he could ask about that. Maybe the teacher? He didn't seem all that bad.

Summer hugged the mountainsides a long time, not wanting to leave, but autumn's first storm arrived with all the more rage. Mensen came into the schoolhouse shivering, for he had the longest walk to school, and the hail had caught him halfway there. The first lesson was arithmetic, but it wasn't looking too good for the work Skulberg had set. Napoleon had been beaten by England; Nelson had sunk

the French-Spanish fleet and the schoolchildren were working out their own sums: 27 English ships against 37 French ones, 1,800 British dead and wounded, but 15,000 on the enemy's side.

Skulberg stopped teaching and said a prayer for those killed in the battle. The schoolchildren stood up and put their hands together, but they weren't listening, they were whispering amongst themselves:

'Nelson's leg had already been blown off . . .'

' . . . caught it in the eye . . .'

' . . . Grand Admiral Villeneuve was undressed down to his shirt, my dad said . . .'

' . . . Nelson was in charge . . .'

' . . . true greatness . . .'

' . . . they all died . . .'

Mensen couldn't hear much of what the vicar was saying—Skulberg's voice got quieter and quieter, until it almost petered out completely—except that when a person dies, a whole universe dies, Mensen heard that. And that each of these universes that died in the battle had deserved to live.

Mensen liked what the teacher said, and he liked the way that he said it.

Skulberg's hesitant voice spoke each word carefully, as if he wasn't really sure of it and was afraid to lose the words or their meaning as he talked.

In the break there was an argument about Nelson's death. He died in the grace of God, Sven said, because like Christ he died for others. A stupid death, Ole retorted, because it meant he couldn't enjoy his fame. Maybe he'd become careless through the easy victory, others suspected. Or he hadn't died at all, it was only a trick to lull the French into a sense of security. Mensen assumed the admiral had been too slow.

Death waits for the slow. He thought better of saying it out loud. He hoped someone else would. He'll be my friend then, thought Mensen, but he waited in vain.

After the battle, Mensen found things easier. Napoleon blockaded the ports and all Norway went hungry, except for Mensen, who had barely eaten anything beforehand. I eat air, he used to claim, and everyone would laugh at him. No one was making jokes about it anymore; they themselves had little more to eat.

Even his legs were getting much better. By now they obeyed him and could also calm down as long as he moved them enough before school. He ran from his house over the valley meadows, past the rich farmers' summer huts higher up and the racks where the hay for the winter was drying, further and further through the thick birch woods, up to the col with the cairn that was a waymark for travellers in the time of giants. Behind it the rocks glinted. They were as blue as the sky, because the sky became paler the lower it went. Yellow lichens and mossy pillows glowed in cracks in the rocks. Then up the riverbed, where the wet ferns licked at his leg, until he reached the circular hollow high up, full of water it stared at the sky like a wall-eye. He could look far here, and breathe. The winds ruffled his hair, the winds of the mountains and the lake came from all sides. Mensen stood there a long time and wished that he'd be blown away. Then he returned to the village. Its few farmhouses nestled into the mountainside and kept as much distance from the neighbouring houses as they could.

That's how the legs could hold out until the break-time.

When it was spring again, his brother Sigra came. Mensen hadn't seen him for years, because he had sailed to America as a quartermaster and worked for a trading company there. Mensen had forgotten what his brother looked like, but there was a picture in the bedroom that showed Sigra, an eight-year-old boy. Their father had had it painted, many years before Mensen was born. There was no picture of Mensen. He

was nine now and would have liked to have someone to play with, but suddenly a stranger stood there who smelt odd, of tobacco and beer, and was much too strict.

Mensen should sit still. He shouldn't bob his head. He ought to look him in the eye, not stare so oddly into space. And most of all, not always run.

But Sigra was completely different in the evenings. He would sit on Mensen's bed and tell him of his travels, of the light that follows a ship like a burning strip and that is made by shining worms. Of sea serpents so big that they could swallow a brig. Of icebergs that people live on, in houses made of snow. Of the savages in America who walk around naked and slay giant bears with their knives. Of pirates from whom no ship is safe. Of sea battles and love affairs. Drift ice in the passage to St. Petersburg and the horse latitudes, where his hair fell out because there wasn't a breathe of wind. And the dogs in Peru that attacked him and gobbled up his thumb and index finger, including the bones, as he scrambled up into a tree. At first, the mutilated hand made Mensen jump in fright, but at some point the brother was no longer a stranger and Mensen let his brother stroke his forehead with the stumps of his fingers before he fell asleep. The new skin over Sigra's bones was as soft as a child's, and Mensen finally plucked up the courage to ask his brother why their father was black. But Sigra didn't answer, instead he pulled the blanket over Mensen's face, stood up and left the room. Mensen knew that he shouldn't say anything else now. Yet over the following days Sigra talked to him a number of times about their father. Sometimes just a few words, sometimes a little story. He was a Frenchman, who had come to Fresvik as a sailor and married mother, the most beautiful girl in the village. The others had never forgiven him—or her—for that. They had built the house here, before even Sigra was born. And a few years later their father vanished, because he couldn't stand being so boxed in between mountain and sea. He had sailed off on a French ship and fought in

Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. He had travelled the whole of Egypt, from the sea to the sources of the Nile, that's why they called him the African. Then he returned and yet he'd become someone very different, very restless, he couldn't sit or stand still anywhere, he was always running around. Around the farm, over the meadows, up the mountains. He had the fever of the tropics, people said. And one day he disappeared again, shortly before Mensen's birth. This time he didn't come back.

Since their father had gone, Sigra should stay, Mensen demanded of his brother, but Sigra shook his head. He couldn't stay. He didn't belong here, he belonged in the wide world.

Mensen didn't give up. Mother will cry, he said. His brother didn't budge. There are always tears when someone goes, he said, adding that if a tear is shed at the moment when a seaman leaves, he won't return.

Soon after that he left, without goodbyes. Their mother cried in her room for days. But it was good that his brother had left secretly, he'd come back. Mensen pressed the buffalo horn, that his brother had given him, to his ear. It was heavy and warm, and its tip shone white. The sound of the sea had got caught in it on the long journey back from America. When Mensen held the horn to his ear he could hear how his brother's ship ploughed the waves. In the evenings Mensen would lie on his bed, with the horn beside him, and sail to Egypt with Sigra.

On Good Friday, Mensen found his father's seaman's chest in the attic. Sigra had given him the idea of looking for father's old things up there. Their mother had always forbidden Mensen to go there, but if his brother allowed it, then the ban was as good as lifted. Mensen wanted to go to the attic and his brother was in favour, so it

was two-to-one against his mother, and Skulberg was always telling them how important it was that one person didn't decide everything.

The trunk's lock was rusted through. Mensen hit it twice with a hammer and it fell apart. The chest held maps and strange instruments, some made of wood, some of metal that shone yellow, with adjustable tracks, fine notches and tiny holes, revolving mirrors and small telescopes. They had something to do with sailing, but Mensen didn't know what. Sigra would have explained it all, but he'd gone.

The Nile was written in brown ink on the leather loop that clasped one of the maps. Mensen unfolded the map. It was bigger than he was, and grains of sand were lodged in the tattered corners of the fold. Mensen rubbed them with the tip of his index finger. Desert sand, Mensen thought, and lent over the map so that everything blurred before his eyes and he only saw the brown of the Sahara and the Nile, that cut the land like a wound and poured its blue blood into the Mediterranean. He drew even closer, until he didn't see that either, he stretched the tip of his tongue out and carefully licked the fold. The sand crunched between his teeth. It didn't taste any different to the sand in Fresvik, but it was real desert sand, from a land without people. No one would call him the African's son there.

He sat up and studied the map.

The towns had strange names: *Assiut, Esna, Luxor, Khartoum*. He said them like spells. *Gebel*. Those must be the mountains, where it had that word black hills had been painted on the sand. The little rivers that flowed from the mountains to the Nile were called *wadi*. There was a green strip beside the river. Sometimes it was only as wide as a brushstroke, sometimes it was as wide as three fingers.

His father had scribbled a little drawing near the edge, with camels, palms and a stranger's turbaned face, he seemed to be resting as he sat in the shade and his animals

stood at the watering place. In the middle of the desert, numbers had been written, a sum, but Mensen didn't understand its meaning. His father had added something up—no clue as to what. For nights on end he lay in his room and dreamt his way to Egypt. He went to Skulberg and showed him the instruments. The teacher might know them. In the evenings, he had taught him about the stars and told him stories about every one of them. About the big and little bear and the hunchbacked dragon between them. About the giant sea serpent Hydra that snaked across half the sky. About Cassiopeia and her daughter Andromeda, who could only be seen in autumn and winter, and who had been left to the mercy of a sea monster thousands of years ago as an offering and had been saved by Perseus. A picture of him shone in the sky too. Mensen liked these evenings with Skulberg, wrapped in an itchy blanket, and his old stories, but when he showed him the instruments Skulberg shook his head.

'That's a sextant,' he said. 'Don't ask me how it works. The other thing is called an octant. That isn't used much anymore. It must be worth a pretty penny. If you want, I can try to sell it. The wooden one is a quadrant. That's easy, even I can use it. You can use it to take a bearing on the Pole Star, and the string here with the lead weight—that gives you the angle. The Pole Star's height above the horizon tells you your latitude. If you know the exact time, and when a star is at its highest above Greenwich, then you can measure the difference to your own position and so work out your longitude.'

'How do you know the time when the star's highest?' Mensen asked.

'No idea. I think there are tables for that. But next spring a friend of mine is coming here. He's a sailor and he'll be able to explain it all. He wants to see how I'm doing as a preacher boy.'

Mensen blinked, hearing his teacher call himself that.

‘As a preacher boy,’ Skulberg repeated and laughed.

‘My friend never expected me to end up in this line of work. Neither would I have, but I’m still young, just twenty-three years old, so a lot can still happen. You never know—especially as a vicar. God has already turned away from some of my friends. It has cast some into despair, but others are better off for it, they are free. But I don’t want to make you worried. How do you imagine God?’

‘Fast,’ replied Mensen. ‘So fast that no one sees him. And yet he’s there.’

Yet Mensen was not protected by a god of speed, but by the infant-faced angel in the picture over his bed in the living room. The angel’s wings were tousled by the wind. He was leaning into the storm, it almost looked as if he was falling and tumbling forwards, only staying upright by the sound which he blew out of a curved trumpet held to his full cheeks. Had the angel fallen, he would have been devoured by the sea that was painted far below him and just above Mensen’s head. On it there were waves as large as houses, whales on which rowing boats were stranded, and a kraken from whose arms a great many people hung. In the foreground a frigate was sailing at top knot towards their hearth, where Mensen’s mother had let the fire go out a long time before. A little knothole in the ship’s bow was just big enough for Mensen’s index finger. That would be my porthole, he said to himself, carefully poking his finger in. He felt the smooth surface of the opening and thought that further back, with the tip of his finger, he could feel the hammock that he’d sleep in and the sea chest that all his belongings would fit in. Then the ship would move for him and he could lie there quietly and would never have to bob his head. I would never move again, thought Mensen, I’d sit for days at the deck rail and stare at the water. The others would be surprised at me. That’s Mensen, he never budes, they’d say, and I’d not tell

them my secret. I'd sail to Alexandria on the ship and ascend the Nile with little sailing boats.

But that would all take time. He was still a child. Every Christmas he sat with his mother at the table. She sat in her holiday silence, that she kept for special days, in contrast to her everyday silence, which was already so well worn and crumbling that words or even whole sentences sometimes came out of her mouth. She lit the lamp in silence. The cheap oil made it smoke and soot up the ceiling. She dished out the black pudding in silence. She prayed in silence to a God who didn't answer. She had aged since Sigra's visit, was almost forty years old now. She hadn't had grey hairs before and two more teeth had fallen out. That was because of the food. There was less and less. For weeks they had only eaten soups of lichen and grass. He had told her that he wanted to travel to father. She didn't reply, but he hadn't expected her to. He held his head still and stared at nothing.

She died on a summer's day, when Mensen arrived late from school because he had been reading a story with Skulberg after lessons finished. His mother wasn't moving anymore. She sat silently as a rock, as a tree. Her breathing was shallow and her heart was beating as if from a distant world. Mensen ran to the doctor, more quickly than he'd ever run before, but the doctor didn't want to come. Who would pay the bill? Everyone knew, he added, the bad way the Ernst family was in. No one could expect him to make the journey without being paid for it, it was much too far for that, no one could expect it of him, they really couldn't, that was just the way it was. It would be best if Mensen paid in advance.

Mensen didn't reply.

Skulberg. Only he could help him now. He was the only one who took an interest in him. Even if he had almost no money—the parish council didn't pay him well,

Mensen had realised that long ago. But he had to talk to the doctor, a vicar's word has some weight to it, after all.

And indeed it did. The doctor finally packed his case and followed Mensen, but he was too slow on the walk up to the farm. Mensen had to stop again and again to wait for him. He stepped from one foot to the other. How could someone lag so far behind in so short a time? And why didn't he know the way? A doctor should know the way, not just diseases. And he should be faster, much faster, like he was. If Mensen was a doctor, no one would die anymore.

When they arrived his mother was no longer breathing. It was the doctor's fault, thought Mensen. First he didn't want to come and then he came too slowly. Death doesn't wait for those with leaden feet.

The next day Mensen stood at her coffin and spoke to her. She listened to him, she just didn't reply, but that was nothing new, he was used to that. His mother wasn't actually dead, she'd become a tree, that's why she had a wooden skin. He stroked the bark of her face. The opening at the ear was a knothole, dark and hard. Her fingers were roots bent over her chest, clasped in a bitter prayer. A midge was caught in the foliage of her hair, surprised to not find blood. Some sawdust lay on her dress. Time had frozen in the room. When no one moves, time doesn't pass either, Mensen knew that and for the first time he stayed still for hours.

Until he heard the tread of boots. Now the men came and nailed his mother's coffin lid down with heavy blows and blunt nails, making splinters fly across the room. Mensen stared wide-eyed at them, then he ran off, along the path that led from the farmstead to the woods. He jumped over the small stream, waded the wider one, climbed up the rocks that were warm from the sun and soft with moss, passed the whale's eye, climbed farther and higher, and disappeared in the mountains.

Mensen returned to Fresvik after three days, his clothes were in tatters and he had thorns in his hair. The whole village assembled hurriedly in front of the church, many faces that he barely remembered. He had forgotten a lot in the last few days. They didn't shout at him, but he heard what they said as he stood there.

'... a wild boy ...'

'... his father passed on his fever to him ...'

'... don't touch him, he's crazy ...'

'... nodding head ...'

'... jumping feet ...'

'And the look in his eyes. Its not human. He's possessed by the devil.'

'We have to cast out the devil.'

'With fire and prayers. Like they used to.'

'Nothing is like it used to be. The devil is cast out through love.'

The voice came from the church door. It was Skulberg, Mensen knew. He had been good to him before and would be now. Skulberg stepped into the centre of the circle of villagers where Mensen was standing. He laid a friendly hand on his shoulder and brushed a burr from his hair. Mensen should live in the vicarage with him. The boy wasn't possessed, he was just faster than they with their farming ways were used to. He knew him well and would take care of him. Here in Fresvik there was no one like Mensen, no one who would make his way like him. What they called restlessness was only a longing for something that he'd never find in the village.

But the village elders were against it. In their opinion, the vicar was much too soft. Skulberg didn't even beat the children at school. The old vicar had been very different, and it hadn't hurt anyone, except perhaps Gude the village idiot, who was crouched down in front of them, gnawing on a piece of wood, but he might well have turned out

like that even without the beatings. And how should a wild boy like Mensen be brought back onto the right path without beatings? What's more, it seemed as if the vicar's faith wasn't what it could be. He sometimes asked God inappropriate questions in his sermons. *What God was going to do about the injustice in the world?* You don't ask the Lord that. Why did you need questions in sermons at all? You didn't used to get that. Mensen needed a firm hand, they said. The firmer, the better, the elders said, and with that their choice was made. He should live with Haraldson, he owned lots of land and was the richest of them, so God loved him, and he was strict enough for someone like Mensen. When Mensen saw him, he wanted to get away, better to freeze in the mountains than go to Haraldson, but the farmer's big hands held him firmly.

Mensen was given a cold room at the top of the house. He lay there the first night, staring at the black beams above his head. There was no angel to watch over him as he slept here, and no ship to take him to Egypt. He wrapped the thin blanket tighter around his shoulders. He could hear seagulls scrapping over the fish remains down at the water.

They prayed before breakfast in the farmer's house. Ole, Mensen's enemy at school, glared at him. Ase, Ole's sister, lowered her gaze. When the prayer was over, they began to eat. Mensen was given a plate heaped with food, the farmer wouldn't take no for an answer, no one had to go hungry in his house, not even a wild boy. But before Mensen could take his first mouthful, Haraldson screamed at him. He should sit still, for God's sake. Stop moving his head and those damned feet of his.

Mensen held his breath, placed his spoon on the tablecloth and didn't move, instead he stared at his plate until he saw the farmer's hand. It was large and cracked,

with black outlines under the nails. The beds of its nails were red, its joints were swollen, and its little finger stood out to the side, as if it had been broken once. The gold ring was half-hidden under the growth of flesh. Haraldson's hand approached in a wide arc, growing bigger and more threatening. The bristles on the back of his fingers shook in the draught. Then Mensen's head jerked back. For an instant he saw everything: the smile on Ole's face, the tear on Ase's cheek, their mother looking away, and the farmer shouting that Mensen would be welcome to carry on eating now.

Mensen looked at him without moving. His gaze was fixed on Haraldson's red face and glistening forehead until its contours blurred, its nose melted away and its eyes and lips drained of colour. Mensen let the farmer's features disappear further and further. The whole face dissolved. He erased him, killed him and pushed him into empty space. Haraldson jumped up, his chair crashed to the ground behind him. He gasped for breath. The others were right, Haraldson said with difficulty, the Evil One's lurking in this boy.

Then he hurried out of the room.

Haraldson never hit Mensen again. He didn't talk to him nor look at him, and Mensen lived in the house like a stranger, until one night lying in his room he pushed his hand under his pillow because something had rustled. He found a piece of paper. He sat up, lit a candle and cradled the light, so it wouldn't be seen under the door. It was a drawing of a dog with brown fur and shining black eyes. It wasn't a good picture, the dog's back was too long and its back legs were folded over strangely. The next evening a four-leafed clover lay there. Then a piece of sugar in a silvery wrapper. The page of a calendar with a picture of a ship. A wreath of willow twigs. A rosy apple.

With each evening things were getting better in the farmer's house. Mensen didn't speak to anyone about it, not even with Ase who was giving the presents. Who else would they be from? He didn't dare talk to her. But sometimes, when he helped the chief hand to clean the stables, to make hay, or to chop wood for the winter, she would come in his break and sit next to him. His legs stayed quite still for these moments. He carved her a whistle from a branch. She hid it under her coat, so that her father wouldn't see it. Once on one of his trips into the woods, Mensen found a dabchick, a bundle of down and a wide-open beak, and he gave it to Ase. One night weeks later, he didn't find a present under his pillow. He lay down, disappointed. Maybe she had simply forgotten, maybe it had become a chore to her. He'd get used to it, as he had to everything else. But as he was about to fall asleep the door opened and Ase came over to him, barefoot, and carefully, so that the boards didn't creak. She laid down next to him with her arm on his stomach, gave a little sigh and fell asleep. Before dawn she was gone, a light dream, but one that came back night after night, for months and years. An angel was again watching over him as he slept. During the days she looked at him with knowing eyes. Even more than their being together at nights, their shared silence about it brought them closer. If nothing moves anymore, suspected Mensen, then I'm dead. Either my legs or my head or my heart—one of the three must be moving.

Two years later the time finally came. The vicar's friend came to Fresvik. He was a captain, a rough fellow in spite of the monocle over his right eye. He examined Mensen through his eyeglass. They were sitting in Skulberg's small flat, right above the schoolroom.

Mensen was tiny, the captain complained. Namby-pamby, soft as eiderdown. Why did he of all people want to be a sailor?

Mensen said that he didn't want to be one. He needed to get to Egypt, but he didn't have money for the trip and so he had to become a sailor.

The captain suggested he'd do better to be thrown in jail. It wasn't as crowded, the food was better, the company too, and you couldn't drown.

Saying this he laughed and Mensen asked him if he could take him to Egypt with him, but the captain just laughed all the harder.

That was a good joke. The boy was funny. He liked that. Into the Mediterranean with his brig? What a laugh. The brig was an old ship. Anyway, Mensen shouldn't be a sailor. He wasn't stupid. At least, that's what Skulberg said, and he was probably right. Mensen should become a ship's quartermaster. Skulberg had already registered him at the college in Copenhagen. Didn't Mensen know?

He didn't know, and nor did he understand why Skulberg hadn't told him anything about it.

He didn't want to go to school anymore. It took too long. What's more, Skulberg had done it behind his back.

The captain said that Skulberg hadn't known whether Mensen would get a place at the college. The places were like gold dust. And Skulberg didn't want to disappoint him. He was very cautious, as vicars are. But it had gone like clockwork. If he accepted the offer, Skulberg would accompany them to the college. If he didn't accept, he could stay here. Also all right. Then he'd become a farmer.

It's a detour, thought Mensen, but it's a first step. A few days later he boarded.

Everything happened at once on the ship. A black sailor with pockmarked arms was rolling sour smelling barrels onto the deck. Mensen had to laugh when he thought

how he'd imagined his father looked like that. He pressed himself against the galley wall to get out of the way. An old man with gouty hands was patching a sail. An iron chest was carried aloft on wide shoulders. Curses were spat onto the deck and the guns lashed down. The carpenter's hammer drove nails into the wood. Flags flapped in the wind. The captain eyed everything sceptically and roared orders, the quartermaster set about his work hurriedly, and then twelve arms wound up the anchor.

Finally I'm on a ship, thought Mensen. More happens here in an hour than in Fresvik in a week, and we haven't even set sail yet, we're just bobbing up and down in the calm waters of the fjord. What will it be like when we're on the open sea, outside and free?

He'd left quickly. He ran to his parents' farm one last time. It had been sold long ago. A school friend slept in the living room now. Mensen's fingers didn't fit in the ship's knothole anymore. When Ase heard that he was leaving, she cried a long time. Someone always cries when someone leaves, Mensen remembered. Sigra had been right. Yet she still visited him in his room every night. She didn't say a word; she turned her back to him. He ran his fingers up her spinal column, from her pelvis up to her head, burying his hand in her blonde plaits. He didn't sleep these nights. At the end of the last night she slipped him the Saint Christopher. He'd often held the medallion at night, his hand on the slender nape of her neck.

At the harbour she held his hand.

'Don't go,' she said one last time.

Mensen didn't say anything.

‘Copenhagen is too far away,’ she added. ‘It isn’t even in Norway. And the city has just been bombarded. It’s in ruins. And maybe the British will return and the war will start again.’

Mensen knew that she was right. And yet.

‘No one who goes there comes back. Stay, while you can. You’re my sweetheart, you always will be,’ said Ase. She kissed him on the lips. Mensen was astonished. He turned around and ran towards his ship.

The kiss still tasted of caramel on his lips when Ase was nothing more than a dot on the mole, growing smaller and smaller and suddenly disappearing. Now I’m a grown-up, thought Mensen. His belongings from Fresvik fitted into a chest at the bottom end of his bunk. His father’s sextant, octant and quadrant, and the map of the Nile. A blue stone from the mountains. A couple of star charts. Sigra’s buffalo horn.

The brig sailed quickly, pushed by a following wind past Leikanger, Balestrand, Vik and Torvund, further than Mensen had ever seen from the highest peaks, until the mountains retreated too, releasing the water that became wilder and wilder. When Mensen closed his eyes he could taste her kiss, but then they reached the open sea and the salty spray blew in his face; he found a new taste on his lips. He tried to keep hold of the sweetness, but it was too late. Mensen stood in the bow and gazed at the water. Thousands of drops sparkled in the sunlight. They were scattered by the wind before forming new shapes and plunging back into the sea in raging arcs, where they were seized and flung upwards; they let a gust of wind catch them and disperse them in all directions, then wafted higher and finally smacked against Mensen’s cheek, who saw them all, every one of them in their glowing dance.

He lifted his gaze and looked towards the horizon. He had never seen that far before. He’d be able to see to Africa if the earth didn’t curve away, or at least France.

He stared, as if he had to suck this moment in, as if it would be over soon, which it was, for the horizon started to spin and tipped to his left. Mensen tried to follow it; he tilted his head and almost fell over. Then the horizon swayed to the right, first slowly, and then faster and faster, suddenly and unexpectedly it raced up to him, towering threateningly above him, taking up the whole of his field of vision, before fleeing just as quickly. Spray spattered the deck rail in front of the captain's cabin, where the captain had ordered him to hold on. It refreshed him for a moment. It felt good on his hot forehead, he could do with more of it. The captain had gone, he'd had to leave his hammock for the deck, to be ready in case of danger. Nor was Skulberg there, he'd locked himself in his cabin. Ships were not for him, he'd said, and Mensen hadn't understood him, but now he did. Maybe the teacher would know what Mensen should do about this feeling in his head, or was it his stomach, he wasn't sure where it came from. Actually, it seemed to be everywhere, in his whole body, but he could cope with it better on all fours, much better, he thought, he was doing much better, but he was wrong there and he brought up his last breakfast from Fresvik. Maybe he was no sailor after all.

Much later Mensen was woken up by the rattling of the anchor chain. He was slowly coming to, when he almost choked on his tongue that lay swollen in his mouth, but he soon forgot the sick feeling. The brig was in forbidden waters and customs officers here in Helsingør were searching the ship from top to bottom. Mensen stood up and followed them. Why was it up to Napoleon what people brought to Denmark? he wanted to know. They chased him away, looking disappointed that they hadn't found any trace of English goods.

'It isn't God's will that people make trade difficult,' Skulberg explained. 'It's politics. And as long as only their lordships make the decisions, things will carry on

as they are. It will only change, with the help of God, when simple men take their fate into their hands and there are no more kings and lords. Then we'll have paradise on earth. You'll live to see it, Mensen!

'Stop it!' The captain was livid. 'Don't tell the boy any more of your stories! One person has to be in charge, on board and on land. Don't make a mutineer of the boy before he's become a seaman.'

'Agreed. I won't say you while we're aboard.'

In the red light of the setting sun, Copenhagen's church towers looked as if they were dipped in blood, even though the siege had finished two years ago. A sea snail, Mensen thought, looking at the twisting tower of the stock exchange. He could only vaguely make out the walls of the navy college. Its grey stones were like a weight on him. He felt very cold.

'Are you afraid?' Skulberg asked.

'I hope everything goes all right here.'

'It doesn't matter whether it goes well or not, the main thing is that you go fast.'

'That's never been much use to me.'

'It might be though. Have I ever told you of Pheidippides?'

'No. Who's that?'

'He was sent as a messenger by the Athenians to Sparta, to fetch help when their enemies attacked. He ran 200 miles, there and back. He was Greece's fastest runner. On the way there, Pan appeared to him, the god of runners, with wings on his feet and a walking stick in his hand.'

'Was it worth it?'

'The enemies were beaten.'

'Then it was good for something. But that's a long time ago.'

‘The past is never really past. But that’s another story. Look, I’ve got something for you before you go, so you’ll always know the time.’ He pressed a pocket watch into Mensen’s hand, it hung on a silver chain.

‘If you have a quadrant and the exact time, then you can always know where you are. Don’t forgot that, wherever you go.’

Marc Buhl, *Rashida or The Race to the Source of the Nile*

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