

HANS PETER BECH

Tumult in Mecca

BOOX

TUMULT IN MECCA

FROM CIVIL SERVANT TO GLOBAL BUSINESS
ADVENTURER: HENRIK BERTELSEN'S
UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

THE HENRIK BERTELSEN SAGA
BOOK 1

HANS PETER BECH

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Tumult in Mecca

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To Denmark

Tumult in Mecca is a novel about baby boomer Henrik Bertelsen, a boy from provincial Aalborg in Denmark.

The story begins in July 1979, when he works as an economist at the Ministry of Labour and lectures in macroeconomics at the University of Copenhagen twice a week. Henrik craves undisturbed stability to secure his career as a civil servant.

But he doesn't get it.

Out of the blue, a highly unusual opportunity for adventure in Saudi Arabia suddenly appears. And he seizes it.

When we think that today's developments are getting ahead of us, it's only because we have short memories.

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THE INVITATION

The phone rang, and I woke with a start.

The Danish Parliament was on holiday, and most of the office was away. At other times, the phone often rang, but during the summer break, days could go by without a single call.

On this hot summer day in July 1979, the air was still under the copper roof, and the temperature was nearing thirty degrees. I had the skylight open, hoping for even the slightest breeze. Traffic hummed in the distance around the National Bank, the Børs Bridge and Holmen's Church. Otherwise, it was as quiet as a grave.

'Henrik Bertelsen,' I managed to say when I finally picked up.

'It's your brother, Jakob,' said our friendly operator. 'Shall I put him through?'

The operator was blind, something I'd only realised when stopping by his tiny office to say hello. I'd been in the job for about six months and was used to his voice. It was only appropriate to put a face to the kind voice, so I did—of course, he couldn't. But he seemed happy about my

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visit, and we often chatted when he delivered a message or put a call through.

'Hi, Jakob, what's up?'

That's how all conversations with my three brothers started: the twins Jakob and Palle, and Eigil, the oldest. I was eight years younger than the twins and ten years younger than Eigil. A latecomer.

'Fancy a coffee?' Jakob asked.

'Yes, I suppose,' I replied hesitantly. 'When?'

'Now. I've had a call from the Saudi Arabian embassy about a project.'

'What?'

'I know it sounds weird, but come over, and I'll tell you what I know.'

Jakob was co-owner of a gastronomic business in central Copenhagen, a combined delicatessen, open-faced sandwich shop, cafe and restaurant. With their shared kitchen and office facilities, they catered to a wide variety of customers with almost the same products—a clever concept. I dropped by sometimes when it was quiet, and we talked about work, business, family and everything else under the sun.

A SCRATCH IN THE LACQUER

I was very close to Jakob. My older brothers were my role models, and had helped me out of many delicate situations when we all lived at home.

As a child, I was cautious and not fond of fighting. Some of the boys in the neighbourhood found out and started bullying me, though they stopped whenever one of my brothers intervened. It was a miracle that I escaped a thrashing when they weren't around. However, their warnings were unmistakable; they made it crystal clear what would happen if there was as much as a single hair misplaced on my head. My oldest brother wasn't much of a fighter either, but the twins loved it and didn't hold back. They punched first and asked questions later. If anyone didn't listen, there would be trouble. Sometimes for me, too.

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I once used one of their newly bought vinyl records as a template to cut a circle from a piece of cardboard. As luck would have it, the knife slipped, leaving an unmistakable scratch right across the tracks. I put the record back in its sleeve and discreetly returned it to the shelf. Foolish move. Soon after they came home, they switched on the gramophone and placed the record on the turntable. A few seconds later, all hell broke loose as the needle reached the dreaded scratch.

Click, click, click.

I felt the warmth spreading across my face.

‘What the hell!’ Eigil yelled. Then, silence as they inspected the record.

‘Buller!’

Buller was my nickname, given to me by my dad the day I was born.

Rapid footsteps in the corridor. The door slammed open, and not a word was spoken. Palle was the first in line, his knuckles poised for a Dutch rub. Next, they discussed how many dead arms I deserved. A dead arm is a simple, strong punch to the shoulder or one of the upper arm muscles. It hurts; if it hits a nerve, your arm goes numb and tingly. After two dead arms, Eigil decided I’d had enough. I didn’t object and I didn’t cry. At least, not audibly—but my eyes were wet.

‘I’ll replace it,’ I managed to stammer.

It was no empty promise. My piggy bank was full. Mum had the key and would give it to me if I told her what had happened to the record. I wouldn’t mention the punishment already meted out. Besides, with my brothers, the slate was wiped clean afterwards.

Fortunately, it only happened a few times. Perhaps because I soon realised that confessing before being caught brought less trouble. Maybe a telling off at most.

DON'T MIX WORK AND PLEASURE

My three brothers all trained as chefs, and while I was still at school, I got jobs washing dishes, pots and pans where they worked. I moved to

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Copenhagen in 1971 to study political science after a somewhat unsuccessful year at Aarhus University, and got a permanent job washing pots and pans for Jakob, then head chef of a large restaurant opposite the Circus Building. During the week, I mostly worked the two to ten shift, and I took the morning shift from six to two on weekends and holidays. I even grabbed a double shift occasionally, which was great money-wise.

Washing pots and pans at my brother's restaurant had its advantages. It was more prestigious than washing dishes, the work hours fitted perfectly with my studies and the kitchen wasn't bustling in the afternoon. I also prepared vegetables, cleaned and helped prepare for the evening rush. In quiet moments, I caught up with my reading. I became good friends with the rest of the staff, especially with the girls making the open sandwiches and cold dishes. I prioritised their pots and pans on my evening shifts and made sure they always had a tidy and clean workspace. In return, a bag of delicacies often awaited me when the shift was over—smoked salmon and eel, scrambled eggs, liver pâté, cold cuts, cheese and other goodies fitted nicely into a poor student's fridge. The staff weren't allowed to take anything from the restaurant, but as the head chef's little brother, I was an exception.

Or so I thought.

The world didn't work that way. If the head chef's brother could take food out of the back door, so could everyone else. Consequently, that traffic was stopped. Almost. If something was going to be thrown out, I was discreetly asked if I wanted to take it home. Being on good terms with the head chef's little brother could never hurt.

One of the girls took a fancy to me. Her feelings weren't reciprocated, but I dated her younger sister for a while. That didn't lead to anything special, and I realised it was a good idea to keep work and pleasure separate. There was no significant damage, but it didn't end well. Her older sister didn't hold it against me, but I couldn't count on always being that lucky.

ITALIAN COFFEE CULTURE

Jakob's restaurant, Riva, was a twenty-minute walk from the Ministry of Labour, where I worked as an internal consultant in the economic-statistical office. On my way out, I told the secretary I'd be gone for a few hours and might not return. I gave her Jakob's phone number in case anything came up. Disappearing for a few hours wasn't an issue when things weren't busy, as long as they could reach me in an emergency. The chances of that happening were microscopic, as Parliament, the minister, the head of the department and my boss were all on holiday.

I walked instead of taking my bike. There was something charming about Copenhagen on a balmy summer day. As I strolled towards City Hall Square, cheerful noises from the Tivoli Gardens filled the air along H C Andersen's Boulevard. I kept to a moderate pace to avoid sweating while prolonging my enjoyment.

Just after two-thirty, I walked into Riva, across from the Freedom Statue on Vesterbrogade. Jakob looked excited, but also flustered. We sat at a window table in his elegant restaurant overlooking the entrance of Copenhagen Central Railway Station on the other side of the road. He poured freshly brewed coffee into delicate porcelain cups. Usually, a waiter brought us the coffee, but today Jakob had set the table for us at the farthest end of the restaurant.

A group of chattering Italian tourists occupied the other end of the room. They'd just received their coffee after finishing their meal. A waiter came over and told Jakob that the Italians were unhappy about paying for unlimited coffee when they'd only drunk a single small cup.

As kids, we'd spent many summers in Italy and were familiar with Italian coffee culture. Jakob told the waiter to offer them half price; he didn't need to keep track of whether they drank two cups or more.

'About a week ago, the Saudi Arabian embassy here in Copenhagen phoned me,' Jakob said after receiving friendly waves and gestures from the Italian tourists.

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'They were seeking a company that could renovate and operate kitchens in five public hospitals in Taif,' he explained.

'What and where?' I asked.

'I looked it up in the atlas.' He pulled out a large book, leafed through it, and found the maps of the Middle East.

'It's here.' He pointed to a spot in the middle of the western part of the Arabian Peninsula. 'Taif is about a hundred and seventy kilometres east of the port city of Jeddah on the other side of Mecca.'

Middle Eastern geography wasn't something I knew much about. Sure, I'd heard of Mecca, but not Jeddah or Taif. I had no idea where they were. We studied the map and found that Jeddah and Taif were lined up on the same latitude as the border between Egypt and Sudan. Cuba and Mexico appeared if you moved your finger further west. To the east, it hit India, midway between Delhi and Bombay. Exotic names!

'And what did you reply?' I asked, still studying the map.

'That, of course, we can easily handle that.'

I stared at him for a long time. The mischievous glint in his eye was typical of him and Palle, and drove our mother crazy when they were kids. They were gorgeous, blue-eyed, fair-haired boys. In childhood photos, they looked like Raphael's angels. They were anything but. They used to throw toys out of our fourth-floor flat window, followed by burning toilet paper. Once, at a family gathering, they took our youngest cousin to the police station and reported that he had got separated from his parents. My brothers were tired of dragging him along and wanted to go to the cinema. Time has slowed them down, but their mischievous minds remained.

'What do you know about hospital kitchens?' I asked.

'Nothing.' He paused. 'But I know someone who does.'

He couldn't possibly mean me, I thought. And he didn't.

'A few months ago, we had a big party here in the restaurant.' He pointed out into the room. 'It was a twenty-first birthday party for the

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daughter of the managing director of a company called Stainless-Steel Enterprise. They're experts in designing hospital kitchens and they do projects worldwide.'

'So, you referred the embassy to them?' I asked, knowing full well he hadn't.

'No. I said we could handle it. Then, I called Stainless-Steel's director to see if they'd be our subcontractor. They agreed.'

'*Our* subcontractor?'

'Yes, they'll be the subcontractor for the renovation. They will also perform equipment and machinery maintenance. However, ongoing operations aren't their speciality, so that's what we'll do. They've sent a brochure describing who they are, what they do and where they have customers.'

He pushed the brochure on the table in my direction. I leafed through it. It had impressive pictures of brand-new kitchens worldwide. Apparently, they exclusively produced and delivered hospital kitchens.

'It sounds exciting,' I admitted, 'but why on earth did the Saudis call you?'

'I don't know,' he replied, looking thoughtful. 'Honestly, I think they dialed the wrong number. But I didn't ask.'

I was lost for words.

'Listen,' said Jakob and straightened up. 'It's a super exciting project. It's not rocket science. Stainless-Steel Enterprise can do the renovations. Running the kitchens can't be that different from running a restaurant. Otherwise, we can hire someone out there to do it.' He waved his hand at the window towards Vesterbrogade.

Out there. It sounded easy when he said it that way.

He looked at me and added, 'A delegation from Saudi Arabia is coming here on Sunday to discuss the details.'

A HOLY COW AND PORTUGUESE ONION SOUP

Some see problems; others opportunities.

Jakob saw opportunities everywhere. He loved trying anything new. Plus, he was blessed with a tremendous amount of self-confidence. And an attitude of what he didn't know, he could find out, or he would find someone who could help. Jakob also exuded authority, and with his upright posture, 190 cm, and close to 100 kilos on the scales, he was a person who stood out in any context.

We enjoyed many unusual projects together. For example, we once grilled a whole calf for a summer party at a large engineering company. Had he tried that before? No, but when asked if he could (as number ten when the previous nine had declined), he jumped at the chance.

A whole calf? On a grill? For five hundred people? No problem.

He persuaded the firm's technical director to enlist the help of a few blacksmiths to transform an open dumpster into a grill that could accommodate and hold this hundred-and-fifty kilogramme animal. At one end of the container, wooden logs were burned. The glowing barbecue coals could then continuously be pushed under the calf. The blacksmiths rigged up a device with a solid skewer at the other end. Once mounted and rotated, the calf would cook on all sides. It was the perfect solution—at least on paper.

Jakob always contacted me when he had something exciting up his sleeve. We had great fun doing such jobs together, and my finances were significantly boosted. The calf needed to be ready for carving at seven o'clock, and Jakob estimated that it needed cooking for at least nine hours. Preparing the embers would take another two, so we had a very early start. The party was scheduled to end at one a.m., and the engineering firm had ordered French onion soup with baguettes served at midnight.

We met at Jakob's restaurant at six in the morning to prepare the soup. We needed coffee, so we had a few cups and discussed the day ahead

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while the onions simmered in a giant pot. And we forgot them. They turned an unmistakable dark colour, not burned or rancid, just very well done.

‘Damn!’ cried Jakob. He was about to throw them out when I had an idea.

‘Why not call it Portuguese onion soup? Who knows anything about Portuguese soup, anyway? After a few drinks, the guests will probably find it exotic.’

Jakob agreed instantly, but after a second thought, he insisted we also make a lighter French version. The engineers and their spouses should get what they’d ordered. We generously added garlic and thyme, plus some dark colouring to enhance the Portuguese variant.

‘Brilliant,’ I said. ‘Now the guests can choose between a French and a Portuguese version. People love to have a choice.’

ON WITH THE JOB

At around nine o’clock, we arrived at the Tramway Museum, Skjoldnæsholm, where the party was being held, with our soups. Unfortunately, some of the Portuguese variant had spilt and Jakob’s Renault Dauphine smelled of garlic for months afterwards.

Two blacksmiths were busy finishing the grill and the coals were already burning well. Half an hour later, the butcher arrived in his van with the calf. When such a small, cute fellow was eating grass out in the fields looking at you with its big eyes, it might not seem like much. But it was a hefty beast when it had to go on a spit and rotate on a grill.

The blacksmiths told us they’d had some engineers calculate the dimensions, and had determined that the spit must be made of solid stainless steel and have a diameter of seven centimetres. Otherwise, it would bend under the weight and the calf wouldn’t rotate.

The beast weighed a ton—at least, it felt like it. How on earth could we mount it on the spit and secure it so it could be rotated without too much effort for nine hours?

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We ended up shoving the spit's spearhead up between the calf's backside, along its spine and out under its severed head. Then we wound strong steel wire along its spine and ribs. At each end of the spit, we pushed rings with spikes into the calf, tightened and secured with screws. The weight distribution was hopeless. We had to do something. The blacksmiths fabricated a stainless-steel H, which could spread the calf's legs out and better distribute its weight. That helped. The calf now only had to be roasted on its upper and lower sides and with an almost even distance to the coals.

After grilling for a few hours, some of the meat was tender, and the rings supposed to fix the calf at each end of the spit proved too flimsy. The blacksmiths set to work again. This time, they hammered more robust spikes through the calf's front and hind quarters. The stainless-steel H was pressed up against and welded to the spit.

The process, with blacksmiths wearing large masks, and welding equipment and with flames and sparks flying around them, looked dramatic. But it worked. The beast was stabilised. Though it would be a challenge later when we had to remove it from the spit again. The spikes wouldn't come off easily. We decided to deal with that problem when we got there.

What remained was rotating the calf and pouring on the marinade Jakob had prepared in bucket loads.

Grilling a whole animal, especially one as large as a calf, means the meat closest to the coals will be done first. Obviously, Jakob was aware of that and had brought several rolls of heavy silver foil. We wrapped the meat and the parts that didn't require much cooking in the foil. When the guests arrived and the foil was removed, the meat would appear evenly cooked.

In the middle of the afternoon, the rest of Jakob's crew turned up. He oversaw the entire party, so there were two additional chefs and ten girls to help with serving, clearing and tending the bar later in the evening. They brought the appetiser and the side dishes for the main course, including several types of sauces, and the dessert.

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When the guests arrived at six, Jakob, the other two chefs and I had changed into chalk-white chef uniforms with tall hats and red checked scarves. I wasn't a chef and thought it deceitful of me to wear a chef's uniform.

'Nonsense,' said Jakob. 'Guests want real chefs.'

On with the job.

A SHOWMAN

The smartly dressed guests gazed at the enormous grilled calf, unwrapped from the foil and slowly rotated by me while Jakob poured the remaining marinade over it. The guests were curious. They asked how we got the calf on the spit, how we ensured a uniform roasting, what the marinade contained, where the best meat was, how long it had been roasting, and so on. In a loud and clear voice, Jakob answered the questions so everyone could hear them. The crowd surrounding the grill grew and asked the same questions.

Jakob changed tactics and began proactively explaining how to prepare and roast a whole calf on a grill. It was an impressive lecture and didn't give the impression he'd never tried it before; it sounded like it was his speciality. Again, there were questions which Jakob answered with humour and wit. Helped along by drink, excitement spread among the guests. Jakob understood better than anyone that success is well on its way when the food is part of a good show.

The guests were upbeat after the first course of smoked salmon and copious amounts of delicious cold white wine. They eagerly anticipated sinking their teeth into the succulent calf.

We lifted the calf off the grill with the blacksmith's help and took it into a carriage house. Out of sight of the guests, the blacksmiths, using angle grinders, freed the animal from the spear, the H-profile, and the welded-on spikes. It was a brutal and violent procedure, but it had to be done quickly.

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Large pieces of meat were now carried out onto giant platters. From four tables, we carved out precisely the piece of meat each guest wanted. Once again, there were questions. Fortunately, Jakob had given us a crash course on a calf's anatomy during the afternoon. Even I could advise the guests on the tenderest, most flavourful, or well-done piece of meat.

After the meal, we removed our chef's hats, and while the music played for dancing, we served drinks from the free bar. It was very well attended. In addition to mixing cocktails, we also provided some psychological first aid. After several drinks, inhibitions shed, and vocal cords loosened, some guests had a lot on their minds. A few crises arose, which was to be expected with so many people. They were dealt with rapidly and with discretion. No need to ruin the party for anyone else.

The late-night snacks, the soups, and Jakob and me, again wearing our tall chef's hats, were driven into the marquee on a wagon from inside the carriage house. Now, the guests could freely choose between the Portuguese and French onion soup. The Portuguese soup was a considerable hit; many people grilled us for the recipe, but we didn't reveal it. We merely hinted that in Portuguese onion soup, the onions should be roasted a little longer, and it needed more garlic. We refrained from mentioning the colouring.

By three in the morning, the last guests had left, and we started dismantling everything and cleaning up. We didn't get home until after sunrise, but it had been an enormous success. The engineering company's event committee was thrilled, and the employees later claimed it had been the best company party ever.

AN UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

'Saudi Arabia sounds exciting,' I admitted. 'But why did you call me? How do I fit in the picture?'

'You're fluent in English, and I'll need you,' Jakob said.

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According to the embassy, the project was a public tender issued by the Ministry of Health, where several Saudi Arabian firms had been invited to bid. Unfortunately, one of the companies had lost their foreign business partner. Saudi Arabian embassies worldwide had been asked to find a replacement. Still, there was only a month left of the tender period. The embassy in Copenhagen, which knew nothing about the details of the project, had done as requested. This is where Jakob, by accident and mistakenly, had come into the picture.

A few days before our meeting at Jacob's restaurant, a representative from Gasaz Enterprises, the Saudi company, had called him. They wanted references and had asked how soon he could deliver an offer. Jakob gave them some of Stainless-Steel Enterprise's customers' names. He stressed that the Ministry's tender document had to be available in English and Gasaz should cover the travel and hotel expenses during the stay. Jakob and his team of experts would naturally need to personally inspect the five hospitals in question.

That was out of the question said the representative.

'If that's the case, I can't be of any assistance,' said Jakob, and he ended the conversation.

An hour later, they were on the phone again. Travel and hotel accommodation could be funded for three people for five days. Apparently, an Egyptian who worked from an office in Cairo and some people from Gasaz's head office in Jeddah would come to Copenhagen on Sunday. The details could be discussed, and Jakob and his team should be prepared to travel the following week. The offer had to be written in English, and Gasaz would translate it into Arabic.

'Can you come on Sunday?' asked Jakob, quickly adding, 'and travel to Jeddah on Wednesday?'

Wow! A trip to Saudi Arabia sounded exciting, but the timing? Not good; in fact, it couldn't be worse. I was in the middle of establishing a co-housing community, and we'd be moving into our new house at the beginning of September. My wife, Sammy, and I intended to use some of our holidays then. We were also planning to adopt a child from

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Indonesia. If that were to succeed this year, we'd also need to save some holiday for that trip. Could I get time off work? Probably, as there wasn't much to do at the Ministry during the summer.

'We've got a lot on our hands as we're in the middle of moving,' I replied. 'I'll have to discuss it with Sammy. And before I say yes, I want to read the tender description.'

Why was I being so reticent? If Sammy agreed to my travelling, it didn't matter what was in the tender.

Jakob gave me the brochure from Stainless-Steel Enterprise, so I could prepare for Sunday's meeting with the representatives of the Saudi Arabian company.

I walked back to the Ministry but didn't return to my office; I cycled home instead.

RING, RING, WHY DON'T YOU GIVE ME A CALL?

It wasn't love at first sight when Sammy and I met, a late November evening just after midnight at the Pussycat Disco on Gothersgade.

I'd met up with my mates from my hometown, Aalborg, and we'd started the evening at Hviid's Wine Bar. The bar closed at midnight, and we were thrown out. As usual, we trudged our way down to the Pussycat. Our usual place was at the bar on the first floor. We could stand there, watching the dance floor and the girls as they went to and from the loo. When we arrived, two girls had already occupied some space at the bar. Sammy was one of them. We pushed in to make space, but Sammy protested. We started talking, danced and exchanged phone numbers.

She left around two o'clock, saying she was working the next day and needed a few hours of sleep.

Me? I had another boozy weekend.

The following Monday afternoon, after having been at the university

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all morning, I was taking a much-needed nap on the sofa in my tiny flat on Amagerbrogade when the phone rang.

It was Sammy. Sammy who? I was still half asleep and not thinking coherently. 'Saturday at Pussycat' I heard before the line went dead.

My memory slowly returned. I vaguely remembered a tall, slim, dark-haired girl with brown eyes and a foreign accent—my favourite features. But the connection had broken. Had she hung up because I hadn't recognised her straight away? *Wait a minute.* Hadn't we exchanged phone numbers on Saturday? What did I wear that night? My blue checked shirt!

I dived into the laundry basket. Sure enough, in the breast pocket, I found a piece of paper with the name Sammy and a telephone number written in blue ink. I called back. Apologising, I explained I'd been asleep when she'd called and was a bit groggy. Of course, I remembered her. Should we meet?

Sammy had rented a flat in the housing complex behind Rigshospitalet, where she worked. I swam on Tuesdays at the university's gym on Nørre Alle, not far from where she lived. I could easily drop by her place afterwards. That was fine with her. But only a brief visit. A girlfriend was visiting, and after a light evening meal, they planned to head off to the cinema.

The arrangement was poorly thought out on my part. After swimming, I'd have red eyes, reek of chlorine, and my long hair would look a mess. But I was curious, and she probably was, too.

When I rang her doorbell the following evening, I wore worn blue jeans, a beige polo neck jumper, a double-breasted blue peacoat and brown cowboy boots with Spanish heels. This outfit suited the occasion best. Sammy opened the door. She wore a blue corduroy pinafore dress with a dark polo neck sweater underneath and thick blue tights. On her feet, she wore some kind of slippers. She was tall and slim, with thick dark brown hair and brown eyes, and had a waiting, enticing smile. We stood there, absorbing our first impressions of each other for a few seconds. It felt like an eternity.

'Hi. Come in,' she said eventually.

Her friend, a female colleague, had already arrived. We greeted each other. I explained I'd just got out of the pool and probably smelled of chlorine. They didn't disagree. The cassette recorder was playing ABBA's 'Ring, ring, why don't you give me a call?' and we chatted about the film they were going to see. I didn't know it. They were eating shortly, and I had to go.

'Let's keep in touch,' I said, bidding Sammy and her colleague farewell.

A TEMPORARY STAY

After my bacculaureate in the summer of 1970, my girlfriend from the past several years and I decided to go our separate ways. She wanted to go to France. I wanted to go to Aarhus. So we did. No dramatics. Just a fond farewell, thanks for everything and enjoy life.

However, I never felt at home in Aarhus. The economic studies were too mathematical and too business-orientated for my liking. I was more interested in macroeconomics. Friends from the bacculaureate years had moved to Copenhagen, and in Aarhus, I'd have to rebuild my social life from scratch. In the spring of 1971, I gave up and moved to Copenhagen. My friends and my brother Jakob, who could get me a job, lived there, so I switched to political science, which included macroeconomics, instead.

On 1 September 1971 I started my studies at Copenhagen University. After the first week, I joined a study group with four others. After my unsuccessful time in Aarhus, I was determined to make a good start. With what I'd learned the year before in Aarhus and my study group, I got top marks at the end of the first year. My exam results at the end of the second year were as good as the first, but partying took over during my third year. There was a party every weekend with my friends from Aalborg. We started Thursday evening and usually continued until late Sunday. I didn't study much, and in mid-autumn, I doubted I could catch up before the final spring exam. I risked having to redo my third year.

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The thought sickened me. I'd already missed a year due to my change of studies. If I had to redo my third year, it was goodbye to my study group. I'd have to explain to everyone that I couldn't finish in time and needed a further year. It would be embarrassing.

Since my steady girlfriend and I had broken up, I wasn't short of fiery but short-term female company. I panicked, terrified when they started placing their underwear in my chest of drawers, so I threw them out. Going out and partying cost a lot of money and distracted me from everything else. It was great while it was going on, but I felt strangely empty afterwards. It didn't leave me with anything besides an empty pocket and a hangover.

KEY TO A NEW CHAPTER

When I opened our flat door, Sammy was home. She was working an evening shift, and we could have coffee together before she left.

'I met Jakob today,' I said.

'How are they?' she asked.

'Great, I imagine. We didn't discuss his family. Jakob had had a phone call from the Saudi Arabian embassy, and we were preoccupied with that.'

'A phone call from who?'

'The Saudi Arabian embassy. Jakob wanted to know if I'd go to a meeting with a delegation from Saudi Arabia on Sunday at the restaurant. And if could I travel to Saudi with him on Wednesday next week? We'll be away for five days.'

She looked at me, puzzled. 'What will you be doing in Saudi Arabia?'

'You won't believe it, but we will be doing some field studies before tendering an offer to renew and maintain the kitchens in five hospitals in a town called Taif,' I replied, knowing full well how bizarre it sounded. 'It's east of Mecca,' I added, as if that would clarify things. I

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repeated everything I knew, which wasn't much. It didn't seem clearer for Sammy.

'I've got to run,' she said. 'Let's talk about it tomorrow.'

'I don't need to go to work early tomorrow,' I hastened to say. 'We can have breakfast together.'

'That'd be nice,' she replied, smiling, kissing me, and flying out the door.

When I first met Sammy, our calendars were full of other arrangements. We managed to find a Saturday when she could come to a party to which I had already been invited. She would arrive around nine. By nine fifteen, she still hadn't turned up.

As I'd run out of cigarettes, I rushed downstairs to go to the newsagents across the road. When I opened the main door, Sammy was standing there looking annoyed. She'd been ringing the doorbell for at least fifteen minutes and was about to go home. I managed to make her change her mind. I forgot about getting cigarettes and we went to the party. She had to leave around two, but I promised to call her the following day when I was more sober.

We arranged to meet on a weekday evening at a restaurant in downtown Copenhagen. Sammy wore black jeans and a red coat and hat. She oozed maturity and self-confidence. We ate lamb and shared a half-litre of the house red wine.

Sammy was just over a year older than me. Her full name was Samantha, but no one ever used it. She was born and grew up in a working-class family in Manchester, the oldest of five kids. Later in life, she discovered she didn't have the same biological father as her siblings. In fact, she still didn't know who her biological father was. When she'd finished school, she'd moved to London to train as a student nurse at Saint Bartholomew's Hospital. I'd never heard of it but could understand

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it was one of the best in England. Sammy had shared a flat with other student nurses in a large house in Islington, and they were now her closest friends. She was staying in Denmark until the spring, when she planned to move to the States with another nursing friend who'd have completed her training by then. They had contracts with a large hospital in Houston, Texas, with a good wage and moving costs paid for.

'Why did you learn Danish?' I asked, 'You're only staying for a short time.'

'A nurse must be able to communicate with her patients.'

There was a pause. I was embarrassed; I should have known better. Many Danes speak excellent English, especially the younger generations. I must admit I was impressed. She'd learnt Danish in a relatively short time. Respect.

'What about Houston?' I asked and knew I had to be more precise. 'Are you dead set on it?' I've never been good at bluffing; my cards were now out on the table.

'There isn't much in life that can't be changed,' she replied, a smile creeping into her eyes.

We said our goodbyes outside the restaurant. Sammy had to work the next day and I was at university. I would have prolonged our evening, but that wasn't in the plan.

From then on, I felt that Sammy could be the key to me opening a new chapter. She was different, was English, and a trained nurse with a job that needed her complete attention and alertness. She was responsible and took it seriously.

In mid-December, Sammy decided to go home to Manchester for Christmas and return after the new year. I thought that was a bad idea. I could understand her wanting to go home for Christmas, but couldn't we celebrate New Year's Eve together? I was going home to my parents in Aalborg for Christmas. They agreed I could invite who I wanted to their New Year's Eve party. I wanted her to come, and the flat had

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enough rooms so she could respectably stay the night. That's what happened, and after New Year's Eve, we were a couple.

I had to get Sammy to agree to the project in the Middle East. The timing wasn't the best, but I wanted to go to Saudi Arabia with Jakob. Sammy's English and hospital know-how would be a great asset to the project.

Sammy slept late the next day. She'd an excellent reason to do so after working an evening shift. When she got up, I made coffee and went to the bakers for fresh breakfast rolls. I repeated what I knew. 'I agree; it sounds bizarre. But if we can arrange it, I'd like to participate in the project. After I get home, there are nearly two weeks until we move. We can easily do it. And we need your help writing the proposal.'

'How are you getting there?' she asked. I knew from her response she'd accepted I was going.

'We're flying,' I said stupidly.

'Which way are you flying?' She wanted to know which route we would be taking. I hadn't considered it, but with the recent unrest in the Middle East, I realised it might seem risky.

'I'll find out,' I promised. 'We won't be flying anywhere where there's too much trouble.'

STEEL-FREE STAINLESS ENTERPRISE

Later that morning, I went to work and read the brochure from Stainless-Steel Enterprise a few times. I'd received a massive stack of copies of a report with a list of opportunities for efforts against unemployment, which we'd prepared for the government's committee on labour market issues. I had put them on the shelf behind me. My boss wanted me to write a cover letter on his behalf to send out with the report when it returned from the printers. There was no hurry as everyone

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was on holiday. Sending them during the week would be fine. Apart from that, my inbox was empty.

I told the secretary I had an errand to run in town. In fact, that was true. Laksegade ends at Bremerholm, which at its northern end reaches the King's Garden. On the way, I passed Strøget, the pedestrian street humming with summer-happy tourists. The garden was full of people stretched out on the lawns, enjoying the sun and the warmth. Several of the girls were topless. It has been like that for many years, and of course, I took a discreet look and enjoyed the sight. As one of my friends said, working up an appetite in town is okay as long as you eat at home. I thought that sounded funny.

'Henrik,' I said to myself, 'get a grip' A walk around the gardens didn't bring me any closer to finding a solution, but on the other hand, there was no need to be uptight about it. I was satisfied with where I was in my life. Everything was falling into place or at least heading in the right direction. A trip to Saudi Arabia sounded exciting. And perhaps I could find more time to play my guitar. It wasn't too late to join a band, which I had dreamed of ever since my teenage years.

Back at the office, I looked at the pile of reports and decided they could wait until tomorrow. I went home early instead and spent a few hours with Sammy, cross-examining her on everything she knew about nutrition and hospital kitchens.

That evening, Jakob phoned and asked if I could drop by the following morning. He'd received a copy of the tender, and a representative from 'Steel-Free Stainless Enterprise' would be there. We laughed at the slip of the tongue. An engineer—Helmut Freisleben—would be there to help us prepare for the meeting with the Saudis and would probably accompany us on the field trip.

The representative from Steel-Free—the new name had already stuck—had implemented new kitchens in hospitals all over the world. As his name implied, he was born Austrian, but he'd grown up in Denmark. He answered our questions, and we realised how perfect Steel-Free would be for managing renovation and interior design. Operations, however, wasn't their domain. We'd have to do that. The tender mater-

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ial, though, was hopeless. It outlined that the offer should cover the renovation of the kitchens at five hospitals and their operation for ten years. However, besides a random and incomplete list of some kitchen equipment, there was no information about the current buildings, specialities, number of patients, healthcare personnel, or catering requirements.

Obviously, we needed to make an onsite inspection and speak with the local authorities before making an offer. Even then, there'd be many unresolved issues to consider. Helmuth said that in his experience, there was often insufficient information from those types of countries. Projects were frequently carried out to generate funds that filled the pockets of politicians and bureaucrats. Saudi Arabia was a dictatorship led by a king who had a huge family, all living a luxurious life. Where did the money come from?

After Helmuth had left, Jakob and I thoroughly discussed the project again. We were convinced that Steel-Free Stainless Enterprise, as our subcontractor, could solve the renovation tasks. We were also confident we could find a solution for the operations, but someone had to have on-site responsibility. If we won the project, it would mean that Jakob had to move to Saudi Arabia. Under no circumstances would I move there. Anyway, after the offer was delivered, I wouldn't be needed any more.

We decided not to waste any more energy on that question. We probably wouldn't win, anyway. We'd submit the bid to the Saudi company, which would then handle the bidding. We just thought it would be exciting to visit the country.

Back at the office, I spent the afternoon drafting a cover letter for the report and asked a colleague to review it. She suggested a few amendments. The secretaries could then type it up and include the recipients' names and addresses, and I'd sign the cover letters the following day. My inbox was still empty, so I cycled home.

That same evening, Jakob phoned and said we would meet the Saudis on Sunday at three o'clock at Riva.

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tions on-site. The following week, we'll prepare the proposal. It'll be ready for pickup on the evening of the twenty-fifth. That should give you enough time to add your contributions and submit it before the deadline. While preparing the proposal, we'll need to talk over the phone to coordinate the details.'

We were on shaky ground, but the precise dates impressed our guests. Because I was moving house the first weekend of September, there was no room for delay. In reality, we had no idea how long it would take to write the proposal, but we had to finish it in the time available. Parkinson's Law states that work expands to fill the time available for its completion; we had to adjust the proposal's scope and level of detail to the time we had. I was familiar with that way of working. There were often short and rigid deadlines when the political system dictated our activities. Working day and night, we'd drop everything and deliver what we could in the time we had.

'You must stay in Jeddah until the proposal is completed,' the Egyptian suddenly commanded.

'That's impossible,' Jakob responded immediately. 'Once we've finished our investigations on site, we need to return to Copenhagen and set our experts to work on designing the solutions—there'll be drawings, calculations and descriptions. We can't do that if we're in Jeddah. If staying in Saudi Arabia while the proposal is being prepared is non-negotiable, we must withdraw.'

That's the end of that adventure, I thought. But now the director spoke up.

'OK,' he said. 'We understand that. But you've asked us to cover your travel and stay in Saudi Arabia, so we must be sure you'll deliver a proposal.'

'Listen,' my brother said. 'We're all busy people. I run three businesses. Helmuth is chief engineer at Stainless-Steel Enterprise, and Henrik is chief economist at the Ministry of Labour. We're ready to take a week off at short notice and travel to Saudi Arabia. When we say we can

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