

Lena Einhorn

Blekingegatan 32

(excerpt – chapters 1-5 and 14)

Translated from the Swedish.

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'Greta! Greta!'

She is looking out towards the sea, her eyes screwed up in the sun. All she can see is the unmistakable silhouette of his haircut and the lanky body with the long legs. Now he is gesticulating towards her, gesticulating that she should come down to the sea, that she should run in with him.

She laughs. She shakes her head.

But of course he doesn't give up. He never gives up, that is what is so remarkable.

She gets up from the steps of the porch, puts her manuscript aside, throws her blouse down and runs across the soft warm sand, past him, into the sea.

She runs faster than him, much, much faster than him. And she dives into the water, head first.

When he has caught up with her, out of breath, he holds her wet head with both of his large hands and looks at her. For a long time. Not into her eyes, not into her. He looks at her, the way you look at a great work of art.

'Greta,' he says, and now he is looking into her. 'I shall lay the world at your feet!'

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Chapter 1

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A bell tolls, weakly, so weakly that nobody could reasonably be disturbed by it. She turns onto her side, her eyelids tightly pressed shut. It is All Saints' Church, six times. Not now, not yet, she ought to have another quarter of an hour, at least. She has the right to it.

'Shut up, you little bastard!' From above.

She sighs, quietly. So that was it... not the church bells.

Now you can hear heavy stumbling steps from the neighbour up there. Oh God, why can't he just sleep off his hangover? She doesn't want to, but she can't stop herself from listening. Because the worst sort of sounds are rarely audible through the ceiling. When there is a real danger, it is often ominously silent. But then the steps die away. She sighs with relief. Then she looks out into the room. The sunlight filters in behind the thin curtain, lighting up the edge of the portrait on the sideboard. If it was Sunday, it would be something quite different. The Fjäderholm islands? Skansen park? Somewhere she could be left in peace.

But it isn't Sunday. It is hardly ever Sunday.

From the other part of the sofa bed, calm, gentle breathing can be heard. Alva copes with everything, even when she is asleep. Alva doesn't listen through the ceiling to the neighbour, never has done all of her seventeen-year life.

Now you can hear the clatter from the kitchen. Now it will soon definitely be over.

'Kata!'

One, two, three, four...

'Kata!'

One, two, three...

'Kata, not another morning!'

There is a movement beside her.

'We're coming, mama. Both Kata and me. In a minute.'

A weak muttering can be heard from the other side of the door. A hand stretches out towards her, strokes her cheek.

'Kata, you must get up.'

Mama's extended arm. No, that isn't fair.

She pretends to be asleep.

Alva puts on the dressing gown, the one that had belonged to papa, gets up and leaves the room.

Now she is alone, and suddenly it is completely silent.

For a brief moment.

'Greta Gustafsson! You are not going to be late to work again, do you hear!'

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Chapter 2

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Any young woman in her situation would have thanked her lucky star. Every girl from her district would have been walking on clouds after such an opportunity.

But not her. And why not? She couldn't even give an answer. It was as if it was her basic state somehow. Her confounded nature. Because how otherwise could you explain why it wasn't enough? Although it was good, it wasn't good enough. Not by a long chalk.

You had to be grateful for there being aspects of it that compensated.

She stroked the box with her hand. Twice. So perfectly arched, with a downy surface. The price tag hung on a thread. Twenty-eight kronor, it said. A whole week's wages! She couldn't help but smile. A hatbox, or food and rent? Hatbox, of course, if you could choose. Then again, not a hatbox. A hatbox was pure vanity. Empty, meaningless vanity. The sort that really just made you depressed. Of course, you could care about your appearance. But empty vanity was worse than rats in the stairwell. At least the rats wanted something. Something important. That, you could respect.

'Excuse me, how much is this?'

She looks up. A middle-aged lady, quite obviously from the fancy district of Östermalm. Her gaze is well-suited to her pompous tone.

Greta immediately straightens herself up, making her almost 10 centimetres taller than the customer. Then she looks her right in the eye. And delays a moment.

‘This is a completely new model that our modiste calls Margit.’ Her voice is stable, calm and extremely business-like. ‘It is made of braided liséré, and is available in marine and beige, brown and beige, pink and beige, green and beige and rust and beige.’

Now there is silence. Are those bits of mascara that have fastened on the customer’s lower right eyelid? Yes, and she has missed a part of the eyelash. Keep your eyes on her ...

‘I see...’ the lady’s snootiness has suddenly evaporated. ‘And what does it cost?’ She sounds almost shy. ‘Eighteen kronor. This is excellent value for money.’

Out of the corner of her eye she notices her supervisor, Mrs Hellberg, watching. Mrs Hellberg looks so satisfied.

Where has she learnt this? How does she know? For those acquainted with her circumstances, it might look like a charade, a piece of theatre. A role well rehearsed by a fifteen-year-old girl in front of the mirror. A make-believe figure. But it isn’t like that, not really. She is not pretending. She just doesn’t reveal everything all the time. In actual fact, she almost never does.

And at the Paul U.Bergström AB department store – popularly called PUB – sales assistant Greta Gustafsson’s sureness of style and noticeably good hand with customers are greatly appreciated.

She is an excellent saleswoman. But that’s of no help.

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Chapter 3

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There had, however, been two places that helped, for a very long time. Two saving angels, if places can be angels.

Skansen had come first. That was from the time when she didn’t have any say at all, because she had been locked every day inside the big box at Nytorget square. They had taken her there when she was seven. That horrifying – yet at the same time totally unimaginative – ugly big box was somehow symbolic for what it did to her, what it was intended to do to her. She had counted the minutes, every day, utterly incapable of understanding why she should interest herself in how many litres of water could run through a tap with a certain diameter during a certain time, utterly incapable of understanding why her language should be divided up into small soulless skeletal parts, and utterly incapable of understanding what she had in common with the other seven-year-old people around her, who seemingly without any friction adapted to the ways of the world of which she couldn’t fathom anything. If life was only about describing, organising and explaining, then she didn’t even understand what life was good for. Worst of all was that play, too, was regulated in this horrible place. Which meant that she also feared the breaks. She couldn’t stand having to romp about to order, for a certain number of minutes. She couldn’t stand being expected to instantaneously open herself or allow herself to be amused or to be able to run around, only to just as suddenly turn it all off again. Those who lived around her – those who were of the same age as her, and thus, and on account of a certain geographic proximity, had been placed in the same institution as her – did, however, already on the

stairs down to the school yard seem to have switched to marble-playing attitude or skipping-rope attitude or gossip-attitude. That was something she just couldn't stick.

Or was it simply her own shyness that she couldn't stick?

But just like when someone desperately searching for love suddenly and inexplicably finds it, she too had found the solution. And it was, surprisingly enough, the hated school itself which showed her the way. It had started when they were told to read the book by Selma Lagerlöf, the one about the boy who flew on the back of a goose over all of Sweden and knew everything about the nation's towns and buildings and provinces. She obediently opened the book (because obedient she was), and when the others sat and read the thick volume she let her thoughts wander off as usual, while at the same time in some way absorbing the text. But then, suddenly, she made a discovery. Something got a grip of her attention. That boy, the one in the book, Nils Holgersson, he was the one who got a grip on her. Yes, she understood *him!* To be hovering like that, a long way from the ground, high above all the human beings... to look at everything from a distance... to be the only living creatures in space, the boy and the faithful goose, to have permission to wander off in your dreams. Yes...

At the end of the lesson, Fröken Rosenqvist explained that the reason they had read this particular book just now was that in it the authoress told about Skansen, "the big garden outside Stockholm, where they have collected together so many remarkable things". And besides, Skansen was a bit like *Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey Through Sweden*, except everything was gathered together in one place: streets and buildings from all corners of the realm, from a bygone age. Their teacher said that reading the book would be a preparation for a visit to that place. Preparation, Greta thought, so that you wouldn't risk the terrible fate of being surprised! But this time she fooled them. She didn't read the thick book to learn. She *became* Nils Holgersson, the boy who hovered high over the country, and flew wherever he wanted, without anyone being able to stop him.

Then came the day when the pupils themselves would visit that garden. It was early one morning, autumn on the verge of winter. The sun had not yet risen and many of the street lights up on Katarina bangata were still lit when Fröken Rosenqvist got them to form a long line in the school yard. Greta shivered, but tried not to let anyone see. She soon sought out Lisa, the only one in the class that she found herself able to talk to. Or rather: the only one who didn't expect Greta to talk to her. Then they were told to start moving. In a long orderly procession they crossed Nytorget square, then walked along Skånegatan to Renstiernas gata, and finally down the long steep Katarinavägen. There was a bit of a glow on the church roofs but not yet on the water as they walked from the high Södermalm hill down to the Old Town of Stockholm. The Old Town with its many roofs and its seemingly randomly placed spires striving up towards the sky but still not able to reach the children up on the hill. One-two, one-two, one-two, like a little army they marched.

There was a cold wind when they came down to Röntmästartappen, where the Djurgården ferries were lined up in the half-light of morning.

'Girls first!' Fröken Rosenqvist called out. Girls first, because they were never as warmly dressed as the boys, and besides they were supposedly so incredibly more fragile.

She balanced on the gang plank out to the little ferry. *Djurgården 4* it said in large letters on the side. Then she stepped aboard, and saw the long, varnished wooden benches along the sides. Perhaps something happened already then, already when she saw those wooden benches. Because they were arranged like in a

theatre. And the very same moment the ferry left the quay, she understood that she was on her way to a great adventure. Out on the immense sea to a foreign shore.

It opened itself up for her in a second, the land of stories. Because, you know, you can go off travelling in lots of different ways. You can travel to other places, indeed other worlds. But you can also travel to other times. At any rate in your imagination. And here at Skansen, here you could do it for real.

She saw the Kyrkhult cottage from a distance, just behind the bird ponds. A little farm with beehives in front and a tree at every corner. And she knew that it was the cottage her papa had so often talked about, most particularly when he had had a little too much to drink. Without her ever having been there, she had longed to go to the timbered little farm in Norra Sunholt and the green, rolling countryside round about. Because when her beloved papa, with tears in his eyes, had spoken of a heavenly place far away, so different from the misery in which they now lived, this had gone straight into her young soul. There was a paradise – somewhere else. Now she was there. The smells, and the paintings – people from a bygone age, surrounded by colourful flowers – and the simple, genuine room with its wooden table and its lovingly carved chairs. This wasn't a place for calculations, sums and descriptions. This was a place for life. Real, genuine life.

So it became her special place, Skansen. From that day on, she had made her way there as often as she could and had a few coins to spend. On Sundays, during holidays, indeed sometimes she even sneaked off there after school. The only problem was that every time she had been there, the return to everyday life was all the harder. The greyness enveloped her so that she sometimes felt as if she was being smothered. Although when it had been at its very worst, she noticed that it helped just to think about Skansen. So she developed a new place for an outing: Skansen in her thoughts. She soon knew every single cottage down to the tiniest detail, every single tree, every single mound of stones. Indeed, thoughts were a blessing. Thoughts nobody could take away from her.

Thus was her life in those days, in the big ugly box in Södermalm. Among her classmates, Greta Gustafsson was regarded as something of an oddball, a strangely attractive yet inaccessible girl, who you rarely understood.

But there were moments when you could see this girl reach out with her soul towards somebody. This happened most particularly when somebody in the class had been told off or kept in detention after the lesson. Then Greta could stand in the corridor outside and wait. And when her classmate, reprimanded and crushed, came out of the classroom and closed the door, Greta was there and put her arms around him or her. She stood like that a long, long time, often with tears in her eyes, and consoled.

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Then papa died. And thus vanished the final ounce of endurable existence. It didn't happen quickly, it didn't even happen unexpectedly, he had been fading away such a long time. The kidneys, they said. But dead? How is that imaginable?

They hadn't even let him vanish in a civilised manner. She had been there, she had seen it. They had stood in a long line together, she beside her papa.

'Take your hat off!'

He had looked at the woman, confused. A blue blouse with a white starched collar, a blinding white apron. Her grey teeth seemed even greyer against all the white.

With difficulty, he lifted a hand up to his head and took off his hat.

‘I’m sorry...’ His eyes were shiny, he was shivering even though it was hot.

‘Income?’

He stared at the repulsive nurse. Who was like she was just because she worked at the clinic for the poor. Who was like she was just because she busied herself with people who were worse off than she was. People who couldn’t repay her contempt.

‘What’s your income?!’ The nurse had raised her voice.

Papa gave Greta an appealing look, but she was unable to help him. She didn’t know.

‘Income, man!’

He suddenly stumbled.

‘But can’t you see!’ She heard the shriek from her own throat, as if it came from somebody else. *‘Can’t you see! He’s dying!’*

Gone for ever, for all eternity. Never ever there again. How can you bear it? And whose fault is it? It must be somebody’s fault. Somebody or something has forced her wretched papa to wear himself out, to work in the rain and the cold without enough clothes on his body, to carry loads much heavier than what his slight body could manage, to never be able to rest properly, to slowly be broken down, indeed, disappear, become nothing, hardly a living being.

She was fourteen. But did she mourn? No she didn’t mourn, not openly. She wasn’t going to treat them to that. And when Alva and Sven cried in front of other people, then she got angry. Told them to be quiet.

After that, Södran became so incredibly more important. Södran, that was her second place. Really it had been for years, even before Nils Holgersson and Skansen. But much time was to pass before she could start to use it in the same way. But then, on the other hand, Södran would have a decisive advantage over Skansen: Södran didn’t just offer an escape, Södran offered hope. A very distant hope, admittedly, but for a girl used to living in dreams, distant hope can work miracles.

Södran, that was the very finest theatre for the people of Södermalm.

Mind you, if one is going to be very fussy it started already when she got that present from her papa on her fourth birthday. Papa had scraped together for it, without telling mama. Then mama had screamed at him in the night, screamed that they couldn’t afford it. Mama often screamed at papa – above all at night – and every time it cut right into Greta. So much that she sometimes went to sleep with her hands over her ears.

So she ought to have had a bad conscience for those water colours. But she didn’t, because she knew that papa knew why he had given her them. Because he hadn’t given her any paper, only paints and a brush. And she had immediately gone out into the backyard, behind the shed. And there, amidst all the junk and all the shards of glass, she had sat down with the small coloured cakes, the brush, a glass of water and a little mirror. And then she had started painting, pictures on herself, on her own body. Houses and suns and trees and small figures. And then she had painted her lips, her eyes and her cheeks. And when she looked in the mirror, she saw that she had changed, she was no longer Greta. And then she had started strutting around. She saw that she could change from a little girl to an old man in a second. And screw up all her face and

feel that she could hardly manage a single step, and get a voice so deep that it was almost deeper than papa's. And then she laughed. How fantastically clever she was, after all! Then she went to show papa. And he looked so proud. Which gave her a shudder of joy. Yes, sometimes she could feel that. When papa looked happy, really happy, she could feel a shudder of joy.

Gradually, she acquired fellow actors – Alva and Sven, her big sister and big brother. She dressed them up and gave them instructions. 'You're the papa' (she pointed at Sven), 'you're the mama' (she pointed at Alva), 'and I am your drowning child'. They never questioned her, her will was so strong. But Sven, who was all of seven years older, soon left them, and it was hard for Alva to spend hours every day playing the game, even though she loved it. So when Alva couldn't, then Lisa had to take her place. Lisa, her classmate, obeyed; she went along with almost everything that Greta suggested. This allowed Greta's imagination and inventiveness to blossom. Sometimes they went all the way down to the royal palace. There they walked around in the castle square "like princesses". What it meant to walk around like princesses, Greta didn't explain in more detail, she just straightened her back and raised her eyebrows, and looked far away, at nothing. 'Perhaps one of the princes might catch sight of us,' she explained.

Yes, Lisa went along with most things. But when Greta suggested that they put on Sven's clothes and go down to the cobbler's two blocks away, as boys, then Lisa got embarrassed.

'Nothing to be afraid of,' Greta had answered. 'If you take big steps and look as if you own the street, then everybody will think you are a boy. You *are* a boy. So Lisa had followed along with her, although she kept her mouth shut. And Greta, who talked more than usual (*a lot* more than usual), had fooled everybody. Even the cobbler, although he knew her.

'I am Gustafsson's youngest son.' She had managed to make her voice sound really deep. 'And this is my mate.' Then she had started to whistle and walk around with her hands in her pockets. The cobbler had laughed so much he almost choked, because in the end he had of course recognised her.

After that success, Greta wanted to play the dress-up-as-boys game every week and go off to new districts. Lisa had never really felt comfortable with the trick, but she played along anyway to be able to be with Greta. And to be part of what always happened afterwards. When they climbed up onto the roof of the shed.

'We are on a white sandy beach, Lisa, can you feel it?'

They had gotten up there with the help of the old wooden ladder which stood leaning against the wall. Then they had lain down on the metal roof, so flat that nobody could see them from down in the yard. Only from up above.

That was where they ended up. Every time.

'Can you see the waves breaking in onto the beach? And the sky, look at the sky, such a clear blue! Can you hear the orchestra? Over by the casino, how beautiful it sounds! The trombone, oh, how it toots!'

Lisa loved to hear Greta describing all this. Greta was just as good at describing things as she was at acting. When she told her stories, Lisa could really see it all, every detail. When she told her stories, she wasn't at all shy, not at all like in school. No, at those moments Greta could talk on and on for ever.

But what about Södran, the theatre? Well, you could say that Södran was the extension of that game, the furthestmost point. Not that they could afford to go to Södran – theatre visits were for another class of people. But because it was there, almost within reach. And with a bit of imagination, more than so. Already before she started school, Greta had started to sneak up to Mosebacke square, while pretending that she was going to go out into the yard and play. Since they could hardly keep her locked up inside, that trick

sometimes worked. Then, when her family had finally discovered that she had disappeared, and Sven or papa went out to search for her, and in the end found her, more often than not an hour or two had passed. It was a long way from Blekingegatan to Södran.

She tried to be there at seven o'clock, when the actors arrived. She stood on the veranda, the one that led to the stage entrance. That was where they all went in, all the variety artistes, all the prima donnas, all the comedians. Nobody stopped her, despite the fact that she was so little. They most likely simply weren't looking at her level. The actors were often well dressed, in furs and suits, and paraded past as if they were already on the stage. Sometimes she felt the smell of the women's perfume, indeed even of the men's.

Then, when they had all gone in, she still stood out there. Because she could hear their voices. The doors were always open, even in the winter. And it wasn't only the voices that wafted out to her, but all the scents – theatre make-up, the dust from the stage floor, old costumes. All in a single intoxicating mixture. While scenes and stories and music can transport you to another reality, nothing can beat scents. Nothing in the entire world. To experience this was worth all the tellings-off that then awaited her. Because she knew that it was this that was her divine kingdom. This and nothing else.

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'Fröken Gustafsson.'

She quickly turned around. Fru Hellberg looked inquisitively at her. And beside her stood Herr Bergström – the director of the whole of PUB! Greta felt the creeps coming on. What had she done wrong? She curtsied quickly.

'What do you think?' Fru Hellberg had turned to Herr Bergström, who was looking at Greta with a furrowed brow. 'She is always clean and smart, and she does have a pleasing face.'

'Yes...' Herr Bergström looked pensive. 'Quite tall... how old are you?' He was speaking to her! She swallowed.

'Fifteen... soon sixteen...' They were going to dismiss her! She was too young!

Herr Bergström raised his eyebrows.

'Mind you, height doesn't really matter, does it?' Fru Hellberg was quick to interpose.

'No... no... that's true of course.' He looked at Greta again in silence. Then he smiled, gave a quick nod and went on his way. Fru Hellberg hurried after him.

It was thus it started, as simply as that.

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He stared at the pictures. She tried to interpret his facial expression.

'Moje, do you think they'll help?'

The photographer on Forty-ninth Street had asked her to look languishing, languishing and hunted and seductive at the same time. He had told her to put a hand to her throat, like an animal waiting to be attacked. He had told her to be beautiful. Even though she hadn't fully understood what he meant, she had done the best she could. And the photographer had looked pleased.

But Moje, what would Moje say?

'They're fantastic,' he mumbled.

She felt a thrill.

‘Do you think they’ll help then? Do you think they’ll want us now?’

Moje laughed.

‘They’ve wanted us all the time, Greta. Don’t you understand? They have wanted us so much that they had to put us in our place. Pulverise us so that they later can dissolve us in their hot milk.’

She gave him a confused look.

‘So the pictures won’t be of any use then?’

‘Oh yes...’ He smiled knowingly. ‘I know Lazar Mayer. He’s going to do it in his pants with excitement.’ Then he laughed again, his loud laugh, which could be heard from hundreds of metres away, perhaps even from Central Park. Moje was not somebody you went past without noticing.

Now he took her hand, and with the index finger of his other hand he stroked the tip of her nose. Then he lowered his voice:

‘Now, you see, they won’t be able to resist us any longer, my lovely Greta.’

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Chapter 4

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Page 108 and page 109 in the Paul U. Bergström department store spring catalogue for the year 1921 show a young woman in hats. Ten pictures, as many hats, but the same girl. She looks as if she is nineteen or twenty. She is only fifteen. Considering she is so young, Greta Gustafsson has an amazing poise, or perhaps it is simply her nature. She looks into the camera with a gaze and a seriousness that seems to say: ‘Here I am. I am not going to pretend for your sake, this is really me, but you are not quite going to reach me.’ Sincerity and inaccessibility at the same time. Already, so early. Is that why Fru Hellberg has recommended her for the catalogue? Or is it because Greta is a girl who has been born with even – indeed, one might say beautiful – features? Greta herself doesn’t care about that, not inside. Not as something that is her. On the contrary, it would be terrible if you put your worth in something so unimportant and transitory as your appearance. Although sometimes, on the odd occasion, she knows that she can take advantage of her looks. When she sees how it affects others.

Greta’s mother says she is proud of the catalogue, admittedly, but she also says that she doesn’t really see the point of the pictures, from Greta’s point of view. It’s included in her wage, the work Greta has done in front of the camera – at PUB they have even told her that despite the fact she isn’t selling any hats while she is being photographed, she will nevertheless get a full wage. Nothing extra, that is. This, however, is not primarily what worries Anna Gustafsson, because she can understand it very well. If you don’t sell any hats then you don’t bring in any money to the department store. What worries Anna Gustafsson more is that her daughter might start getting ideas. That is always what worries Anna Gustafsson. And that Greta might draw Alva along with her, like she did the year before. Now Alva has found work as an errand girl at an office, and Anna shares her time between delivering newspapers in the mornings, cleaning at a canning factory and doing sewing work in the evenings. Sven has to look after himself to some extent. He got a

local girl pregnant, doesn't live at home any longer, and supports three people with his job as an assistant in a fruit shop. But Greta, Greta has got the best position of all of them. Anna calls PUB "paradise".

And then fashion catalogues can be dangerous things.

There are other things that can be dangerous. A cinema ticket costs eighty-five öre. So you pay almost as much per hour of cinema that you would have earned if you had worked instead. You could say that means a double loss. But of course that isn't where the big danger lies.

Greta Gustafsson usually sits on the fourth row, in the middle, spellbound. Her lips move together with the soundless words on the enormous screen above her. There are no special smells in the auditorium. There are no live actors there. But it works anyway. She often sits here, at least once a week – more often if she has managed to stash away a few kronor. This particular evening it is *Sir Arne's Treasure*, the latest work by Stiller, the great director. The week before it had been an American film, *Polly of the Storm Country* with Mildred Harris Chaplin. This one is better, Stiller is better. He grips the viewer. He is never in a hurry, everything can take its time. That is how it should be, it is only then you can really be involved in what happens. And Elsalill, Elsalill, when she discovers that her beloved is her sister's murderer! Her look... Oh, how wonderful! How terribly painfully wonderful!

Afterwards, she almost staggers out of the auditorium, like someone not really awake, someone who abruptly is woken in the middle of a dream. Sometimes it takes the entire walk from Biblioteksgatan to Södermalm before she has returned to reality. Thank God for that walk. If she has got Alva to go with her, then Alva knows that they must walk home in silence, at any rate half way. But Greta has often gone on her own, because Alva is more conscientious about household duties after work. And when Greta gets home to Blekingegatan she will snuggle in beside her sister on the sofa bed and tell her the whole film, from beginning to end. That's how she extends the experience. And Alva loves it when Greta tells what happened, because it is almost as if she is there herself and watching the film. Greta tells her like a big sister, even though Alva is two years older. Sometimes she calls Alva "My little one". 'My little one,' she says when she has finished, 'now I've told you the whole story, now you must go to sleep.' And then she kisses her on her forehead.

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Why was it like it was? Why did she turn out like she did? So complicated, as mama used to say. Alva and Sven were different, took things easier, even though they had all grown up together, spent the same long winter evenings in a room that bore death. With the same impoverished and sick papa who sat in an old armchair beside the window and absentmindedly drew figures in a newspaper, evening after evening. With mama, who sat at the other end of the room and mended clothes and sighed and said nothing. No, nobody said anything. If the children wanted to talk with each other, they whispered. But more often than not, they sat in silence. It was as if there was a threat in the air, a tension that was only relieved late at night, when it was assumed that they were asleep, or sometimes when papa came home drunk and mama couldn't restrain herself. He drank because he hated his work, she shouted because he couldn't find anything better. And it was almost better when the explosion came, better than this unarticulated knife edge on which they otherwise lived.

Sometimes when she was a little child she used to go into the kitchen – they only had one room and the kitchen – and sit under the table. Then she would sit there for hours and think.

And on one occasion when she had been sitting there, her uncle David (he drove a taxi, and did nicely for himself) came up to her and asked what she thought about for such a long time. Then she had looked up at him and said:

‘I think about what I shall be when I’m grown up.’

‘And what will you be?’ he asked, of course, and smiled.

The answer came quick as a flash:

‘I shall be a prima donna. And then I shall be a princess. And when I get rich I shall give nearly all my money to poor children.’

And uncle David, who didn’t have any children of his own then, and was exceptionally fond of Greta, thought that was the sweetest thing he had heard. Indeed, Greta was quite simply the sweetest person he knew.

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Chapter 5

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Changes rarely come one at a time. They have a tendency to bring about other changes. Or perhaps you make sure that is what happens. Bearing in mind Greta’s interests, one could well ask oneself whether she herself indeed initiated the entire course of events. But no, it couldn’t have been like that. If not attributable to thought transference, then the process must actually have been started up without her participation. But to actually make use of it, yes, that was what it was all about; to make use of the few chances one gets in life. To make good use of them.

It started almost exactly the same as last time, only the cast of characters was different. This time, neither Fru Hellberg nor Herr Bergström were involved. Instead, it was the man who made the catalogue, he who had photographed Greta in all the hats, who came up and stood beside the hat counter. And right behind him came the tall Captain Ring.

Captain Ring who was going to make a film about PUB, because PUB would soon be celebrating its fortieth anniversary.

‘She’s very good,’ said the catalogue man and turned round. ‘She poses well. And besides, the girl looks pretty too.’

Her heart suddenly started racing.

‘I am sorry,’ answered Captain Ring while he looked down at his notebook. ‘but Olga Andersson will be modelling the hats, she is quite a beauty.’

Oh no! For a moment she shuts her eyes, devastated, but then quick as a flash she pulls herself together and looks at Captain Ring. Gives him such an intense look that he can’t refrain from looking up from his notebook. And when he looks back at her, she smiles. Just a little.

‘Hmm,’ says Captain Ring. ‘But we do need some extras who can be amusing.’

* * *

‘Psss...’ One is turned on. ‘Psss...’ That is the next one. Then the third, and the fourth, and the fifth. Each lamp has its own electrician who turns it on when told to. It is Captain Ring who tells them to. The little studio is full of people, just like last year, when she and Alva had succeeded in being extras in a film with Gösta Ekman (and mama had been furious, because Greta had wilfully taken time off from PUB). Now she is yet again in a space packed with people all of whom know exactly what they are supposed to do. A bit like in the army. It wasn’t so strange, after all, that a captain was drawn to the role as film director.

She sat in one corner and watched. She would have to wait a long time, she only had a small part. But Greta Gustafsson had absolutely nothing against waiting. Greta Gustafsson was at this very moment in seventh heaven. And this time, her mother couldn’t say anything, because it was PUB that had asked her. It was just a pity that Alva couldn’t be there too.

‘Knut! The ladder!’ Captain Ring’s instructions were succinct, and he didn’t say more than was necessary. ‘No, there! Olof, can you raise the drapery, I can see the top edge in the camera.’

She smiled a little to herself. Captain Ring talked just like she had talked to Lisa. She liked it. She liked it when people knew what they were doing. As long as they didn’t try to bully her.

‘Ragnar, are you ready?’

A handsome man in his mid-thirties came out of the shadows. Greta gasped, even though she knew he would be there. Because now he was actually standing here, right in front of her. Ragnar Widestedt, she’d seen him at the cinema, just a few months before, in *The Fledgling*.

‘Make-up on?’

‘Aye, aye, captain!’

Everybody laughed. Despite the tough regime there was a good atmosphere in the studio. Most people seemed to know each other.

‘Olga!’ Captain Ring now called out. ‘And the children!’ A woman actor, whom she also recognised, came forward and stood beside Widestedt. And soon after her a boy aged about seven, holding his father by the hand. Ring leaned down.

‘And what’s your name, my little friend?’

‘Erick,’ answered the boy, so quietly that hardly anyone could hear him.

‘You’ll have to let go of daddy’s hand now,’ the director smiled. ‘I’ll look after you, I promise!’ Then he looked about him.

‘And the girl?’

Nobody answered.

‘Where have we got the girl?’

There was still silence.

‘She didn’t come to make-up,’ somebody called out.

‘She didn’t?!’ Now Captain Ring suddenly got angry, that was probably part of the job too. ‘Why hasn’t anybody said anything? What was her name?’

‘Gustafsson.’

Greta gave a start.

‘Greta Gustafsson.’

‘And Gustafsson didn’t come to make-up?’

They were talking about her! Was she going to be in a scene with them, Ragnar Widestedt and Olga Andersson? She got up from her chair and with a hard knot in her tummy walked towards the studio floor.

‘But there you are!’

‘I didn’t know... I thought that...’

‘Never mind,’ Captain Ring cut her off, ‘hurry up now.’

Twenty minutes later she was back, dressed in an enormous pair of black-and-white checked men’s trousers and a coat that was at least ten sizes too big. The cap on her head was of such a nature that not even her mother would have put it on, even if it had been bitterly cold. It was perhaps meant to be funny, but it wasn’t. She looked grotesque. She thought so herself, and evidently so did all the others in the studio. They gawped at her. But nobody said anything. Suddenly she sensed they were laughing. Nobody showed it, but inside, inside they were laughing.

She wanted to sink through the floor.

Now she saw how Widestedt leaned forward towards Ring and whispered something in his ear. Ring nodded. Then they were silent again. After which Ring turned again to Widestedt and whispered something back. Widestedt suddenly laughed, out loud this time. She felt how the blood drained from her face.

‘Right! Everybody ready?’ Captain Ring strode up to her.

‘You see that clothes hanger?’ He pointed. ‘You must put all those clothes on and take them off in three minutes. Do you think you can manage that?’

Greta nodded, imperceptibly.

‘Good! And it should be funny, Fröken Gustafsson. As funny as you can make it!’

Afterwards, they were all silent. A surprised silence. Then they started applauding. For at least half a minute. Well, of course they had been astounded. The shy shop assistant had suddenly been transformed. She had gone around in those enormous clothes with her hands in her pockets, like a tramp visiting the Salvation Army’s charity warehouse, and after a change of clothes and personality with lightning rapidity she had immediately started tripping along like an office girl. And she was funny too. Especially after the next transformation act, when she had become the snobbiest Östermalm lady you could imagine. They had giggled. But she felt that this time it wasn’t a mean giggling. Because now she knew exactly what she was doing.

Captain Ring, of course, had no idea that she was one of those people who throughout their life have dressed up in different clothes and changed roles in double quick time – boys and girls, aunties and uncles, poor and rich.

And now she heard how Ring, laughing, said to Widestedt:

‘Oh no Ragnar, we’re not going to cut that out!’

* * *

It was over in a day. Then back to the hat counter, just like after a day at Skansen. That was that, and that was all it would be. It was her fate. Moments of exhilaration, but always horribly brief. And afterwards she wondered whether it had been worth it.

But one little event did nevertheless occur on account of that single day of filming. A little event that actually changed something.

‘You were tremendously funny, Fröken.’

She recognised the man who stood in front of the counter and smiled. Who was he? She racked her brain. One of the electricians from the filming? No, no, not with such clothes. Was he the husband of a customer she had served? No, then he would hardly know about the film. Suddenly she remembered! It was the father of little Erick, the boy who had played her little brother.

‘Thank you.’ She made a slight curtsy.

Then Erick’s father laughed. He was in his thirties, an elegant appearance – black suit and a bow tie – and was fairly handsome, even though his hair had started to thin at the front.

‘And say hello to little Erick,’ she added, to show that she recognised him.

‘I shall indeed. My sister says he has never had so much fun as that day. He can’t stop talking about the film.’

She looked at him somewhat confused.

‘Well, I was wondering, Fröken Gustafsson...’ – now he was smiling again, cautiously, but yet not without self-confidence – ‘whether you would like to go out and eat dinner with me one evening?’

‘Dinn...’ she swallowed. ‘Err...mm...’ What ought she to say now? ‘Will Erick be coming?’

‘Erick? To dinner? Well...’ He laughed. ‘My sister usually tucks him into bed at seven, so it would in that case have to be a terribly early dinner.’

‘I see...’ she said simply.

‘But if you are really keen for Erick to come, we could of course take a dinner at five.’

‘I don’t think I understand...’ she said. Although she did understand. The man in front of her was Erick’s uncle, not his father. And he was inviting her out. She tried to win time.

‘Where... err...?’

‘Well, the simplest would be if I invite you to my home. My chef is one of the best in Stockholm.’

Sometimes, rather rarely but sometimes – and she couldn’t explain why – it so happened, that her shyness switched in a moment to boldness, that her lack of assurance was inexplicably transformed into self confidence, that her timidity disappeared and was replaced with forwardness. It had been like that at the filming. And it was like that now.

She looked into his eyes, and then she said:

‘That sounds terribly nice.’

// Chapters 6-13 have not been translated //

Chapter 14

The morning was warm, even though it was already the middle of September. In Berzelius Park people were sitting on the benches, eating a sandwich, reading a book, or just lapping up the sun. It was Monday, a workday for most, but perhaps not for everyone. The trams went past at regular intervals along Strandvägen. Plingeling it said when they left the stop opposite Dramaten, the Royal Theatre, and continued on their way.

Plingeling. Some young people got off a tram, there were three of them. They walked round the majestic building, with determination, as if they had done this their entire lives. They talked with each other, yet a little warily – perhaps they had only just got to know each other? When they reached Nybrogatan 2, one of them, a tall youth, clutched the handle of the big door and held it open for the other two. The woman smiled at him – she had blond, wavy hair. The other man patted him on the shoulder. They went inside. As if they had done this their entire lives.

‘Are you the new ones?’

An elderly woman looked out from a concierge booth.

‘Yes,’ said one of the young men, the one who had held open the door. There were now actually five of them, another two women had been standing inside the door to the stage entrance.

‘Well then, in that case Superintendent Personne is ready to receive you. Go up to the Tower Room, on the fourth floor.’ She pointed towards an open door which led out to a stairwell.

The young people glanced at each other. Then the whole group started to move towards the stairs.

‘And good luck!’ the concierge called out after them.

They called it the Tower Room. That’s what it had always been called. Here in the secretive upper part of the theatre building, close to but separated from the gallery, was the space where Sweden’s future actors were moulded. First, a rectangular room with mirrors, and inside that room the holy of holies – the octagonal Tower Room.

They peeped in. It looked like a state room in a palace. In the middle were two long oak tables, solid, commanding respect. Indeed, the entire setting spoke of tradition and history. Here, you didn’t come late.

‘I suppose we should go in,’ said Johannes and gave a little giggle. It was he who had held open the door to the stage entrance.

‘Then let’s,’ said Karl-Magnus and stepped in.

But they didn’t dare sit down.

Now one of the girls started laughing. Out loud.

Karl-Magnus gave her an amused look.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t help it,’ she said. ‘It’s as if they want to prepare us for an audience with the King!’ She laughed again. She had dark curly hair, unusually dark and curly for someone from Sweden. Her name was Mimi.

‘Ah, *there* you are!’ An elderly man appeared behind them. Was he criticising them for having entered the room in such a high-handed manner? Or had he actually been waiting for them, ready to make his own entry at the right moment? He was tall and had grey hair, was wearing a suit and a bowtie, and carrying an attaché case. In his breast pocket he had a red kerchief. This was evidently an attribute that was chosen with care. They curtsied and bowed, all at the same time.

‘Sit down, sit, sit!’

So they went up to the tables. There were two tables, and at least twenty chairs. Having already found a little security among themselves, they gathered in a group round where the elderly man had positioned himself at one end. Then they sat down, all at the same time.

He, however, remained standing. Observing them, with nerve-racking slowness. Yes, he had most likely been waiting for them...

‘Hmm, not many of you this year.’ He pursed his lips slightly. ‘Well, I wish you welcome to the Royal Dramatic Theatre’s school. I am Nils Personne. *Superintendent* Nils Personne.’

Now the girl with the dark curly hair smiled again, she probably couldn't help it, Superintendent Nils Personne. Schoolmaster, headmaster, senior master, professor, assessor, compressor. And superintendent. An attribute, like the red kerchief.

At last he sat down, Superintendent Nils Personne. From his attaché case he now produced a book bound in black oilcloth. It looked as if it had been in use many years. Then he withdrew a gold pen from the inner pocket of his jacket.

'Hmm...' he said again. He opened the little book and looked up at them. Examined them for a few more seconds.

'The first name on my list is Lena Cederström.'

The five young people glanced at each other. So there would be a roll call. They would be turned into individuals, or at least people with names.

One of the girls stood up. It was the one with wavy blond hair. Her nose was slightly crooked – only slightly – and she had an intelligent gaze.

'You are the daughter of Marika Stiernstedt, aren't you?' Superintendent Personne looked at her with interest. 'And the aviator baron?'

The young woman nodded. Yes, first impressions would come to be touched up. They did, of course, know who Marika Stiernstedt was. Aristocrat and socialist. And productive author. She who was called Lena had been brought up by a strong woman.

'How nice... in that case, perhaps you can bring some texts from home.'

Lena's expression was friendly, self-assured.

'And you have previously studied where?'

'At Djursholm's mixed school until I was confirmed, and then at a convent school in Belgium.'

'Ah yes, of course... Catholic, like mother...' Personne gave a slightly inscrutable smile while he jotted something down. 'How old are you?'

Lena Cederström was twenty one. Almost all the pupils would turn out to be twenty one or twenty or nineteen. Successful newly-fledged students about to start off in life.

'Thank you, Fröken Cederström. Karl-Magnus Thulstrup!'

He who was called Karl-Magnus was just about to stand up when something happened. Something almost imperceptible.

It was a weak knock. Weak, but still distinct. Everything came to a halt. Since Superintendent Personne so obviously came to a halt. They turned towards the door – everyone except Superintendent Personne who continued to stare down at his book. It was as if the room had become rigid, for no good reason at all. And she who was called Mimi had time to think that this was likely theatre too.

Another knock. This time more forceful.

'Come in!' the superintendent bellowed. As if he hadn't heard the first knock.

The door to the Tower Room was slowly opened.

Outside, wearing a black dress and with a similarly black cape, stands a young woman. Tall, at least 170 cm. But her age is hard to tell. In one way she looks mature, indeed one might almost say experienced in the ways of the world. At the same time, there is something shy and very young about her.

'Yes, well, what occasions this grand entrance?' The superintendent looks at the newcomer. A hint of a smile in one corner of his mouth.

She doesn't answer.

'Fröken Gustafsson, I believe?' Still smiling.

Greta nods, almost imperceptibly.

‘Weren’t you the one who got a place in the very last stages? So in consequence you come in the very last stages, is that right?’

The question does not demand an answer, of course, and nor does it get one. Personne slowly taps his pen on the oak table. Three times.

But Greta stays where she is. Almost without blinking.

‘Oh well, come in and sit down.’

Without a word she goes up to the table where the other pupils are sitting. For a moment, a brief moment, she hesitates, uncertain. Then the woman with the dark curly hair, Mimi, looks up at her. And pulls out the empty chair next to hers.

Greta quickly sits down.

‘When you made your entry, Fröken Gustafsson, the other pupils were telling us about their earlier educational institutions.’ He doesn’t look at her, although he is still addressing her. ‘So, Karl-Magnus Thulstrup!’

And strange it is how a single person can alter the atmosphere in a large group. Without having uttered a word.

Karl-Magnus stands up.

‘I matriculated from the secondary grammar school in Södertälje. This spring. I am nineteen years old.’

Mimi glances to one side.

‘Ah yes, right, you are the son of the mayor of Södertälje. How nice. Do you know any foreign languages?’

‘I have studied English and German.’

Mimi can see how the woman next to her looks down at her lap. And that below the hem of the woman’s skirt a long ladder runs down.

‘Thank you, Herr Thulstrup. To become a successful actor, one needs a good knowledge of languages.’

Now her neighbour, quick as lightning, pulls her skirt down over her knees.

Mimi peeps at her face.

‘Mimi Pollak!’

She gives a start. Glances quickly around the room. Then she takes a deep breath and gets up from her chair.

‘I have been to Karlstad’s secondary grammar school for girls,’ she answers, before she is asked. ‘*And...*’ smiling, she raises her index finger, ‘... I am nineteen years old!’ Smiling, to show that she isn’t afraid of compressor Personne.

‘Yes, thank you...’ he mumbles while he writes. ‘But you don’t look as if you have been in Karlstad very long... Fröken Pollak...’

Mimmi’s smile fastens. No, that xenophobic comment is unacceptable.

‘My word, yes!’ she answers, decidedly brazen. ‘Nineteen years.’ Now she looks him right in the eye.

Greta suddenly comes to life. She looks up, observes her neighbour intensely. And when Mimi sits down, Greta greets her with a nod. She gets a nod in return.

They have seen each other before. Greta can’t remember where. But it was somewhere. She remembers that very clearly.

He calls out her name last of all. Perhaps because she arrived last? Perhaps because she was the last person to get a place in the school? Or maybe it was simply a coincidence.

‘Greta Gustafsson,’ he says briskly.

But Greta Gustafsson doesn’t give a start, at least not one that can be seen. Greta Gustafsson would never allow Superintendent Personne – least of all Superintendent Personne – to see her give a start. She has learnt, better than those around her in the room, the well brought-up, affluent young people accustomed to the ways of society. Better than Lena and Karl-Magnus and Mimi and Barbro and Johannes. Greta Gustafsson stands up slowly and with care, seemingly unconcerned. The elegant black dress reinforces the dignified impression. The ladder is no longer visible.

‘So fortunate that you managed to get here, Fröken Gustafsson, before your name was called up.’

She doesn’t answer. Nobody could imagine that she had been obliged to help her mother clean at the canning factory that morning. On the other hand, nobody could imagine almost anything about Greta Gustafsson.

‘And you have studied where?’

Greta fingers her ring, a gold ring with a little diamond.

‘Elementary school...’ She twists the ring one turn round her finger. ‘Katarina elementary school in Södermalm.’

There is silence. Plingeling can be heard from out on the street. Plingeling. And the sound as the tram moves along the rail. Johannes looks with surprise at the gold ring which Greta can’t stop twisting. Round, round, round. The little diamond glitters in the sunlight.

‘Yes, right...’ Personne draws out the word while he writes slowly.

All the others look with surprise at the seemingly urbane creature from the poor districts of Södermalm.

‘And how old are you?’

Now Greta looks slightly uncomfortable.

‘Seventeen,’ she says quietly. And then, after a moment – unexpectedly, and thus totally disarmingly: ‘It’s my birthday today.’

Suddenly they all start laughing. But not at all unkindly.

Even Superintendent Personne gives a friendly smile.

And Karl-Magnus stands up:

‘Three cheers for Greta!’ he calls out. ‘Hip, hip, hooray!’

And while they all cheer, Greta blushes fiercely.

She is smiling, although she tries not to.

* * *

They are standing in a bunch outside Dramaten, just below the majestic steps. The sound level of the little bunch is high, they are all speaking at the same time.

‘What about going to Söderberg’s coffee shop?’ Karl-Magnus suddenly says, louder than the others. ‘People from Dramaten usually go there.’

Johannes widens his eyes. ‘Well, in that case!’

And they all start to move off, like one body, like a shoal of fish. Because now they belong together. Söderberg’s coffee shop, that’s where people like them go.

They troop off in the direction of Birger Jarlsgatan.

All except one person. She remains on the pavement outside Dramaten.

‘Aren’t you coming with us?’ Mimi has stopped.

Greta twists her ring, no, she must stop doing that.

‘I’m not much for coffee shops,’ she mumbles.

‘No...’ Mimi hesitates a moment. ‘Do you smoke?’

Greta shrugs her shoulders.

‘Would you like to come home with me and have a smoke instead?’

The others are now a bit away. Greta glances towards them.

‘I’m going to meet somebody.’

Mimi snaps her fingers. ‘Yes, of course, it’s your birthday!’

Greta nods.

‘Well, congratulations.’

‘Thank you.’

And then Mimi runs off, after the little bunch.

Greta immediately turns round and starts walking along the Nybro quay. Quickly, since she is going to meet somebody. Energetically, since she is in such a hurry she hasn’t got time to go with the others to the coffee shop. Not until she has gone far enough that she feels certain they won’t be watching her does she turn round again. Far away, quite a way up Birger Jarlsgatan, goes the little shoal of fish. Tightly squeezed together. Even from this far away it looks as if they are laughing, that they are having fun with each other, that they are busy creating the group feeling that will bind them together in the years to come.

She stands on the quayside and watches them until they disappear from view. Then she remains standing a while longer, looking at nothing. In the end, she starts walking, the long walk across to Södermalm. To mama and Alva – Alva who, when she comes home in a couple of hours, will ask her to tell of everything that has happened on the first day of her new, fantastic life.

/end of ch.14/