

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Elephant Keepers' Children

Peter Høeg

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Peter Høeg

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Finø

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

The Sea of Opportunity

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

The City of Gods

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Chapter 68

Chapter 69

The Finø Waltz

Chapter 70

Acknowledgements
Copyright

About the Book

Peter and Tilte are trying to track down two notorious criminals: their parents. They are the pastor and the organist, respectively, of the only church on the tiny island of Finø. Known for fabricating cheap miracles to strengthen their congregation's faith, they have been in trouble before. But this time their children suspect they are up to mischief on a far greater scale.

When Peter and Tilte learn that scientific and religious leaders from around the world are assembling in Copenhagen for a conference, they know their parents are up to something. Peter and Tilte's quest to find them exposes conspiracies, terrorist plots, an angry bishop, a deranged headmaster, two love-struck police officers, a deluded aristocrat and much more along the way.

Part adventure story, part study of human nature, *The Elephant Keepers' Children* is a delightful and thought-provoking novel from the prize-winning Danish author Peter Høeg.

About the Author

Born in 1957, Peter Høeg published his first novel in 1988, having followed various callings – dancer, actor, fencer, sailor, mountaineer – before turning seriously to writing. His novels *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* and *The Quiet Girl* were published to great international acclaim.

Born in 1961, Martin Aitken holds a PhD in Linguistics and gave up university tenure to translate literature. Novels in his translation have been published on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in Denmark. His translations of short stories and poetry have appeared in book form and in numerous journals and periodicals in the United States, Canada and Denmark. He lives in rural Denmark.

ALSO BY PETER HØEG

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow
Borderliners
The Woman and the Ape
History of Danish Dreams
Tales of the Night
The Quiet Girl

*For Awiti, Adoyo, Ajuang, Apiyo, Akinyi and Karsten.
For Stine and Daniel.*

The Elephant Keepers' Children

Peter Høeg

TRANSLATED
FROM THE DANISH
BY
Martin Aitken



HARVILL SECKER
LONDON

In case you wish to befriend an elephant keeper, make certain to have room for the elephant.

OLD INDIAN SAYING

FINØ

1

I HAVE FOUND a door out of the prison. It opens out onto freedom. I am writing this to show you that door.

You might ask how much freedom he thinks he's entitled to, this boy who was born on Finø, the island they call Denmark's Gran Canaria, and in the rectory to boot, with its twelve rooms and a garden as big as a park, and not only that but born into the midst of a father and mother, an older sister and older brother, and grandparents and a great-grandmother, and a dog, all of which sounds like an advert for something expensive but a worthwhile investment for all the family.

And while there might not be that much to see when I look at myself in the mirror, being the second smallest in the seventh class of Finø Town School, and on the skinny side too, there are many older, heavier players on the football fields of Finø who can only watch as I sail by like a surfer on the wind and feel their hair stand on end when I let fly with my lethal right foot.

So what's he complaining about? you might ask. How does he think other fourteen-year-old boys feel? And there would be two answers to that.

The first is that you're right, I shouldn't complain. But when Father and Mother disappeared and things became complicated and hard to explain, I discovered there was something I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten, while everything had still been bright, to seek to discover what will always endure, what can really be relied on when it starts to get dark.

The second answer is the hardest. Take a look around. How many people seem happy to you? Even if you have a father with a Maserati and a mother with a mink coat, as we had in the rectory once, how many people actually have anything to cheer about? Isn't it okay, then, to ask what can set a person free?

Now you might say that as far as the eye can see the world is full of people who'll tell you which direction to choose and what to do, and that I'm just one of them, and in a way you'd be right, though in another this is different.

If you ever heard my father give a sermon at Finø Town Church before he disappeared, then you'll have heard him say that Jesus is the way. My father can say that so beautifully and effortlessly you'd think we were talking about the way down to the harbour and that we'd all be there in a minute.

If you'd heard the service from a stool next to the organ, as played by my mother, and if you'd remained seated afterwards, she would have told you that music was the future. She plays and speaks in such a way that you would have already booked your first piano lesson and be on your way to spend your life savings on a baby grand.

If, after the service, you'd come back for coffee on one of those occasions when my favourite uncle, Jonas, who goes bear hunting in Outer Mongolia and has a stuffed bear standing in his hall and who has now become a union man, was staying with us, then you might have heard him say at some length that what really gets the ball rolling is having confidence in yourself and devoting your life to organising the working classes, and he says this not just to wind up my father, but because it's something he truly believes.

If you ask anyone at my school, they'll tell you that life doesn't begin till after ninth class, since that's when most of the children of Finø move away to board at the high school or begin vocational programmes in Grenå.

And finally, in a different direction altogether, if you asked the residents of Big Hill, which is a rehab centre just west of Finø Town, all of whom were substance-abusers by the time they were sixteen, if you ask them straight out, one on one, they'll tell you that even though they're totally clean and deeply grateful for their treatment and are looking forward to starting a new life, nothing even comes close to the long, mellow high you get from smoking opium or shooting heroin.

And I'll tell you this: I'm certain all these people are right, including the residents of Big Hill.

That's something I learned from my older sister, Tilte. One of Tilte's talents is that she can believe all people are right and yet at the same time be wholly convinced that she alone knows what she's talking about.

All these people I've mentioned, what each of them reveals is the door to their own favourite room, and inside that room is Jesus, or the songs of Schubert, or the national achievement test after ninth class, or a stuffed bear, or a steady job, or an appreciative pat on the back; and many of these rooms are, of course, fantastic.

But as long as you're in a room, you're inside, and as long as you're inside, you're a prisoner.

The door I'll try to show you is different. It doesn't lead into another room. It leads out of the building.

It wasn't me who found the door, I'm not cut out for that. It was my older sister, Tilte.

I was there when it happened, it's two years ago now, just before Mother and Father disappeared the first time. I was twelve and Tilte was fourteen, and even though I remember it like it was yesterday, I didn't realise that was what she'd found.

Our great-grandma was staying with us, she was making buttermilk soup.

When Great-Grandma makes buttermilk soup she stands on two stools placed on top of each other so she can reach to do the stirring, and she does that because she was born small and because her spine has collapsed six times since then and she's become so stooped that if she's to be in that family ad I was talking about before, they're going to have to take care what angle they take the picture from, because that hump of hers is as big as an umbrella stand.

On the other hand, many people who've met Great-Grandma believe that if Jesus ever returns one day it could easily be as a lady of ninety-three, because Great-Grandma is what's called omnibenevolent. That means she's so kind she has room for everyone, even people like Karl Marauder Lander and Alexander Beastly Flounderblood, who was dispatched by the Ministry of Education to take charge of Finø Town School, and who you'd have to be his mother to love, and even that might not be enough, because I actually saw him collect his mother from the ferry once and she didn't seem to have much time for him either.

Nonetheless, no one should underestimate our great-grandma. You don't get to be ninety-three and survive several of your own children and a six-time spinal collapse and the Second World War, as well as being able to remember the end of the first one, without something special keeping you going. I'll put it this way and say that if Great-Grandma were a car, the chassis has been falling apart for as long as anyone can remember, but the engine purrs as if it were straight from the factory.

When it comes to words, though, I'd call her reserved. She hands them out like they're boiled sweets and there aren't many left, and maybe there aren't when you're ninety-three.

So when all of a sudden, without turning her head, she says: 'There's something I want to say,' we all fall silent.

'We' being my mother and father, my older brother Hans, Tilte and me, and our dog, Basker III, a fox terrier named after the book about the hound of the Baskervilles. He's

called 'III' because he's the third of his kind since Tilte's been around, and she's insisted that every time a dog dies and we get a new one we give it the same name, just one number on. Every time Tilte tells people who've not enjoyed the pleasure of meeting us before what the dog is called, she always says the number, too. They're usually lost for words, maybe because it makes them think of the dogs that died before Basker, and I think that's actually why Tilte insisted on the name, because she's always been more preoccupied with death than kids normally are.

Now, as Great-Grandma seats herself in her wheelchair and prepares to speak, Tilte leans over the kitchen counter and lifts her legs off the floor, and Great-Grandma wheels up beneath her. Tilte always wants to sit on Great-Grandma's lap when there's something she has to say, but Great-Grandma's become frailer, and Tilte's heavier, so now they do things this way, Tilte lifting herself up and the world arranging itself beneath her so she can curl up in the lap of her great-grandmother, who at this point is already smaller than her.

'My mother and father,' Great-Grandma says, 'your great-great-grandparents, weren't exactly young when they married, they were in their late thirties. And yet they had seven children. Just after the seventh was born, my mother's brother and his wife, my uncle and aunt, died, smitten with the same influenza, the Spanish Flu. They died almost together, leaving behind them twelve children. My father went to the funeral in Nordhavn. After the ceremony there was to be a council at which the family were going to divide the twelve children between them. That's the way it was done back then; it was ninety years ago and it was all about survival. It took two hours by horse-drawn carriage to get from Finø Town to Nordhavn, and my father didn't arrive back until evening. He came into the kitchen, where my mother was standing at the stove, and said: 'I took them all.'

My mother looked up at him, full of joy, and then she said, 'Thank you for your confidence, Anders.'

When Great-Grandma finished telling us this, the room fell silent again. I don't know how long that silence lasted, because time had stopped. There was too much to absorb for anyone to think. It was like everyone had given up. We needed to grasp what had occurred inside Great-Grandma's father when he saw those twelve children at the funeral and felt himself unable to tear them apart. And most of all we needed to understand his wife at the moment her husband arrives home and says: 'I took them all.' There's no hesitation there, no going to pieces and wailing at the thought that we have seven children of our own, which can seem bad enough by itself if you think of the three of us in the rectory with our two bathrooms and one for guests, but all of a sudden they've got nineteen children.

At some point, when everything's been quiet for I'm not sure how long, but definitely a long time, Tilte says: 'That's how I want to be too!'

We all thought we knew what she meant, and in a way we did. We thought she wanted to be like the father, or like the mother, or like them both, and be willing to take on nineteen children if it ever became necessary.

And she did mean that. But she meant something else, too.

Before she said it, during the long silence, I think Tilte discovered the door. Or became certain of its existence.

Before I start, I'm going to ask you something. I'm going to ask if you can recall a moment of your life at which you were happy. Not just in a good mood. Not just content. But so happy that everything was totally one hundred per cent perfect.

If you can't recall a single moment like that, then obviously you're in a bad way. Which makes it all the more important I reach you with this.

But if you can recall only one, or better still several, such moments, then I'd ask you to think about them. It's important. Because that's when the door begins to open.

I'll tell you about a couple of mine. There's nothing special about them. I'm telling you to make it easier for you to identify them in your own life.

One such moment was the first time I got picked for the Finø AllStars, who play against teams from the mainland in July. The list was read out by the first team coach, whom we call Fakir on account of him being bald and built like a pipe cleaner, and because his mood all year round is like he just got up after sleeping on a bed of broken glass.

No one under the age of fifteen had ever been picked before, so it came out of nowhere. He read the list out loud and my name was on it.

For a brief moment I couldn't tell where I was. Was I outside or inside my body? Or maybe both places at once?

Another moment was when Conny asked if I wanted to be her boyfriend. She didn't ask me herself, but sent along one of her ladies-in-waiting called Sonja. I was on my way home from school and Sonja came up beside me and was like, 'Conny told me to ask if you wanted to be her boyfriend.'

For a moment there it's like someone pulled the plug out: are you floating or standing on the ground? You don't really know. And that sense of floating isn't something you imagine, the whole world as you know it is completely changed.

There's another situation with Conny. This goes right back to when we were about six years old and in kindergarten together. In all of Finø Town there are maybe three hundred children and only one school and one kindergarten, so in a way we were all of us at school and in kindergarten together at some time or another.

The kindergarten had been given these enormous wooden beer barrels by the Finø Brewery, and they'd set them down and chocked them up and put floors in and little doors and

windows so they could be used for playhouses. Inside one of those barrels I asked Conny if she would take her clothes off in front of me.

You might ask where I found the courage, since normally anyone would think I'd be too afraid even to ask the way to the bakery, and I'll admit that this really was one of the times I surprised myself the most.

But if at some point you happen to meet Conny, you'll understand that there are women who can bring out the most extraordinary things in a man, even if he is only just past his sixth birthday.

She didn't say anything in reply. Just began ever so slowly to undress. And then when she was completely naked, she raised her arms and turned just as slowly to face me. I could see the down on her skin. The barrel enclosing us was round like a ship or a church, and it smelled of all the beer that had seeped into the wood over a hundred years. And I felt that what occurred between Conny and me was to do with the entire world that surrounded us.

The last moment I'll tell you about is also the most low-key. I'm a small child, three years old maybe, because we had just got Basker II and he's climbed up into my parents' bed where I've been sleeping too. I slide down onto the floor and push open the French windows and go outside into the garden. I think it must be early autumn, the sun's low in the sky and the grass is cold as ice and biting at my feet. Between the trees are big spiders' webs, and their threads are hung with dewdrops like a million tiny diamonds all glittering at once. It's very early and the morning is fresh and new and impossible to reproduce, as though there's never been a morning like it before and there doesn't have to be a copy because this one will last for ever.

At that moment the world is completely perfect. Nothing needs to be fixed, and there'd be no one to do it anyway, because there are no people, not even me, there's nothing else but the joy. It's all so very brief, and then it's over.

I know there are moments like that in your own life. Perhaps not the same, but similar.

I'm trying to make you aware of the seconds just before you realise how special the situation is and then begin to think.

Because the moment the thoughts come, you're back in the cage again.

That's part of what's so depressing about the prison. It's not just made of stone and concrete with bars in front of the windows.

If it were, it would all have been so much easier. If we were confined in the ordinary way we would surely have found a way out, even two such timid souls as you and me. From Grenå or Århus we would have got hold of a couple of hundred grams of that pink powder they put in the jet motors of the model planes when Finø holds its Grand Kite and Glider Day. And we would have found a rust-free pipe with a bung at each end, and we would have drilled a little hole in the pipe and put the powder inside and inserted a fuse from a New Year's firework into the hole, and we would have blown a great big exit in the wall, and they wouldn't ever have seen us for smoke.

But that wouldn't be enough. Because the prison, which is the life of every single one of us and the way we live it, this prison is not simply built of stone, it's also made of words and thoughts. And we are all of us involved in building and maintaining it, and that's the worst part of the whole thing.

Like that time Conny asked me out via Sonja. Right after the first second passed, right after the shock of it had turned the world around, it all snapped back again, and it snapped back because I thought: Can this be true? She means me, and not some other Peter? Why me? And supposing it is true, am I at all good enough for her? How long will it last? And if it does last, as I hope and pray it will, it's still got to end sometime, surely?

'And they lived happily ever after.'

I never liked that ending.

Father was the one who read to us in the evenings, to Tilte and me and Basker. Whenever the fairy tale ended with 'And they lived happily ever after' it always gave me a sense of discomfort I felt unable to account for.

Tilte found the right words for me. One day, she can't have been more than seven years old and I would have been five, she said: 'What does "ever after" mean?'

'It means until the end of their days, until they died,' Father said.

Then Tilte said: 'Were their deaths dignified?'

Father went quiet. Then after a while he said, 'It doesn't say.'

Then Tilte said, 'What happened next?'

I know where Tilte got it from, that thing about the deaths and whether they were dignified. She got it from Bermuda Seagull Jansson, Finø's midwife and undertaker rolled into one. That's the way it is - with the island being so small, a lot of people need to be two or three things at once, like Mother, who is the organist and churchwarden and advisor to the agricultural machinery rental firm all at the same time.

Tilte often talked with Bermuda and had even helped her put bodies in coffins. So that's where she got it from.

But that still doesn't explain everything. Try to imagine: you're sitting there with a seven-year-old girl and you've just read a fairy tale, and the idea behind them living happily ever after is for the story to have a happy ending and for the children to now be in the mood for going to sleep and to look at their family and feel secure in the belief that their mother and father and themselves and the dog are going to live happily ever after too, even if it is such a very long time indeed. And then there's this girl aged seven, Tilte, who asks if their deaths were dignified.

When Tilte said that, I understood why I had never really felt comfortable about those endings. I hadn't ever been

able to think like Tilte, I didn't even have the guts. But there was something I'd sensed. That even if they did live happily ever after, what happened when they got to the end of their days?

That may be where the fun stops.

Now I'll tell you what happened to us. Not so much because I want to talk about us, but to help me remember when the door was open so I can show it to you.

I can't help you out through the door, because I haven't really gone through it myself yet. But if we can find it and stand in front of it often enough, you and me together, I know that one day we'll be able to walk through it and out into freedom.

It's never too late to gain a happy childhood.

That's something Tilte and I read once in the library, and I always loved that sentence. But don't think about it. If you think, you'll come to a halt. And then you'll say it doesn't make sense, because your childhood has already gone, and what's gone was like it was, and nothing can change that now.

Instead, you should let the words remain inside you: it's never too late to gain a happy childhood.

I think that's true. But sometimes it can be a problem.

Still, Tilte says there's no such thing as problems, only interesting challenges.

So I'll say that one of the interesting challenges of gaining a happy childhood began on Good Friday, on the square called Blågård's Plads, in Copenhagen, Denmark.

2

WE'RE WAITING ON Blågårds Plads in Copenhagen, we being Basker, Tilte, me and our older brother Hans, and we're waiting in a black-lacquered carriage drawn by four horses, and for that we can thank Hans. Assuming, that is, that we would wish to thank him at all.

Most of the population of Denmark, or at least the tourists of Finø, think my brother Hans looks like a prince in a Danish fairy tale. This they base on his being one metre and ninety centimetres tall and having blond, curly hair and blue eyes, and being strong enough to unhitch one of the horses from the carriage, turn it on its back, lay it down on a table and tickle its tummy.

But because Tilte and Basker and I know Hans, we think he looks like a grown-up baby, too.

The strategic midfield of the Finø AllStars may never have had a more formidable general. But off the pitch, with no ball to occupy his attention, his gaze is permanently fixed towards the stars, and anyone in that state will show a tendency to fall over the furniture.

Now he has moved to Copenhagen to study astrophysics, which also has to do with stars, and here he has taken on a part-time job driving a horse-drawn carriage, and Tilte and Basker and I have come to visit him for Easter while Finø Town Church is in the hands of a visiting pastor on account of Mother and Father making their annual trip to La Gomera, a wannabe Finø in the Canary Islands.

I don't know if you're familiar with Blågårds Plads. Personally, this is my first time here, and to begin with the square seems rather ordinary. It's warm in the sun and cold

in the shade. There are still some piles of snow left over from winter, and there's a church with a number of people in front of it. As a clergyman's son one is always pleased to see customers in the shop. Sitting on a bench in the sun are three men in their prime of life, which they spend drinking Carlsberg Elephant beer. Behind our carriage, a greengrocer is standing outside his shop staring at a crate of lemons that have survived the winter thanks to the five daily prayers he directs towards Mecca, and in front of us is an old lady on her way across the street with a case of cat food balanced on her Zimmer. So the only unusual thing is the question of why a tourist wealthy enough to pay five thousand kroner online in advance for an hour and a quarter's carriage ride through the city's historical centre should have chosen to depart from Blågårds Plads, and besides that there's the issue of where he might be, since he should have been here ten minutes ago and has not yet turned up.

Then Hans' mobile phone rings, some sentences are exchanged, and after that our lives are completely different.

'It's Bodil,' says the voice at the other end. 'Are Peter and Tilte with you?'

Bodil Fisker, known to all as Bodil Hippopotamus, though short and slight of stature, requires no introduction. She is the municipal director of Grenå Kommune, which includes Finø and the islands of Anholt and Læsø, and everyone knows her. Hans has no need to put her on speaker phone, not that she's loud, she keeps within a normal range, but her voice is the penetrating kind that can reach out into the furthest corners of the globe. And it's not only her voice, it's the entire way she is, and all that stuff about the spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters could have been written about Bodil Hippopotamus.

But what truly moves upon the face of everything is Bodil's attention, not her actual self. A municipal director is not a person one meets in the flesh, but someone with people below her, who in turn have people below them, and

they're the ones you speak to on the phone. I have seen Bodil only once, on an occasion I would prefer not to dwell upon, but which nevertheless I must tell you about presently. Bodil calling us in person is a sign that something is terribly wrong.

'Tilte, Peter and Basker are here,' says Hans.

'Did your mother and father leave an address?'

'Mother left her mobile number, that's all.'

'When are you due back?'

'We have one trip to make before I return the carriage.'

'Call me when you're on your way home. On this number.'

Then she hangs up.

Tilte turns her head and looks me straight in the eye. And I know why. She wants to remind me of something. That at this moment there is still a chance.

I have hesitated to tell you this. But now I'll say it straight out.

Tilte and I have discovered that the door is open not only in happy moments. It is open, too, in moments of dread. Exactly as you learn that someone is dead or has got cancer or has disappeared, or that Karl Marauder Lander – known by all on Finø as the eighth of the seven plagues of Egypt – has got up at four in the morning to be the first at the gull colonies where we gather eggs in May, which is okay because the gulls, the herring gulls and the lesser black-backed gulls only begin to sit on their eggs when there are three, so the nests that contain three we leave well alone. But at the very moment you discover that Karl has emptied the nests and the world is about to collapse around you, at that moment the door is open.

And now I shall tell you what Tilte and I have discovered one must do: one must reach inside and feel. The moment the shock kicks in there's this very unusual, very special feeling inside and all around you, and that is what you must reach into and feel. It is there just before the tears come, and the despair, and the customary depression, and the

giving up, and the decision that if Karl can get up at four in the morning, then you can get up at three or two, or even not go to bed at all so as to be sure of getting there first. During that brief moment when your normal instincts are gone and new ones have yet to appear, at that moment there is an entry.

This I remember on Blågårds Plads, and I listen inside and sense that the shock has caused the door to open.

After that, things happen so quickly it's all we can do to keep our snorkels above water, and this is even true of Tilte.

The first thing is that Tilte says what all of us are thinking.

'Mother and Father have disappeared!'

The next is that Blågårds Plads begins to change.

3

DO YOU KNOW when the way you're feeling sort of rubs off on those around you, like on the way they look? One minute Blågårds Plads is all okay, without necessarily being worthy of preservation by UNESCO and attracting five million tourists to Copenhagen. The next it looks like a place people come crawling to in order to die. The group in front of the church look like a funeral procession. Once they've finished their beer, the three men on the bench will lie down and wait to expire, and they won't have to wait long. The greengrocer's lemons turn out to be composting, and the old lady with her Zimmer and her cat food looks at us as if we're driving a hearse and she's going to ask if she can see the deceased one last time.

Then I say: 'Bodil's frightened.'

We all heard it, and in a way that's the scariest part. All of us heard something in Bodil's voice that can only be understood in one way: that she has run into something bigger than herself.

And then the singing begins.

It comes from inside the church, and the voice is female. She must be using a microphone, and Blågårds Plads is at the same time a funnel that amplifies sound. The song is a foreign hymn and swings gently like gospel music.

The words are inaudible, but it doesn't matter as long as the voice is there. It is a voice big enough for us to park our whole carriage inside, and it is so warm that we would not be cold for one second, not even on a winter's day, and so cosy that we would gladly run the risk of a parking ticket, because we would never want to leave ever again.

For a brief moment, it lights up Blågårds Plads. It puts the greengrocer's lemons back on the trees, it makes the men on the bench consider joining Alcoholics Anonymous, and it causes the old lady in front of us to let go of her Zimmer and prepare to dance the fandango.

It prompts Hans to get to his feet, Tilte to stand up on the seat, and me to move up close to Hans and elbow him in the side so that he will lift me up to see, the way he has done ever since I was small.

A procession emerges from the church. I can see several clergymen in chasubles, a lot of people dressed in black, and in front of them walks the lady who is singing.

At first one wonders how someone so small could possess such a large voice, and then one thinks that she is not a person at all, because it seems like a long green dress is floating of its own accord, and above it a green silk hat like a turban with nothing in it. Then the dress turns and a face becomes visible, her skin is light brown like the stone of which the church is built, and that is what makes her face disappear.

Then she looks towards us, and as she holds the final note she takes off her golden, high-heeled shoes, removes her green turban, allows it to fall to the ground, and grabs a bag from a person standing next to her. In her hand she is holding a wireless microphone that she places on the ground, and then she lifts up the hem of her dress and begins to run. She runs towards us on her bare feet, over the snow and past the men on the bench. And before she is halfway across the square I can tell that she is the same age as Tilte or slightly older, and that she can do the 400 metres in under a minute.

As she reaches the carriage, she leaps like a grasshopper onto the box next to Hans, and even as she is still suspended in the air, she yells: 'Drive! Now! I'm the one who booked you!'

The procession is in disarray outside the church, people are shoved aside, two men in suits break out of the crowd and start running towards us. We know, all four of us, that they are after the singer. And we know, too, that we are on her side. I'll tell you straight out why. She could have been a child pornographer or an abuser of animals, but with that voice I would have tried to save her anyway, and I know that Tilte and Basker feel the same way.

But we need Hans, and for a brief moment we have no idea if he is up to the job.

Regrettably, Hans has yet to discover women.

Which is all the more embarrassing given that women have long since discovered him. When he stands in for Finø's harbour master in June and July and finishes cleaning the toilets at about eight o'clock every night and is done collecting mooring fees from all the boats, at least three of the sweetest girls of summer will be waiting to take him for a walk. But taking Hans for a walk is easier said than done, because no sooner have they begun to amble than Hans begins to swirl around them as though he's on the lookout for something from which to protect them, or a big puddle he can lie down in so they can cross without getting their feet wet.

The trouble is my older brother was born eight hundred years too late. He belongs to a chivalrous medieval age and considers all women to be princesses who may be approached only gradually by means of slaying dragons, for instance, or lying face down in puddles.

But the girls of Finø attend tae kwon do lessons and move to Århus when they are sixteen and take a year out as exchange students in America when they are seventeen, and if they should ever meet a dragon they would want it to be their boyfriend, or else they would pull it apart and write a biology report about all the pieces. So Hans has never had a girlfriend, and now he's nineteen, and his future prospects are less than bright, to say the least. Now, too, he stands