

the exception

Christian Jungersen

Translated from the Danish by Anna Paterson

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‘Don’t they ever think about anything except killing each other?’ Roberto asks. Normally he would never say such a harsh thing.

The truck with the four aid workers and two of the hostage-takers on the tailgate has been stopped for an hour or more. Burnt-out cars block the road ahead, but it ought to be possible to reverse and outflank them by driving through the small, flimsy shacks on either side.

‘What are we waiting for? Why don’t they drive on through the crowd?’

Roberto’s English accent is usually perfect, but now, for the first time, you can hear that he is Italian. He is struggling for breath. Sweat pours down his cheeks and into the corners of his mouth.

The slum surrounds them. It smells and looks like a filthy cattle pen. The car stands on a mud surface, still ridged with tracks made after the last rains, now baked as hard as stoneware by the sun. The Nubians have constructed their greyish-brown huts from a framework of torn-off branches spread with cow dung. Dense clusters of huts are scattered all over the dusty plain.

Roberto, Iben’s immediate boss, looks at his fellow hostages. ‘Why can’t they at least pull over into the shade?’ He falls silent and lifts his hand very slowly towards the lower rim of his sunglasses.

One of the hostage-takers turns his head away from watching the locals to stare at Roberto and shakes his sharpened, half-metre-long panga. It is enough to make Roberto lower his arm with the same measured slowness.

Iben sighs. Drops of sweat have collected in her ears and everything sounds muffled, a bit like the whirring of a fan.

Rubbish, mostly rotting green items mixed with human excrement, has piled up against the wall of a nearby cow-dung hut. The sloping, metre-high mound gives off the unmistakable stench of slum living.

The youngest of their captors intones the *Holy Name of Jesus*.

‘Oh glorious Name of Jesus, gracious Name, Name of love and

power! Through You, sins are forgiven, enemies are vanquished, the sick ...'

Iben looks up at him. He is very different from the child soldiers she wrote about back home in Copenhagen. It's easy to spot that he is new to all this and caving in under the pressure. Until now he's been high on some junk, but he's coming down and terror is tearing him apart. He stands there, his eyes fixed on the sea of people that surrounds the car just a short distance away; a crowd that is growing and becoming better armed with every passing minute.

Tears are running down the boy's cheeks. He clutches his scratched, black machine gun with one hand while his other hand rubs the cross that hangs from a chain around his neck outside his red-and-blue 'I Love Hong Kong' T-shirt.

The boy must have been a member of an English-language church, because he has stopped using his native Dhuluo, and instead is babbling in English, prayers and long quotes from the Bible, in solemn tones, as if he were reading a Latin mass: 'Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of all my days ...'

It's autumn back home in Copenhagen, but apart from the season changing, everything has stayed the same. People's homes look the way they always did. Iben's friends wear their usual clothes and talk about the same things.

Iben has started work again. Three months have passed since she and the others were taken hostage and held prisoner in a small African hut somewhere near Nairobi. She remembers how important home had seemed to all of them. She remembers the diarrhoea, the armed guards, the heat and the fear that dominated their lives.

Now a voice inside her insists that it was not true, not real. Her experiences in Kenya resist being made part of her quiet, orderly life at home. She can't be that woman lying on the mud floor with a machine-gun nozzle pressed to her temple. She remembers it in a haze, as if it were a scene in some distant experimental film.

This evening Iben has come to see her best friend, Malene. They are planning to go to a party later, given by an old friend from their university days.

Iben mixes them a large Mojito each. She waits for Malene to pick something to wear. Another track of the Afro-funk CD with Fela Kuti starts up. After one more swallow, she can see the bottom of her glass.

Malene emerges to look at herself in the mirror. 'Why do I always seem to end up wearing something less exciting than all the outfits I've tried on at home?'

She scrutinises herself in a black, almost see-through dress, which would have been right for New Year's Eve but is wrong for a Friday-night get-together hosted by a woman who lives in thick sweaters.

'I guess we just go to boring parties.'

Malene is already on her way back to the bedroom to find something less flashy.

Iben calls out after her: 'And you can bet tonight will be really quiet. At ... Sophie's!' She pauses. Just long enough to suggest that saying 'Sophie' says it all.

In a loud, silly voice, Malene responds: 'Oh yes ... at Sophie's.'

They both laugh.

Iben sips her drink while she looks over the bookshelves as she has done so many times before. When she arrives somewhere new she always likes to check out the books as soon as she can. At parties she discreetly scans the titles and authors' names, filtering out the music and distant chatter.

She pulls out a heavy volume, a collection of anthropological articles. Clutching it in her arms, she sways in time to one of the slower tracks. Her drink is strong enough to create a blissfully ticklish sensation.

She holds her cold glass, presses it against her chest and gently waltzes with the book while she reads about the initiation ritual to adulthood for Xingu Indian girls. They are made to stay in windowless huts, sometimes for as long as three years, and emerge into the sunlight plump and pale, with volumes of long, brittle hair. Only then does the tribe accept them as true women.

Also on the bookshelf is the tape that Malene's partner, Rasmus, recorded of the television programmes on which Iben appeared when she returned from Kenya. It sits there on the shelf in front of her.

Nibbling on a cracker, she puts the tape into the machine and presses Play without bothering to turn the music down. As the images emerge on the screen, she takes a seat.

Now and then she laughs as she observes the small puppet-Iben, sitting there in front of the cameras of *TV2 News* and *TV Report*, pretending to be so wise and serious – as she explains how the Danish Centre for Genocide Information, where she works as an information officer, lent her to an aid organisation based in Kenya. There is a short sequence filmed in a Nairobi slum before the camera records the arrival of the freed hostages at the American embassy for their first press conference. She studies these images. Every time she sees them, they seem just as fresh and unfamiliar.

Malene comes back, trailing a faint scent of perfume and wearing a flimsy, chocolate-coloured dress. Dresses suit her. It's easy to understand what men see in her. With her thick chestnut hair and lightly tanned skin, she looks positively appetising, like a great smooth, glowing sweet.

Malene realises at once which tape Iben is watching and gives her friend a little hug before sitting down next to her on the sofa.

Iben turns down the music. Roberto, still in Nairobi, is addressing a journalist: 'In captivity it was Iben who kept telling us that we must talk to each other about what was happening, repeating the words over and over until they were devoid of meaning, or as near as we possibly ...'

He smiles, but looks worn. They were all examined by doctors and psychologists, but Roberto took longer than anyone else before he was ready to go home.

'Iben explained that there were a lot of studies demonstrating how beneficial this could be in preventing post-traumatic stress ...'

TV Report cuts to Iben speaking in a Copenhagen studio. 'If you want to prevent post-traumatic stress disorder, it's crucial to start debriefing as soon as possible. We had no idea how long we were going to be held. It could have been months, which was why it was a good idea to start trying to structure our responses to what we were experiencing during captivity ...'

Safe in Malene's flat, Iben groans and reaches for her drink. 'I come across as ... totally unbearable.'

'You're not the tiniest bit unbearable. The point is, you knew about this and most people don't.'

'But it's just the kind of stuff that journalists are always after. I sound like such a psychology nerd ... as if I had no feelings.'

Malene puts down her drink, smiles and touches Iben's hand. 'Couldn't it be that they were simply fascinated by the way you managed to stay in control inside that little cow-dung hideout? You were heroic. No one knows what goes on inside the mind of a hero and you certainly weren't used to being one.'

Iben can't think of anything to say. They laugh.

Iben nods at Malene's dress. 'You know that you can't turn up to Sophie's in that?'

'Of course I do.'

The next recordings are Iben's appearances on *Good Morning, Denmark* and on *Deadline*. On screen she looks like somebody quite different from the old stay-at-home Iben. Normally her shoulder-length blonde hair is thick but without the sheen that the sun brings out in most blondes. The African light, however, has been strong enough to bleach her hair. Since then, she has had her hairdresser add highlights to maintain her sun-drenched appearance.

She had also wanted to hang on to her tan, which, in the interviews, was almost as good as Malene's. And she felt that the usual rings under her eyes were too visible for someone not yet thirty, so she had followed Malene's lead. She went off to a tanning salon, but it didn't take her long to realise that frying inside a noisy machine was not for her. Now her skin is so pale and transparent that the half-moon shadows under each eye look violet.

At the time, her story suited the news media down to the ground. Whatever Iben said was edited until it fitted in with the narrative they were after: an idealistic young Danish woman, confronting the big, bad world outside and proving herself a heroine. She was the only one who had managed to escape from the hostage-takers. Afterwards she had left her safe hiding place to run back to the captives in an attempt to make the brutal policemen change sides in the middle of a brawl.

The papers loved quoting the other hostages when they described Iben as 'the strongest member of the group'. A tabloid phoned one of them and didn't leave him alone until he admitted that 'without Iben the outcome might well have been less fortunate'. The media chased the story for a week and then totally lost interest. The group's captivity had lasted just four days, which meant that Iben didn't rank among seriously famous hostages. By now, the journalists have forgotten her.

Iben realises that Malene is trying to sneak a look at her face to find out if ‘something’s the matter’.

‘Malene, I’m fine. Why don’t you go and change?’

‘Are you positive?’

‘Yes. Sure.’

The furnishings in the flat are in a state of flux. The backs of a couple of basic IKEA folding chairs are still covered by Indian rugs from a Fair Trade shop. The rugs, like the cheap Polynesian figurines, are reminders of the time when Malene studied international development at university. Three years have passed since Malene received her degree. Soon afterwards her student job at the Danish Centre for Genocide Information was turned into a proper, well-paid post. Rasmus, who has a dead-end university degree in Film Studies, makes a good living, too, as a computer-hardware salesman. Now their furniture includes pieces by top designers, such as their Italian sofa and a couple of armchairs.

The telephone rings. Iben answers and recognises the deep male voice with the Jutland accent. She has listened to Gunnar Hartvig Nielsen so many times on the current-affairs programme *Orientation*.

Iben calls Malene, who is presently sporting jeans and a fashionable, colourful silk shirt. It looks like her last bid in the dressing-up stakes, because she has put on some make-up.

Iben hears Malene turn down Gunnar’s suggestion that they should meet for dinner and invites him to join them at Sophie’s instead.

When Malene hangs up, Iben wonders aloud: ‘Could he really be bothered to come to Sophie’s?’

‘Why not?’

‘But what’s he going to do there?’

‘Meet people, talk to me. Have a good time. Like we are.’

‘Yeah ... of course.’

Iben switches off the television. Malene wants to finish her make-up.

Iben had heard Gunnar Nielsen’s name for the first time when she was still a student. Everyone in her dorm shared a daily copy of *Information*, which published Gunnar’s stream of articles on international politics. They scrutinised every word and particularly admired his reports from Africa.

Like Malene, Gunnar had grown up in rural Denmark. At nineteen, he had gone to Tanzania to work on a development project rather than

going to university. He had taught himself Swahili and stayed on in Africa, travelling around for nearly four years. His first book about Africa had been called *The Rhythms of Survival*. It had become not only required reading for young backpackers, but also was taken seriously by people concerned with international issues.

By the time he was twenty-five Gunnar had been a well-established journalist. He had gone back to Africa several times. At one point, he had tried to combine university studies with his *Information* assignments to cover summit meetings and conferences, but the dull world of university life couldn’t compete with the excitement of being at the centre of things, so he had dropped out of the course after little more than a year.

Iben and Malene were still at university when Gunnar’s newspaper pieces suddenly stopped. His fame as a star left-wing writer quickly faded.

Four years ago when she was a student trainee at the DCGI, Malene had found out what had happened. She had managed to get hold of him for an interview about the horrific, but at the time unrecognised, genocide in the Sudan. Gunnar had taken a job as the editor of *Development*, a magazine published by Danida, the Danish state organisation for international development. He had told her that, after his divorce, he needed a steady income to pay child support and to rent a new flat with enough space for his children’s visits. His articles were as good as ever, but went almost unnoticed by people outside the circle of Danida initiates.

Iben, who was studying comparative literature at the time, felt envious of her friend, who always met such exciting men through her work, and was good-looking enough to attract many of them. Her envy deepened when Gunnar invited Malene out to dinner.

More meals followed. Malene and Gunnar explored restaurants in every corner of the city, but did nothing else. Gunnar’s strongly built body, his ‘disillusioned socialist’ attitude and, above all, the fact that he was in his mid-forties, meant that Malene thought the chemistry between them wasn’t right, much as she loved dining out with him. Now and then she would tell Iben about how weary she felt when she saw the pleading in his large eyes.

Once Iben spoke out. ‘It isn’t fair to keep going out with Gunnar and

letting him pay for one meal after another. He's in love with you and you don't even want to sleep with him.'

'Oh, come on. We always have such a good time together. And he's said that he isn't expecting anything more – you know, like love or sex.'

'But he's got to pay for you all the same?'

'No, it's not like that. It's simple: he enjoys eating in restaurants and so do I, but I'm broke. If he couldn't afford it and I could, I'd pay for him.'

When Malene met the younger, cooler Rasmus and became his girlfriend, he too tried to stop her evenings out with Gunnar. Iben overheard Malene say, 'Rasmus, there's nothing sexual between Gunnar and me. We're just good friends.' Still, Rasmus had insisted that she should pay her share.

Before leaving, Iben and Malene wolf down some leftovers and empty their Mojito glasses. In the hall, Malene quickly changes to another pair of her expensive orthopaedic shoes, which she has to wear because of her arthritis

Iben and Malene hang up their coats in the narrow passage of Sophie's flat. The air is heavy with the smell of fried food, wine and people.

Sophie comes over to meet them. After the hugs and cries of 'So good to see you', she notices Malene's clothes and make-up. 'But Malene, it's not that kind of party ...' Some of her other guests are drifting out through the sitting-room door and bump into her. Distractedly she finishes the sentence: '... it's just, you know, the same old crowd coming round for a drink. You know I'm off tomorrow, don't you?'

When she phoned up about the party, Sophie, who had lived in the same student housing as Iben and Malene, explained that she was leaving Denmark to join her boyfriend, a biologist working in Canada on a two-year project.

Someone in the sitting room calls out: 'Hey, look, there's Iben. The heroine has arrived!'

'Went back to protect the others, instead of just looking after number one,' another old college friend adds.

Iben smiles. God only knows how many times she's explained it all before. 'I had no idea what I was doing. Everything was so confusing. I just didn't think about the outcome.'

'But that's precisely what makes what you did heroic, Iben. You had the right instincts. Or whatever it is that kicks in when you've got to make a split-second decision.'

Sophie gives Iben another little hug and looks her in the eye. 'Most people would have run for it.'

The sitting room is packed with familiar faces. Five years ago they were all students together, in their early twenties. Iben remembers how they would laze around on the grass in Fælled Park when there was a concert on. Almost of all them have finished with education by now. Some have jobs, but many more live on benefits, full or part-time. Despite failing in the job market they still feel less poor now, because the unemployment payments are quite an improvement on student grants. Individual lives are being pushed in utterly unforeseen directions along career paths, sometimes along straight routes and sometimes up blind alleys. Some of them already have children.

They are everywhere, standing or sitting, drinking beer or red wine, chatting in the low light from a few dim lamps. Three young mothers drift around with babies in their arms. Iben and Malene exchange glances. Obviously, dancing isn't an option.

There are more questions about Nairobi, but Iben only smiles. 'I've been asked about all that so often I can't even bring myself to discuss it any longer. Some other time. Look, what about you?'

She does the rounds of the room and then tucks herself away in a corner where she can half-sit, half-lean on a table. A man starts reminiscing about nights spent clubbing. He's a dentist, fresh from his qualifying exams and already well on his way to becoming an alcoholic.

She looks up and, across the room, sees Gunnar. Malene once spoke of him as 'such a big guy' and Iben got the impression that he was John Goodman-sized. Now she realises that he is more like the young Gérard Depardieu.

Iben sees Malene get up from an inflatable armchair and walk towards Gunnar; the dentist turns to watch.

Iben crushes a crisp between her teeth. Some women, she thinks, would be bloody irritated if their friend had that sort of effect on every single guy they met. She observes Malene lead Gunnar away to the relative peace of the hallway.

Later, Iben and one of Rasmus's best friends end up side by side on

the sofa. He wears a neon-blue jacket with contrasting seams and is proudly telling her that he's just landed a job as a copywriter in an advertising agency. His voice sounds louder than it used to be and his laughter seems more mechanical.

'Human rights and art – great stuff, but there's no money in it!'

He sees the expression on Iben's face. 'Sure, it's not so bad being more or less broke. But unemployment, that's something else. It's awful. I mean, just look at the way you're treated by your prospective employers. They couldn't give a fuck. They know perfectly well they can take their pick from thousands of graduates.' Some of the people standing nearby are listening in and he turns to them as well. 'But in a good agency you get treated differently. The bosses know how few there are who have both the talent and the stamina to put up with that line of work.' He smiles. 'Like, watch the style; fuck the substance.'

He mentions the name of his agency and Iben is obviously meant to recognise it. 'We've been on TV. Like you.'

Iben pours fruit juice into her plastic cup while keeping an eye on Gunnar, who has come back into the room. He isn't surrounded by any female admirers. Maybe because by now they're old enough to feel self-conscious or because they think that, in the flesh, he doesn't quite live up to their fantasies. Or maybe because he is just too old.

Rasmus's friend is still working his story. Now he's telling everyone about how his agency paid for him and the rest of the crew to take a three-day Christmas break, partying in Barcelona, and how it was worth it, given the firm's investment in their salaries.

His listeners look sceptical and Iben decides to jump in and defend traditional values, such as 'Money isn't everything' and 'You can't buy happiness'. In no time she realises that this discussion is just a rerun of their old debates, as if they are all battle-worn politicians in the last days of an election campaign, able to predict their opponents' arguments.

Avoiding eye contact, she deliberately turns away from the discussion and tries instead to eavesdrop on the conversation of the two strangers sitting opposite.

But Rasmus's friend hasn't finished. 'Iben, your job is different. I would've liked it myself. You investigate serious stuff. Humanitarian issues. That's really worthwhile. It means something.' He pats his

bright-blue jacket. 'You try to make the world a better place, sure. But I'm not convinced that will ever happen. It's not top of the agenda.' He breaks off, apparently amused by his own paradox.

Later, Iben finds herself standing next to a child's folding cot, all aluminium and nylon, like a tiny piece of camping equipment. She is balancing a glass of red wine and three broken crackers.

Suddenly Gunnar materialises at her side. 'What's it like to be back home?' That calm voice of his.

She looks at him. He has grey-blue eyes. 'I'm not sure if I am back.'

They laugh.

Iben doesn't know where to look. Sophie has put on one of her Buddha Bar CDs. At the other end of the room Malene walks over to a wooden chair and sits down. Only Iben knows exactly how Malene looks when her feet begin to hurt. She will want to go home soon.

Gunnar is telling her about being in Dar es Salaam to interview Habyalimana, the former Rwandan President. Not long afterwards the presidential plane was shot down and his widow kept herself busy by killing Rwandan Tutsis. These revenge killings alone led to half a million deaths. Gunnar speaks of when he handled one of the heavy, nail-studded wooden clubs used to break human skulls.

'A lot of the murdering was done inside churches, where many of the Tutsis sought refuge. It was hard work killing human beings with whatever was at hand – mostly household implements and agricultural tools. Faced with hundreds of victims, the Hutus found it expedient to cut the Achilles tendons of their victims straight away. Then they could take their time about the slaughter – days, if necessary.'

In his company Iben finds it easier to recall the three months she spent in Nairobi before being captured. She tries to express how surreal it all was. Most people are bemused, but Gunnar knows Africa.

They lean against one of Sophie's bookshelves. She loses track of time. Then somebody passing by accidentally bumps into Iben and she discovers that she's been standing there with her mouth half open a bit too long, gazing up into Gunnar's regular features and drinking in his long, absorbing explanations. She gives herself a little shake, like a dog that's clambered out of the water.

I'd better go and talk to someone else, Iben tells herself. But she sees Malene heading over to join them. This is not good.

Malene doesn't look at Iben, only Gunnar, when she tells him about meeting one of his journalist friends at the Centre and what a weird encounter it was.

Iben wants a glass of water. She turns to go, but Gunnar grabs hold of her wrist. 'Who knows, I might run into you one day at the Metro Bar.'

'Metro Bar?'

'Don't you know it? I was sure I'd seen you there. It's the café, next to Broadcasting House. I go there several times a week.'

'No, I don't know it.'

Iben realises what he has just said and quickly looks at Malene.

Malene pats Gunnar's broad shoulder. 'Look, I really came over to tell you that I'd better leave. My feet ...' She smiles a big goodbye instead of finishing the sentence.

Gunnar and Iben nod in silence, looking at her arthritic hands and feet.

Malene smiles again. 'Iben, are you coming?'

2

The Danish Centre for Genocide Information, or DCGI for short, was set up to collect data about genocide and make it available, both in Denmark and abroad, to researchers, politicians, aid organisations and anyone else with a genuine interest. Over the years, the organisation has accumulated Scandinavia's largest collection of books and documents on the subject.

The DCGI is housed in a restored old red-brick building, along a lane in Copenhagen's central Østerbro district. Its offices and library take up the entire attic floor, a space once occupied by the city council archives.

The library is expanding all the time. Grey steel shelves cover the walls almost everywhere – in the kitchen, the hallway and the space they call the Small Meeting Room. They have also invaded the largest room, which serves as a shared office for Iben, Malene and Camilla. Wider and heavier industrial-style shelves, the steel lacquered dark green, have been tucked into the less accessible corners and are laden with cardboard boxes full of documents such as diplomatic reports and transcripts of foreign court proceedings.

Only five people are employed to manage the Centre and handle the mountains of printed material. In addition to Iben (the information officer) and Malene (the projects manager) are Paul, the head of the Centre, Camilla, Paul's secretary and Anne-Lise, the librarian.

Apart from Paul's room, the spacious main office is the brightest and most pleasant. Iben and Malene sit facing each other at ergonomically correct desks. Although most of the walls are lined with books, the shelving is not as tightly packed as it is in the library. Malene has put potted plants on the sills in front of the three windows, which is why the office is lovingly referred to as the 'Winter Garden'. The point of the joke is, of course, that the room will always look like a library, regardless of how much vegetation is crammed into it.

Iben and Malene have tried to make their office look more homely in other ways as well. They have put up a notice board and with time it has

become covered with photos, conference invitations, newspaper cuttings and postcards with teasing messages about the sender having a great holiday while they're slaving away in an office.

It's the Monday morning after Sophie's get-together and Iben and Malene are at work as usual. They sometimes chat with each other, sometimes with Camilla, whose desk is at the other end of the large room, next to Paul's door.

Iben can sense something – something in Malene's eyes.

At one point, Malene sighs audibly and Iben looks up. 'What's the matter?'

'Oh ... nothing.'

Malene prints out a piece that she's been working on and starts correcting it, first with a green marker and then with red. After a while she sighs again.

Iben looks away from the screen, hesitates and tries a little smile. They are such good friends that Malene can't help smiling back.

'What's up?' Iben asks.

Malene slams the printout down on the wrist-support in front of her keyboard.

'I just can't get it right. Not the way I want it.'

'What's the problem?'

'I've got to get the text ready for at least three posters about how Danes rescued lots of Danish Jews. It's for the exhibition. It's so hard ... Whatever I write sucks. It sounds so self-satisfied and so ... evangelical!'

Iben leans forward, pleased that Malene seems to have forgotten about the slight awkwardness at Sophie's party.

'I've rewritten the whole thing four times, but it's just ... How do I avoid writing stuff like: "The only country in the world" and so on?'

'Why not add something about the restrictive asylum policy towards foreign Jews during the 1930s?'

'I thought of that, but it doesn't fit in with the main theme of the exhibition. Besides, what I wrote sounded crap as well.' Malene starts writing again.

Iben gives up and returns to her own screen. She can't quite put Malene out of her mind, even though she knows that there's no real conflict between them and Malene is probably just having a bad morning.

They are both working on an exhibition based on an idea that Malene had while Iben was away in Africa. Malene thought that many people might share her own sense of weariness at all the evil deeds in the genocidal world out there, and want to know more about the heart-warming exceptions. She thought up a theme for a poster exhibition that would celebrate the small minority of good and brave people in Nazi-controlled regions – people who saved lives during the Holocaust. She talked to Paul and he liked the idea. The Copenhagen City Library agreed to allocate space and time, and afterwards, the exhibition would be made available to schools and any other interested institution.

Something occurs to Iben. 'Maybe it would work better if you described the civil servants behind the thirties asylum policy? It would fit in with your approach of looking at the individuals behind the rescue stories.'

Malene takes her time to reply and Iben doesn't want to sound bossy.

'Look, it's just a thought.'

Iben's job is to research the background for Malene's posters. She is revising her notes on the story about the Polish shepherd Antoni Gawrylkiewicz. He risked his life by digging underground shelters, where he housed sixteen Jewish survivors of the ghetto massacre in Radyn. The Jews had managed to escape by hiding in an attic. When the Germans were searching the house, a Jewish father had to strangle his youngest child, a little boy, because he started to cry.

As so often at work, Iben feels hopelessly spoilt. How could anyone possibly think that what she had experienced in Nairobi was of any consequence? She had been kept prisoner for four days. When she came back home, she was offered all the counselling she needed, paid for by the aid organisation she worked for. Antoni Gawrylkiewicz had never got any kind of support or care.

True, her supposedly therapeutic talks hadn't been particularly helpful. The therapist had asked about the depression and panic attacks that had hit Iben after the death of her father nine years ago. At that time, talking to friends and to a psychologist had actually helped, but after Nairobi, with the new therapist, it seemed to her that nothing at all came up that she didn't already know.

Those who challenged the system during the war were left terrifyingly alone with their fears. Iben had found another item about a man, a

passer-by, who was suddenly shot dead in the street by an SS officer. The man's crime was to hand a jug of water to the prisoners in a Jewish transport.

Regardless of the terror, Antoni Gawrylkiewicz, and others like him, had fed and housed Jewish strangers for years. Night after night they must have fallen asleep knowing that the family might be woken up at any time by hammering on the door and be deported to a concentration camp, together with their secret house guests.

No one dared tell anyone else about the deadly risks they were taking. For two years Antoni Gawrylkiewicz cooked for sixteen Jews and, to make sure there were no signs of their existence, carried away their excrement from the earth shelters where they lived. Many of the units in the Polish resistance movement were as driven by anti-Semitic hatred as the Nazis, and one local unit suspected Gawrylkiewicz of hiding someone. He was tortured, but revealed nothing.

After the liberation the Jews he had saved were at last free to return to their homes. Even though resistance fighters kept up their murderous attacks against Jews, at the end of the war there were many survivors because of him.

And as it is said in several religious creeds, including Judaism, : 'He who saves one life, saves the entire world.

Iben misses the laughter she usually shares with Malene. Ostensibly there is no problem. They talk, as ever, about work-related topics. They haven't really fallen out with each other. If anyone has the right to be cross, Iben feels it should be her. Malene, always so sure of being attractive to men, is making a big fuss over nothing.

Camilla's gentle voice floats across the room from her desk. 'Paul called to say he won't be in this afternoon. He'll be in tomorrow morning.'

'Thanks, Camilla.'

Camilla is at least ten years older than Iben and Malene. She has little in common with the two younger women, but Iben likes her. Camilla is generous and brilliant at her job, always happy to share a joke.

Iben wants to stretch her legs. She goes to the kitchen, fills the Thermos with coffee, and returns with an idea. 'I thought, maybe the exhibition could be called something like "Everyone Can Make a Difference".'

It would refer to what the exhibition aims to do, which is to make people want to create a better future, not just dwell on the past. The name would highlight that.'

Camilla is quick off the mark. 'That's a fantastic idea.'

After a moment, Malene responds. 'Aha ... Right ...' She looks up from her writing, which is obviously still frustrating her. Clutching the knuckles of one hand with the other hand, Malene swivels on her chair to look first at Camilla, then Iben. 'I'll add it to my list. We'd better run our ideas past Paul soon.'

Paul has a terrific talent for formulating concise and arresting soundbites that always go down well with the media. He once said in a television interview that the DCGI should survive because 'The purpose of the Danish Centre for Genocide Information is to develop a vaccine against what, in the past, has been the worst form of political disease. Our goal is to encourage resistance in the communities of the future.'

Paul is in his thirties, lean and fair. His hair is very short and he almost always wears a black sweater. Sometimes he dresses up by adding a black jacket. He plays the role of politically engaged, media-savvy intellectual to perfection. During a typical workday Paul spends more time networking over a lengthy lunch than he spends in his office. His top priority is to increase the public's awareness of genocide, and he goes about it by making sure he's part of the current-affairs coverage. He has excellent relationships with a whole string of editors and journalists, which helps him secure amazing amounts of free publicity.

Iben once told some of her friends that Paul, despite coming across as a black-suited embodiment of sobriety, drives an Alfa Romeo and keeps his mobile phone on when he's out jogging in Hare Woods, the best nature trail in the city.

Her friends instantly labelled him a fraud. But Iben disagrees with them. It is Paul's job to fit in and he conforms one hundred per cent because he cares passionately about the cause. Without Paul, the new right-wing government would have put the Centre under tighter control immediately after the election. They might even have closed it down, like so many of the other social-democratic projects. But it didn't happen, probably because Paul spent several days in town, lunching with the right people in the right places at the right time.

Iben already has a vision of him promoting their exhibition in some

news feature, and imagines the kind of sales pitch he would give based on the slogan: 'Everyone Can Make a Difference'.

'It is increasingly common to hear people say that it is pointless for individuals to act. DCGI's new exhibition sends a crucial message: personal responsibility still matters. What you decide to do can make a huge difference.'

Malene has worked for DCGI the longest. As a student trainee she was exceptionally capable and, after graduating, she was offered the post of project manager. One of her chief responsibilities is to look after the academics and civil servants who contact the centre.

Two years ago, when the information officer's post became vacant, Malene recommended Iben but didn't tell the selection committee that she was her best friend. She had met Iben at college, she told them, and worked with her in a few student societies. In Malene's view, Iben was unusually bright, efficient and easy to work with.

Once Iben was shortlisted, Malene briefed her carefully, giving her insider advice about the right things to say. In the end, Iben landed the job ahead of 285 other applicants. She and Malene took care not to show how well they knew each other, and tried to make out that their close friendship had developed in record time once they started working together.

After a few weeks Paul stopped at their desks, chatted for a while and then paused, smiling as he looked at them. 'You two have learned to get on quickly. Good!' He tapped on Iben's new computer. 'It's a match I'm proud of. It bodes well!'

Iben's job at the Centre had been her reward for standing by Malene over the years.

One night six years earlier, Malene had been woken by a stabbing pain. Three of her fingers were red and inflamed. It had grown worse, and by four in the morning the fingers were grotesquely swollen and immobile. She had walked along the corridor and knocked with her other hand on Iben's door. Iben had phoned the doctor on call. The diagnosis was a sudden onset of rheumatoid arthritis and Malene had been kept in hospital for several days.

She had recovered, but was told that she must have frequent check-ups, and that the illness had no effective cure. It would come and go for

the rest of her life. It could target any of her joints, for variable lengths of time, but especially those in her hands, feet, knees, elbows and shoulders. The affected joints would become stiff and very sore.

Afterwards a kind of pattern developed. For a few days every second month or so, Malene was incapable of doing things like using her computer keyboard or grasping the handlebars of her bicycle. Taking painkillers helped, but her hands were so weak that Iben had to help her carry shopping bags and so on.

The booklets from the hospital hadn't mentioned a decrease in appetite, but Malene lost weight quickly. Over the following six months the pretty but rather plump Jutland girl with radical attitudes was transformed into a socialist Barbie.

While her friend's pain came and went, Iben felt like Malene's squire, always ready to help and support her. Only Iben was allowed to know when Malene wasn't capable of twisting the lids off jars, of buttoning her shirts, or of unlocking doors by herself.

Just before lunch time, Malene phones Frederik Thorsteinsson, the suave and sophisticated head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry's Centre for Democracy as well as the deputy chairman of the DCGI board. Today is his birthday

Malene knows Frederik best and is on easier terms with him than Paul. She's bantering with Frederik when Iben calls out, loudly enough for him to hear her: 'Happy birthday, Frederik!' She gestures for the others to come and sing 'Happy Birthday!' into the receiver. Camilla joins in at once, but then Malene waves them away and carries on talking.

After lunch, the afternoon is busy. Iben writes a review of a new book called *Systematic Torture as a Method of Oppression: Chile 1973-76*, finds a translator for an article in Latvian about the classification in international law of six and a half million murdered Soviet kulaks (are they a social class or an ethnic group?), and goes on to test new software designed to help export texts to the DCGI website. She has also created the invitations to a talk, 'The Significance of Gender During the Bosnian Genocide'. As the day wears on, Iben begins to feel a little moody and wants to be left alone.

Just before going home, however, Camilla discovers a new episode of

the popular radio show Chris and the Chocolate Factory on the Internet and turns the volume up so that everyone can listen. Anne-Lise comes out of the library and they all gather around Camilla's desk. Together they pick a few more skits, laughing as they hear Chris do his funny telephone voice. As usual, he is spinning out new reasons for skipping work.

'Right, boss ... but you see there's this other thing that stops me from coming in today. It couldn't be more unfortunate, almost ... but, listen, what else could I do? Eh, boss? ... The thing is, I've got stuck in my hammock. I can't fight it. I'd like nothing better than to get out of it, but what can I do?'

Malene, who has always been brilliant at voices, joins in, improvising Chris's words. From time to time she entertains everyone with parodies of the Centre's clients, members of the board, or Paul at his most self-satisfied. It's one of her best impersonations. Smiling, she knocks on Camilla's computer with her knuckles and then announces: 'You two learned to get on quickly. Am I right or am I right? It's a match I'm really proud of.' She snaps her fingers and shakes her head lightly. 'It bodes well!'

It's very amusing. Even Iben cracks up laughing.

By seven o'clock that evening Iben is the only one left in the office. At eight o'clock she drags two large supermarket bags into her flat. She has stocked up on her staples: rice, honey, toilet paper, three packets of organic crisp-bread that was on special offer, yoghurt and vegetables. For supper she chops a handful of greens, adds seasoning and olive oil, puts in today's special – a frozen block of cod – and shoves the batch into the microwave.

So far, she hasn't done much to her flat. The walls are still white, as they were when she first moved in. Her few pieces of furniture are either inherited or bought secondhand.

While the microwave hums she checks her answering machine. No messages. Once the oven has beeped, she opens her email. There's only one new entry:

YOU, IBEN HØJGAARD, ARE FOR YOUR
ACTIONS RECOGNISED AS
'SELF-RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE HUMANS'
IT IS THEREFORE MY PRIVILEGE AND MY
JOY TO BRING YOU TO DEATH
NOW.

What's this? She leans forward, reads it all again. Without formulating the thought, she instinctively knows that she mustn't touch anything.

This is a death threat. No question. Stay calm and think. There have been stories going around about journalists receiving threatening messages from neo-Nazi teenagers. Now it's her turn. Maybe.

The sender's address is 'revenge_is_near@imhidden.com'. The English is reasonable and the spelling is correct, which exempts just about all the young local neo-Nazis. The expression 'self-righteous among the humans' is an attempt to play on the phrase 'righteous among the nations', part of the citation for the highest honour awarded to foreign na-

tionals at Israel's national Holocaust memorial. A foreigner who knows something about the history of genocide might have written that.

Her first reaction is pure sorrow, nothing more. She can feel her face dissolving and her whole body seems to crumple.

That terrible African heat bears down on her again. It could be one of Omoro's friends, or family, she thinks. Or a Luo tribesman. She feels dizzy; it's the heat and the smells. She sees the prison hut, the flies, the militia, the tall trees and his blood. The Luos have found out what happened. They know who she is and have come here from Nairobi. She'll have to accept being killed if that is what they have decided.

She looks around. The bedroom door is open. She hasn't been in there since she came home. And she closed the door this morning.

Standing motionless, she scans the room. Nothing unusual about the stack of books or the cupboard or the bookshelves. What about her desk? The pile of papers looks tidier than she left it. Someone has been through her papers.

No sounds, except her own breathing and faint noises from the television set in the flat below. Her nostrils feel dry, like when the hot dust blows in the wind. The air smells of the angry, sweating men, alert to danger.

She cannot tell why, but she is convinced that someone is hiding in her flat.

Don't switch off the computer. Don't run to grab a coat from the hall.

Instead she walks calmly to the kitchen. She tries to convey that she is relaxed, on her way to do something completely ordinary. Takes her supper out of the microwave oven, which is on top of the fridge, next to the door leading to the kitchen stairs.

Breathe slowly, deeply.

She picks up her mobile from the kitchen table, moves to the stair door and opens it gingerly. No one is waiting for her on the landing. She shifts gears and flies down the narrow stairs, her feet barely touching the steps. It's important to outrun the man in her flat, but also to be quiet enough to delay him discovering that she's gone.

She doesn't close the door, doesn't even give it a push.

She's underdressed for the crisp October evening.

The door to the yard. She stops, just a few steps away.

It isn't likely to be one of Omoro's friends. Something made her jump

to conclusions. She must be sensible, ask herself who else it could be. There are plenty of suspects to choose from, she knows that. Not that it helps. Iben has always tried to forget the obvious fact that all surviving war criminals, the very ones she keeps writing about for the DCGI website, can access the site too. They can Google their own names from anywhere in the world and, in seconds, her articles – in English as well as in Danish – will flash up on their screens. The writer sits in a modest Copenhagen office with no special security features while her contact details – home address, phone number, email address – are easily displayed.

But would an experienced mass murderer take the trouble to travel to Denmark? Of course he might. The air fare wouldn't be much for a professional soldier. And wouldn't an experienced soldier position himself right there, on the other side of the door to the yard? He'd have a direct escape route into the street, making it easier to cover his tracks. Maybe he intended to make her dash downstairs and open that door.

She listens. Not a sound.

Then a click as the stairwell light switches itself off. All too quickly as usual. It's very dark now. But her eyes don't have time to grow used to the darkness. Above her on the stairs someone switches the light on again.

She waits for a second, badly wanting to believe that she is safe – that no one is in her flat; and that whoever is on the top landing isn't coming after her.

The sound of heavy male boots on the stairs. Before she has even turned the lock the footsteps have reached the next landing. No time to think. If someone is waiting for her outside, she'll have to take him by surprise.

Above her the man has passed two more landings. A deep breath. Iben yanks the door open and, in the same movement, starts sprinting across the pavement.

She scrambles over bicycles and dustbins, and over the fence into the neighbouring yard. One more yard to go before she finds an unlocked gate. She runs out into a street that is not her own.

After about a hundred metres she stops to look behind her. There are people, but none of them seems to be in pursuit. Here she will be harder to spot.

Whom has she written about recently?

Barzan Aziz, a small dentist with a large moustache, who lives in a penthouse flat and has a history of personally having taken the lives of at least 120 Kurds and many Iraqi journalists and intellectuals. Aziz strangled his victims with a steel wire, except in some cases, when he hammered nails into their skulls.

Romulus Tokay, an ex-member of the Romanian secret police, was put in an orphanage at the age of eighteen months. He escaped after killing one of his teachers and is currently employed in Columbia, where his usual practice has been to hang people upside-down in trees and light fires under their heads.

And what about George Bokan? He was raised in the United States and played football in college, but went back to Serbia in the early 1990s to help fight the war. Bokan trained snipers, one hundred men at a time, in the skill of killing innocent civilians from vantage points in the hills around Sarajevo.

There are so many more. Iben has summarised the witness statements and other evidence of the activities of mass murderers such as Najo Silvano, Bertem Ygar, William Hamye and others, who between them have killed hundreds of thousands of their fellow men. It is all on the website, as are her condemnations of a whole array of military units, regimes and power-mad dictators.

Have they been hunched over their PCs in Serbia, the Philippines, Iraq, Turkey – wherever – studying her accounts of their crimes?

She looks around in all directions as she walks towards Nørrebro Street. The autumn air is cutting through her thin blouse and the sweat is beginning to dry on her skin, adding to the chill. She overtakes a pale girl with a ring through her nose, military boots and pink highlights.

Iben dials 112 – emergency services – on her mobile and tries to explain quickly to the woman at the other end what has happened.

‘Hold on, please. You say that someone sent you an email and now you’ve run out into the street?’

‘Yes ... no. Not exactly. It was a death threat. The sender is probably a war criminal. Maybe from Iraq!’

The woman’s voice is dry, tight: ‘This is an emergency number. It is reserved for serious calls. I have to ask you to get off the line. Tomorrow you can phone your local police station – if you still feel this matter

is important, that is.’

Iben tries to explain that it’s her job to write about international war criminals and that the threat is not just a practical joke played by an ex-lover, or whatever the woman is imagining. But she is not persuaded and replies abruptly: ‘You’re blocking an important emergency line. That’s an offence and you may be fined. I can see your number in front of me. If you don’t end this call, we’ll have to fine you.’

Iben is about to reply when the woman hangs up.

Is she right? Iben asks herself. Is this an attack of hysteria? It would be good to think so. Then she could simply turn round and walk back home.

She’s walking quickly now, keeping an eye out for suspicious-looking men. The trouble is that they are everywhere. Small gangs of swarthy men are driving up and down Nørrebro Street in souped-up cars and hanging out in the many Middle Eastern take-aways. Men in black leather jackets walk towards her, follow behind her.

Who knows how a war criminal reacts when he first reads the description of himself on a website? Is it a blow to his sense of honour? Might not his claim for asylum in some European country or his pending court case be affected? Some of these men would slit her throat as easily as they’d swat a fly. She has seen photos of massacred people and listened to survivors speaking at conferences. These men do not murder because they hate: even being vaguely irritated is enough.

But why should a killer take the trouble to go after her? Iben is so insignificant. Or is she? Her articles and abstracts describe events involving many hundreds of thousands of men, all experienced killers and mentally unstable. If just one of them is ‘irritated’ enough, her fate is probably sealed.

There are no police patrol cars around and by the time she’s reached Nørrebro Circus she decides to phone the emergency number once more. She’ll try to explain things better this time and insist on talking to somebody who’s prepared to listen.

At that moment her mobile rings. It’s Malene. ‘Iben! I’ve tried to phone you at home. Where are you?’

‘At Nørrebro Circus. Without a coat. I’m freezing.’ Iben begins to describe what has happened, but doesn’t get far before Malene interrupts her.

‘I’ve had a threatening email too! It says I’m evil and must die. I only just opened it!’

Iben can’t help shouting. ‘You mustn’t stay in your flat!’

Malene sounds confused. ‘I can’t stay here? I don’t know ... I didn’t take it that seriously. Should I have?’

Iben hesitates. It’s a comfort that someone else has been threatened too. Everyone in the Centre might have received one of these emails and perhaps dozens of people in similar organisations abroad.

‘Malene, I was so sure there was someone in my flat. It could’ve been ... I mean, if there was nobody in your place ... Anyway, they could just be trying to scare us. If they really wanted to kill somebody, it’d be silly to send an email first.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

Iben is perfectly aware of what her friend Grith, a trained psychologist, would say about her reaction: it is a response conditioned by her experiences in Kenya, one of exaggerated watchfulness – ‘hyper-alertness’ – which is the lasting effect of previous exposure to danger.

A thought suddenly strikes Malene: ‘Iben. Do you think your reaction is because of Nairobi and all that?’

‘I suppose ...’

‘Listen, find a taxi and come on over. I’ll wait for you in the street and pay for the cab.’

‘But if these people break into your flat, they’ll find both of us.’

‘Iben, I don’t think so. Look, it won’t happen.’

Iben doesn’t answer, so Malene hesitates. ‘OK. What do you suggest then?’

‘What about meeting in a café?’

‘But we’ll have to go back to our own places afterwards.’

Iben hates playing the part of the weak female, especially with Malene, but suggests that there are lots of people’s places where they could crash until they have a better idea of the danger they’re in.

‘Oh, Iben. OK, I’ll come.’ They agree to meet at Props Café.

Iben feels she has been leaning too heavily on her friend, and can’t quite bring herself to ask Malene to make sure that she isn’t being followed.

Iben sets out towards the café, along the road by the Assistens Cemetery. Suddenly, for no reason, she starts running. She never cared for

sports of any kind, despite her friends’ attempts to persuade her, but now running feels right. She overtakes pedestrians on the broad pavement, where deep shadows are pierced by shafts of light from shops and passing cars.

A white car skids to a halt not far ahead, and two men jump out so quickly that a cyclist almost collides with one of them. He calls out angrily. The men shout back in reply, and Iben slips through the slow-flowing stream of cars to reach the other side of the street.

It is time to calm down and take stock. She turns to get a look at the two men. They’re standing in the street talking to a third man, whom they must have spotted from the car. All three have dark sideburns and one of them wears metal-framed glasses with small round lenses.

She starts off again, jogging now. The pavement is narrower here and cluttered with a greengrocer’s stall, bicycle racks and advertising boards.

It occurs to her that the emailer might not have had far to travel. There are thousands of political refugees in Copenhagen, all of whom have had terrible experiences and whose family members or friends have been victimised in armed conflicts, persecution, torture and murder. Some may have carried out acts of violence themselves. If Iben has exposed someone, this might be their response.

She feels breathless and slows down. Ahead of her is a tall, sickly-looking man with messy, pale-blond hair, wearing a torn camouflage jacket.

Over the last ten years almost five hundred journalists have been killed worldwide, mostly in undemocratic states. Did any of them receive emails from `revenge_is_near@imhidden.com`? Iben hasn’t heard of them being tracked down in Western Europe. Who would be well informed about this?

Gunnar would, of course.

When the traffic lights change, an old BMW accelerates, its tyres screaming, and races to the next intersection. The lights turn against it and the driver has to brake again. A passer-by laughs.

Iben wants to phone Gunnar straight away.

She’s had a strange feeling about him all weekend, speculating about what his flat might be like and his lifestyle. The fantasy of moving in with him gives her an odd but comforting sensation. She would fit right

in, she felt. But how could she know? – a man whom she has met just once and spoken with for an hour at most? But then, she explains to herself, over the years his writings must have taught her so much about the way his mind works, what his favourite words are, and the nature of his thoughts.

She swerves to avoid a group of noisy teenage boys.

Then she thinks about the word ‘self-righteous’ in the email. It seems they used different words in Malene’s email.

Iben begins to run again.