



Iben Nagel Rasmussen

A Road in My Mind

*There's a mountain in my head
I'm gonna climb before I die
There's a road in my mind
I'm gonna walk - I don't know why*
Eik Skaløe

1950 - VIRUM

The baker is only 200 metres from our home, and on the same side of the road. I am allowed to fetch the bread for breakfast and I run while clutching in my hand the 25 øre that the bread costs. My thin, brown plaits jump up and down in rhythm with my steps: "How strange" - I think - "I run with 25 øre one way, and soon I will run the opposite way with a loaf of bread. But the person running is still me. Inside, I am always I, and I am always only now. I wonder what time and distance are?" I am five years old.

1959 - THROUGH GERMANY

"The mountains! Look at the mountains!" I repeat hundreds of times while the long train full of groups of youths winds through the Alps. It is the first time ever that I have seen mountains. My friend and I are the only ones in our class who have not been confirmed¹: I, because my parents are atheists, and my friend because her parents are Jehovah's Witnesses. We have been given a journey instead. We are part of a big group of about fifty young people, all of whom have actu-

1. Confirmation is a rite in several Christian churches that confirms a baptised person in her faith and admits her to full participation in the church.

ally been confirmed.

It is autumn. The mountains flare with yellow, red and orange. I sit glued to the window completely - yes - mountain-trapped. Later when we go on a bus tour from Lugano (the place where we are staying) with an Italian driver, all the girls cry in chorus: "Take your cap off, take your cap off!" The young man lifts his hat, and the girls howl in delight when his black hair shining from brilliantine is revealed.

1963 - TUNIS

Our jeans are stiff with dirt. We have travelled in the same clothes for four months, only washing them once, in Morocco. Eik and I are on our way across North Africa. We had only a few crowns when we left Denmark. We earn our living through Eik's singing and guitar playing. The trick is to enter a restaurant or a bar suddenly and immediately start playing. That way it is hard for the waiter to throw us out, because there is nearly always someone among the guests who thinks a brash red-haired guitarist accompanied by a small, fearful helper, is exciting and exotic. "We must look happy" - says Eik - "people hate misery, they won't pay for it, they want to have fun, to be entertained", and so they will be.

We sleep on the desert sand, or in the oasis where dogs bark at night; it is full of strange smells: mint, oranges, warm stagnant water. We ourselves are also strangers.

1964 - COPENHAGEN

"Well, it's just fantastic - go on, take it!" LSD is a dangerous drug, and we know it. For a whole day I have prepared myself for the "trip". The small bowl painted with blue patterns in my hands grows and expands; it becomes the universe. The patterns become stars in space; they change like a kaleidoscope. Now they make a cross, now they become a wheel penetrated by lines like the

eight-fold path of the Buddha. The universe, I discover, contains all religions. They are all true; all present at the same time in the same little bowl.

1965 - HOLBAEK SCHOOL OF ARTS

"If I start working at that theatre, I will have to stop travelling around the world." I speak to my friend in a low voice, while we walk along a country lane in the clear frosty night outside Holbaek School of Arts. We run over the snow-covered fields laughing, we let ourselves fall to the ground with open arms. We look up at the infinite, black space. The stars! - we suddenly understand - the stars give the impression of the sky's infinity, not the darkness. When we get up again our bodies have made large shapes in the snow that look like cruciform silhouettes. "No" - he answers - "it is not the end of your journeys. Now you must travel - inwardly."

1966 - HOLSTEBRO

I have "passed". After a month on trial, I have been accepted as a pupil at Odin Teatret. We sit around a table: Barba, ElseMarie, Torgeir and I. The atmosphere is serious. Another aspirant has just run away crying. They did not find her suitable. Barba looks at me intensely: "And you must prepare yourself to stay here in Holstebro a long, long time." - he says - "Are you sure you can stand staying, living and working here? Do you think you can manage a life without travel, without the city?" "Yes, I am completely sure that I can manage."

A couple of months later the director asks if I miss anything in Holstebro, so far away from Copenhagen. "Yes, the sea" - I answer - "I really miss the sea."

2001 - RYDE

What a summer we have had this year. The family camp (there were twenty-four of us including eleven children) was as usual by

the sea. We sleep in tents down by the beach. We swim, cook on the open fire and play music. The climax of the camping comes on the day when we all go to town to play. In the early years the children were mostly a nuisance and they were given big bags of sweets to keep their mouths shut. It looked terrible: chewing children crawling around their parents' legs, crying at the wrong moments, blowing disgusting big bubbles of gum, peeing in the gutters and smearing chocolate in each other's hair. All my husband Kai's brothers and their wives play and sing. My brother Tom also takes part. We have played on a square in Bornholm, in a market in Sweden or, like this year, in the pedestrian area of Langeland. The children are no longer troublesome; they are the core of the orchestra.

Down the street they come - whirling and playing, grown-ups and children together. Six-year-old Matthias stands on his older brother's shoulders with his arms outstretched; Ruben, who is eleven, is on stilts. Six-year-old Jonathan plays the violin, the other children play the saxophone, trumpet, guitar, cello, drums or they dance.

When I observe them, their passionate movements, their lively eyes, their sense of fellowship, I experience a continuity in my own life, as if the dream of my youth dances before my eyes. People pass by or stop, perhaps thinking: "What a life! How exciting! Here is someone who really dares!"

And I see yesterday's endless trials before me: the problems, the quarrels and tears when something didn't succeed. But the public sees the dream, they sigh - and pay. In Ingmar Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* the old mother Helena sits alone in her parlour. A bit tired, she speaks softly, but very gently to her oldest son's ghost:

"You see, Oscar" - she says - "it is exactly like this: one is old and one is a child at the same time. And we do not understand what has happened in that long period in between, the time that was considered to be so important."

Tomorrow we begin at the theatre, the holidays are over, the day after tomorrow I travel to Poland: work, touring, travel are on the doorstep. Here at my table, with a view over the river valley and its layers of millions of years old moraine deposits, I see my life in and with theatre in a surprising perspective and I feel like answering Helena, because it suddenly seems so simple and evident: "What for me was - and still is - most important is to transform the 25 øre with which the little girl with the jumping plaits was entrusted, into bread."

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley

IBEN NAGEL RASMUSSEN (Denmark) was born in 1945 and has been an actress at Odin Teatret since 1966, performing in ensemble and solo productions which include *Itsi Bitsi*. Iben has published *Den Blinde Hest* (The Blind Horse) and edited *Breve til en Veninde* (Letters to a Friend) by Eik Skaløe. Her experiences as an actress are published in *The Actor's Way*, edited by Erik Exe Christoffersen. Iben's main pedagogical project is a yearly gathering of actors from different countries which takes the name of *Vindenes Bro* (The Bridge of Winds).