Wonder…

Aden is the pleasantest and most beautiful city in all of Arabia. It is enclosed by great walls on the side of the sea and by mountains on the side of the land. On top of these mountains several castles are clearly visible…it lies beyond the Red Sea, at the edge of the great ocean.
— Samson, 1683

Standing on deck as the ship put down anchor at Steamer Point, I keenly followed everything in the harbor—the freighters, the passenger ships, and the launches going back and forth. The dhows were alluring with their pointed bows, oblique sterns, and peculiar, billowing jib sails; it felt like stepping into a tale from Arabian Nights. Sindhbad the Sailor set out on his merchant expeditions in ships like these.

I wished I could go ashore immediately. Impatiently I watched as the customs boat pulled alongside the ship. Then came the Health Officer in his launch and with him Dr. Walker, the missionary physician who was meeting us and taking us to shore. Then, after the adults had talked endlessly, after the Customs Officer had cleared all the papers, and after the Health Officer had approved our health certificates, we were finally ready to leave the ship and go ashore.

I had not at all minded leaving Aarhus to come here. I had heard about Aden all my life; my parents and older siblings had lived so long in this fabled place; Anna and I alone had never been privileged to visit here. I had enthusiastically embraced the idea of going to Aden, caring little that I left

friends behind; I could probably get along without them for a while. Besides, I would be making lots of new friends, I was sure.

We had left right after Christmas. Johs and Elin had been at the Main Railway Station in Aarhus to say goodbye. That Elin could be so calm knowing her parents, Anna and I would move so far away, baffled me. At sixteen Elin hadn't minded that she had a home no more. Her move to live with friends of our parents until graduating from the Gymnasium appeared to exhilarate her; with exuberance she looked forward to the freedom that awaited her, escaping at last from what she considered an oppressive childhood.

All of Elin exuded confidence, I thought: her five foot four inch slender frame, her blond permed hair, and her broad smile, a smile that pushed her prominent cheekbones higher and crinkled her eyes. How could she be so happy? I thought ruefully. How could she care so little that we were leaving? But just then, tears filled the corners of Elin's eyes. Oh, wonder of all wonders, she did mind after all. As my sister's brow furrowed and her eyes grew bigger and brighter, I felt reassured. Yes, she *did* care. Elin's usually impish and playful smile was now questioning and wistful. Was she on the verge of bursting into tears? Normally she was lively and outgoing, occasionally temperamental—indeed, her mood swings could be significant—when she was happy she was so radiant and energetic and her eyes shone with amusement; but now they were filled with sadness.

Johs, nineteen however, had looked diffident. Amiable though he was, I didn't know him well as he had been gone for two or three years. Though he had not attended the Gymnasium, he had been accepted into the prep class at the local Teachers' College where he planned to get a teaching degree. He had moved in with Pastor Bøss, other friends of our parents.

There had been a hustle and bustle at the train station, people getting on and off trains, running across platforms, and up and down stairs to catch their connections, busy holiday travelers returning home after spending Christmas with family. My mother gave last minute instructions to Johs and Elin. Then my father, his voice breaking with emotion, admonished them one last time.

I felt torn apart by the leave-taking. As leaves from a damaged book, my feelings were flung across the platform, the pages blown around by the wind,

caught and lifted up, twirled around on eddies of air. Would I ever be able to gather them and put them back together again?

Finally, the train pulled away from the platform.

"Take good care of yourselves, and write…write long letters…," Elin's voice trailed away as the train moved out of the station and picked up speed. As it rounded a curve, she and Johs suddenly disappeared from our view.

During the subsequent train journey, we were all subdued. Outside the landscape languished in a steady drizzle, desolate and gray. White and black cows, their hooves buried in the wet pasture, cast indolent glances after the train. Unable to take my eyes off the countryside, I savored it all; I would be away from Denmark for a long time. I curled up in a corner, clasping my shoulders. Outside everything was bleak, yet the fields held such promise, and soon the pastures would be green again. This matched my feelings: sadness at leaving, yet anticipation and excitement about the future; from now on nothing would be familiar or predictable anymore.

In Antwerp we stayed at the Seamen's Mission while my father made sure our boxes were loaded onto the *SS Mahenge*, the freighter we would be traveling on. Frida came to Antwerp from England to say goodbye to us and Anna and I were excited to see her again. I have a black-and-white picture of her sitting outside a hotel in Antwerp. She was almost twenty-one years old then; a tiny young woman, compact in a bulky winter coat, with hands folded in her lap; her legs with feet in sensible flat shoes are crossed at the ankles. The light illumes one side of her face and hair as though only part of her is visible and available; she doesn't smile. Her face is raised in detachment.

I loved the voyage to Aden, a whole two weeks onboard a ship. There were few passengers and the crew onboard the freighter were friendly, especially the first mate who let Anna and me tag along as he went about his duties. During our dinners, we sat at the captain's table, a table covered with a beautiful white damask tablecloth, matching napkins, wine glasses, and flowers in a vase.

On its way across the Bay of Biscay the ship pitched through the seas with waves towering over it. Anna and I walked the decks with wide-based gaits laughing with excitement as the spray drenched us. In the dining room,

the crew raised the rims of the tables and wet down the tablecloths to prevent plates, glasses, and silverware from sliding off. While our father, Anna, and I continued to enjoy our meals, our mother retreated to the cabin below, defeated by seasickness.

We sailed past the Rock of Gibraltar and scanned the rocks for the Barbary Apes our father told us lived there, but we saw none. We docked first in Genoa and then in Livorno where we visited the Leaning Tower of Pisa. And finally, we sailed through the Straits of Messina where Mt. Etna spewed lava into the sky like fireworks on New Year's Eve. What a farewell Europe was giving us.

I had looked forward to setting foot in Egypt. My father's stories about *al-misr* (Egypt) had created images in my mind of undulating desert sands stretching to the horizon, of camels and donkeys, and of Egyptians in red fezes and long shirt-like gowns, and above all of sun and heat. Therefore I was much surprised at how gray and rainy it was as we approached Egypt; the sea was black and impenetrable. I stood in the bow of the ship, staring towards the horizon over which I expected Egypt to appear, but in the gray haze, sky and sea came together. Eventually the hazy line I decided must be the horizon gradually thickened and Egypt emerged from the sea. Hours later, we were at anchor in Port Said. Now the clouds dispersed and it became hot.

We spent the day ashore where smells of camels, goats, coffee, incense, and sand assaulted our senses; the people shouted, argued, and laughed in that strange, guttural language, Arabic. Would I ever learn it?

Then we continued on, passed through the Suez Canal, all the way down the Red Sea, through the Bab el Mandeb Strait, and finally, an early morning, the bare volcanic rocks of Aden appeared on the horizon as little dots. They grew until they were like pyramids in a mirage, surrounded by shimmering sea, and within hours the ship passed by the looming extinct volcano into the Bay of Aden.

I said hello to Dr. Walker. His welcome was warm. Gawky and cheery, his cheeks ruddy, his dark hair bristly, he spoke in a rolling Scottish accent. He wore a khaki topee, long, khaki *ghurka* shorts, and knee-high socks, just like my father.

Then we were ashore. Barefoot beggar children swarmed around us, shouting "Baksheesh!" They were so persistent that I wished I could give

them something so they would leave, but my father, cold-hearted, it seemed, shooed them away and I, despite the boys' near nakedness—they wore only a short, dirty loincloth—failed to realize that they were utterly impoverished, that they were street children, orphans doomed to care for themselves because of the harsh reality of their family's poverty.

"Hop in, and off we'll be. Karen and the kiddies are waiting," Dr. Walker said. Like all Land Rovers in Aden, Dr. Walker's was dusty, inside and out. My bare legs quickly became covered with patches of grayish-brown dirt and my dress clung to the seat. Yet, I was excited; it was too much to grasp that we would actually be living here, at first with Dr. Walker and his family at Kintore. I wondered what their house was like. I looked forward to meeting his children and hoped I could understand them.

Looking across the Bay of Aden, I tried to imagine where their house might be. It was not in Crater, I knew, which was in the volcano behind us, but in the desert near Sheikh Othman.

"About ten miles in that direction…," Dr. Walker pointed. All I saw was sand; the horizon was gray and indistinct. Then I glimpsed a tower and some airplanes on the other side of the Bay. "…no, that's the RAF Airport at Khormaksar," Doctor Walker laughed. " We're a little north of that, in the desert. You can't see our house from here."

The Land Rover later became a symbol for me of my years in Aden. I fell in love with it; it brought me so many adventures. However, on the threshold of this my new life, my fascination was with riding in a car, in any car—I could not remember ever riding in one—and particularly in a jeep. From the backseat I looked out across the hood and realized there was no windshield, it had been folded down; neither were there windows in the doors.

"That's to keep you cool as you drive," Dr. Walker said with a grin. I understood most of what he said.

My mother sat with us two girls in the back. She seemed happy, but also tired and hot. I was not always sure how my mother felt. She had so looked forward to being back, but now that we were here she somehow seemed a little apprehensive. She pursed her lips and massaged the stump of the right middle finger, the finger she lost to infection some years ago. I knew this was a sure sign of anxiety.

My mother, however, seldom lost for words, soon rose to the occasion, and told us about everything we saw along our way. We passed the Crescent—the shopping area—a half-moon-shaped row of buildings containing larger shops fronted by a small garden.

"Oh, nothing has changed," my mother marveled.

"And this is where we'll shop for material for clothes." She pointed to a large store where bolts and bolts of brightly colored cloth stood on end in such dense clusters that shoppers could barely make their way through the store.

Everything was so bright and cheery.

In the midst of the garden, a statue of the seated Queen Victoria overflowed its marble support. How strange and incongruous her statue seemed in these surroundings. Arab men clothed in bright futas (loin cloths), shirts, and colorful crocheted hats sat on their haunches around the foot of the statue, talking, gesticulating, eating *sambusa*s (spicy and similar to eggrolls, but triangular), all the while paying not the least attention to this the motherly former Ruler of the Mighty British Empire.

Dr. Walker wanted to give Anna and me a taste of the market, the souq. The crowds were immense. I became aware of the many nationalities and my mother discreetly pointed them out: Arabs, Indians, Somalis, Jews, and of course the occasional European. Animals mingled freely—goats, dogs, chickens, and donkeys. And there again were the enchanting smells—of incense, coffee, spices, sun, sand, and of many things with which I was as yet unfamiliar, pungent not at all unpleasant smells. From small stores, mere holes in the wall, merchants hawked utensils, food staples, cloth, watches, and jewelry, anything one might wish for. I stared in amazement. I thought of the shopping street at home in Aarhus, how drab it was in comparison to this. Now, in January, the downtown streets of Aarhus were wet and dank; rain and fog must have settled in, daylight hours were few, and the sun was absent for days on end, covered by dark, heavy clouds. I felt stimulated, alive, and excited here where color, sun, and warmth surrounded me.

We continued our slow progress through the souq. In rooms giving onto the street old men sat on rope grid beds, smoking pipes made of elaborately designed brass; in other rooms younger men reclined against the walls, languidly talking and chewing away.

"That's qat they are chewing, mildly narcotic green leaves that makes them forget everything. They sit and chew it all day and get nothing done."

My mother's condemnation caused me no surprise. My mother tended toward open display of her disapproval. I realized there were very few women in the market. The ones I saw were all dressed in black from head to toe—in chadors—their eyes hidden behind a gauze-like colored veil. What is it like walking around inside that black tent? I wondered.

We drove through Ma'alla and north, away from the volcano. We passed by the RAF camp, which was strongly protected by barbed wire fencing and guards. Within its perimeter were the many barracks for the men and some single-family houses for the officers. The British had a significant force stationed here.

Beyond the camp, white fields stretched all the way west to the Bay: saltpans, my mother explained.

The sky was blue without a cloud and the day was getting warmer. In front of us stretched the desert; a haze hovered over everything. I was now convinced that I could never miss Denmark. This place excited me. I couldn't wait to explore my new environment; I couldn't wait to learn English; neither could I wait to learn Arabic so I could get to know the people who lived here.

Then we saw the large pale-yellow house. It seemed to lie there all by itself in the middle of the desert, surrounded by tall mud walls. We swung through the gates, up to the main entrance. The house was rectangular; a porch surrounded it on the bottom floor, large pillars supported the veranda above. Occasional bushes of oleander grew against the pillars; scattered palm trees and thorny acacias dotted the compound.

We had arrived at our destination.