

Audrey Thomas/BREEDERS

After Corinne fainted in the Picasso museum and everyone was so horrible to her — well not exactly horrible but they stuck her upstairs where the photo exhibit was, the only part of the museum that was *climatisé*, and kept talking at her in French, should they call a doctor? *les pompiers*? and they couldn't find Jeff, even though she described him exactly and told them about his tee-shirt which said "The Gang of Four," she got really freaked out and decided she would go and visit her brother Fred, who was with the embassy in Copenhagen.

She had been up on the top floor for about half an hour, alone most of the time and when she came down Jeff was sitting out in the courtyard with their college friend Martine, drinking orange juice and chatting. He hadn't even missed her, hadn't even known she was sick. They never walked around museums together, he said, so how was he to know she was in trouble. Jeff didn't know she was pregnant, but Martine did, and offered to take a cab back to the place where they were staying on the rue Monge. From the impatient look on Jeff's face Corinne knew it was all over between them and that he had wanted to spend this afternoon in the company of Martine. He would say it was because Martine was bi-lingual and really knew her way around — he always had good reasons. Corinne knew she'd better start to make other plans. She got Martine to entice Jeff out to a movie while she packed up some stuff, wrote a note and made her way over to the Gare du Nord. She'd be back, but right now she needed some pampering and a change of scene.

It wasn't that she expected her brother to solve her problems for her — Martine could probably do that — but she suddenly wanted to see family, especially Fred, the black sheep. If her parents found out what had happened to her she'd be a black sheep as well — two black sheep in a family of white sheep, spotless sheep really. Her mother would say to her father, "Now what have we done to deserve *this*?" She might add, pushing her hair back behind her ear and giving a little smile, "At least Corinne's *normal*; what she's done is silly but at least it's *normal*."

"I guess I'm like your grandfather," she said to Corinne once, "I really don't like anything abnormal. Remember how he always had to have housekeepers who were attractive? He couldn't stand to be around anything ugly?"

"You don't think it's abnormal to choose a housekeeper by her looks and not by how well she can keep a house? I find *that* abnormal." Corinne was in what her mother called the argumentative stage. Grandfather, before he died, employed a series of stunningly beautiful housekeepers, none of whom could cook worth a damn. He even bought paper plates by the hundreds so they wouldn't have to do so much washing up. They sat up front with him, in his old Buick, when he went shopping while the dust kittens gathered under furniture. But he didn't marry any of them and he left his money to his children so Corinne supposed that all that other stuff was abnormal in a normal sort of way. She hadn't minded the housekeepers but she hated going there for Sunday dinner and cutting food on a paper plate.

She had sat up all night and was very glad to see Fred waiting at the Central Station. All around her, college kids like herself had been chatting and flirting and exchanging information about cheap hotels and hostels, places to eat. She felt sad and worldly-wise, set apart from them by her secret sorrow. She read Jean Rhys, a book Martine had lent her, and dozed.

The train went right on the ferry and was held down with huge chains. Most people headed straight for the Duty Free Shop. Corinne wandered through but didn't see anything she really wanted to buy. Fred got a booze allowance from the Embassy and she couldn't imagine bringing him a box of fancy chocolates. A girl who looked Danish was buying bag upon bag of liquorice all-sorts. It seemed a funny thing to spend your money on.

In the Picasso museum there were lots of sculptures and paintings of pregnant women that the artist had done when he was about to become a father again at the age of sixty-seven. Some of her friends' parents were divorced and the fathers married again to much younger women who wanted babies. That was natural. Men could have babies pretty well up to the day they died. There was that cellist, the Spanish one. He was

eighty or something and had a baby. She wondered if her grandfather had ever slept with any of those housekeepers.

She hadn't fainted because of all those pregnant women; she had fainted because the museum was so hot and stuffy and because she had thrown up her breakfast before they set out. The lights in the hall and in the toilets at their hotel only stayed on for two minutes. She stood over the toilet bowl, in the sudden darkness, retching. Maybe it would be better to have the abortion done in Denmark than in France. France was a Catholic country and she was also under age—at least back home in Massachusetts. They'd probably want her parents' consent. And her mother would want her to keep the baby, she just knew it. After Fred defected (that's what they called it between themselves, "Fred's defection") her mother said, "Well it's up to you Corinne, to make me a grandmother." Martine had an abortion—she said it didn't hurt. But they'd seen *Dirty Dancing* last month and Lisa nearly died in that—the sheets were covered in blood.

Fred brought his current boyfriend to the station. (This is my friend Äse—my friend Awser—at first Corinne thought he was trying to be funny.) Äse picked up her bag and as they moved away she could see that Fred was limping badly. "Two broken toes," her brother said. "In pursuit of knowledge. It was Selena's fault really. She took it in her head to dust—as some final gesture—hoping for a bigger wedding present perhaps." Selena was Fred's Hong Kong maid whom he had brought with him to Copenhagen. Now she had decided to get married to a Danish widower and Fred found the whole thing very funny. He had written Corinne a letter about it. "In any event," he said, "her zeal evaporated, or maybe one of her friends rang up, before she put things back in the study. Or before she had replaced *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. I came home late and didn't notice, so when I got up in the night and went into the study to make some notes, wham bam thank you ma'am I went flying."

"He went into work the next day," Äse said, "but his foot was turning purple with little streaks of purple up the leg. When he fainted, they sent him to hospital."

"You fainted," Corinne said, "what day was that?"

"I don't remember, about a week ago, why?"

"Nothing," she said, "no reason. I'll need to change some money."

"I am very impressed that you travel so lightly," Äse said. "Most of the young people one sees are carrying these enormous packs. I always think of them as life-support systems — like the men carry on the moon."

"Oh they are, they are," Fred said. "They contain enormous quantities of clean underwear with one's name sewn in on Cash's name tapes, and socks and deodorant and chocolate bars and Wrigley's gum to distribute to urchins. Soap. Deodorant. Toilet paper. Americans cannot travel without these things and they are afraid that Europe may not feel quite the same about personal hygiene as they do. There may be *shortages*."

"I left most of my stuff in Paris," Corinne said, counting her money and putting it away before she left the *Change* wicket. "With a friend."

"A friend, a friend," said Äse. "When one speaks of 'a friend' and gives no name that usually means a friend of the opposite sex. Or that's what it usually means with you." He smiled. ("This is my friend Awser," and in Hong Kong, my friend Jimmy, in Delhi, my friend Ranjan, in London my friend Michael. Sooner or later Fred had always found a "friend".)

Fred opened the door of a taxi. "We're going to the races this afternoon. Do you want to go home first and freshen up or would you like to have a long leisurely lunch downtown and then proceed directly to the *Galopbane*?"

"I've never been to a horse race," Corinne said, "but I'd like to take a bath and wash my hair first. If that's okay. If there's time?"

"You see," said Fred, after giving the taxi driver directions, "personal hygiene wins out over *koldt bord* and good Danish beer." He got in beside her and patted her knee in a brotherly fashion.

"Never mind, we do understand. Sitting up all night is not much fun. We'll have some fruit and cheese at home and a meal later on, after the races. We have become addicted to the races at the *Galopbane*. It's very small, very pretty — reminds me a bit of New England."

"Do you win?" Corinne said.

"When he wins," Åse said, "he wins all afternoon. Last week he lost all afternoon. It evens up." Åse was very good-looking, with curly dark-blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Corinne wasn't sure what men looked for in other men but by her standards he was certainly handsome. His hair was receding a little bit at the temples, as was Fred's, and he wasn't a poster Dane but he was enormously attractive. He also worked for the Embassy, he said, as a translator and liaison officer.

The house was very pretty, ochre-coloured stucco with a large garden at the back and a formal hedge in front. Corinne was surprised that Fred was not living in an apartment of some sort.

"Everyone before me has been married with at least one kid. I think they want to hold on to the place, which is nice for me, except it means I have to put up with every cultural visitor who comes through — unless they are very, very big. Actually, it's kind of fun. Opera singers singing in the shower, jazz musicians and minor poets smoking up on the verandah, painters making appreciative noises about the light."

"Do they have to eat Selena's cooking?" Selena was the worst cook Corinne had ever experienced. If it weren't that she was also extremely plain it might be thought that Fred was following in his maternal grandfather's footsteps. When Corinne went out to visit Fred in Hong Kong she was served canned chili and hot dogs and desserts like orange Jello, meals like that in a city of gourmet delights. Fred said she had worked for an American family for five years and the children would eat nothing but the most banal American food. Now it was all she would cook. Fred liked good food. Corinne couldn't understand why he dragged Selena around with him. Maybe she was very discreet about his sexual habits.

The one thing she did well was garden, and the garden at the back of the house was beautiful.

"I take the visitors to restaurants," Fred said. "I wouldn't waste a jar of Cheese-Whiz on strangers. It will be hard to find a replacement of her calibre."

Åse came in from the kitchen with three bottles of beer and some cheese and flatbread.

"Rest your leg," he said to Fred, "I'll show her where she is

to sleep.” She followed him up the stairs. He opened a door to the right, which revealed a small corridor and then another door. “It’s strange, isn’t it? Perhaps this is where they kept the old mother. At any rate, you will be very private.”

He put her case down on a luggage stand. This was obviously a room, now, for visitors. They could be private, yes, but so could Fred. Fred and a friend. She wondered if Åse actually lived here — would that be allowed, these days? He was tall, like her brother, but well-built, heavier.

“Thank you for meeting me at the station,” Corinne said.

“But of course we would meet you. Fred has been very happy ever since he got your call.”

“Really?” Corinne was pleased.

“Really, really. Now you have about ten minutes, fifteen at the most. He will not be happy if we miss the first race. I’ll put your food and drink on the bureau here. There’s a hair-dryer in the bathroom.” He went out and shut the door.

The soap in the shower was Imperial Leather, which she didn’t like, but she was already wet when she reached for it. As she washed herself she thought about her brother. He was thirteen years older than she was and yet had never been impatient or dismissive with her as a child. She could only remember him shouting at her once, when she was about four. She had wandered upstairs and into the bathroom which he had forgotten to lock. He was just getting out of the shower and was naked, with what she later knew was a hard-on. She had never seen a man naked before, and with this huge *thing*.

“Don’t you ever knock!” he had screamed at her, red-faced and furious. “Get out!”

She backed away and heard the door slam behind her, the bolt shoot home. And did not go howling to her mother. She must have felt she was in the wrong, not Fred. Maybe the hot water had given him an erection or maybe he was just about to jerk himself off. He never apologized but he was very gentle with her for the rest of his school holidays.

His pubic hair was red. She was dark, like her mother; it was her father and brother who had the red hair, although her father’s was white now and Fred’s had faded.

What did he and Åse do with one another? Were they afraid of AIDS? Denmark was supposed to be very liberal. Was there

a lot of AIDS here? She had seen magazine pictures of young men dying of AIDS. They both looked very fit, tall, healthy men in the prime of life. But one of them could be carrying it. Anybody could be carrying it. Suppose she had an abortion and haemorrhaged? She might be given AIDS-infected blood. It had happened to people with haemophilia, and a woman in Canada had died three years after a blood transfusion. It made her feel faint just to think about it. And whichever way she thought about it—having the baby or having the abortion—it made her feel sick. Would she be able to bring up the subject if Äse were always around?

On the shelf with the hair-dryer, in the bathroom, was a My Little Pony doll. This one was pink with bleached-blond hair. It must have been left by the last family and Fred had kept it as a joke. Or maybe Äse had given it to him because he liked going to the races. It looked silly next to the shaving mug and shaving brush and razor. The little kids went crazy over them. Her friend Julie's half-sister owned about a dozen and liked to comb their manes and talk to them. Better than Rambo and G.I. Joe but pretty useless.

The mane was coarse—a real horse's mane might feel like that. Some of her friends had horses but Corinne had never touched one, let alone sat on one. Theirs was not a horsey family. When had Fred acquired this passion for the races? Maybe at the same time as he made friends with Äse. Girls did that kind of thing all the time—learned to like what their boyfriends liked. It hardly ever worked the other way around.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Äse smiled at her. Corinne smiled back. "Oh yes. It's not at all as I imagined it. Fred's right—it's like some country scene back home. People sauntering around, babies, kids. It's charming."

Corinne had seen twins in a double pushchair and bet on "Gemini" in the third race. She won twenty-seven kroner on a ten kroner bet and was very pleased with herself. Fred had not won anything yet, nor Äse.

"Most of the women I know rely in intuition when they bet," he said. They were sitting on white chairs in the covered grandstand, eating hot dogs with *brod*. Corinne realized that for the first time in weeks she was having fun. It had something to do with the sunny afternoon and the excitement of betting on a

horserace and of course to do also with the certain knowledge that if she asked him, Fred would help her. But it had to do with Äse as well — she realized she was turned on by Äse, by his merry face and his courtesy and the way he had included her in the phrase “most of the women I know.” She and Jeff had been together since grade twelve. He probably never thought of her as a woman.

Galumpf, Galumpf, Galumpf, went the loudspeaker and they played the song that signalled the start of another race. The chairs they were sitting on were numbered and Fred decided to change his seat in order to change his luck. Corinne and Äse remained where they were. Corinne had bet thirty kroner on “Moby Dick” because she was from Massachusetts. The jockey had a white whale on his cap and on his green silk shirt. They had gone down to the paddock in front of the grandstand, to see the horses, now accompanied by stable ponies, circle in front of the grandstand. It was a race for two-year-olds.

“Some say they are too young,” Fred told her, “that it’s not good for them; but aren’t they beautiful!”

Most of the stable hands were girls of her own age and even younger, but the jockeys looked old, with wrinkled, nut-coloured faces. She didn’t like looking at them very much — they reminded her of dwarfs and midgets.

“Of the hundreds of thousands of Thoroughbreds running at all the tracks in the world today,” Äse said, “the pedigree of every one of them can be traced back, through the male line, to one of three stallions at stud in late seventeenth-century England.”

“Really?”

“Really”

“Pedigree,” Fred said, “that must come from foot, somehow. I should have paid more attention in Latin class.”

“When I was a very little boy,” Äse said, “my mother and father used to bring me here to Klampenborg to watch the races and sometimes the Royal Family walked around in the ring. Talk about bloodlines, pedigrees! As a good Dane I should mention that the Danish royal family is the oldest royal dynasty in Europe.”

“And if one is talking about *peds*,” said Fred, “my foot hurts. Let’s make our bets and get something to eat and go and sit down.”

Fred came back up to join them after the race. His choices for one and two had both won and he was elated.

"I'll take you somewhere fancy tonight," he said to his sister, "down by the water. I had bet a lot on that race."

Down by the starting gate a pretty blonde girl, in a pale silk raincoat and holding a cellophane-wrapped bouquet, was being interviewed by a television crew.

"Is that one of the Royal Family?" Corinne asked.

"No, I don't think so. The daughter of an owner, maybe." Äse smiled.

"Girls and horses, girls and horses. They go together, don't they?"

"What about the centaur, half man, half horse," said Fred. "I don't think I've ever seen a statue or picture of a female centaur."

"Of course you have," Äse said. "In the movie *Fantasia*. Surely you, as Americans, have seen that movie?"

"Äse loves old American films," Fred said, putting his hand on his friend's knee. Äse smiled and looked at the hand. He picked it up and gently gave it back to Fred. Corinne was afraid to look at either of them. She was *really* turned on by that, Fred's long, slim hand, a larger version of her own, on Äse's knee.

"Fred took me to *Fantasia*, when I was little," she said. "I don't remember much about it except I got scared when Zeus or somebody threw thunderbolts."

"And I was stoned," Fred said. "It was in the early Seventies, a re-issue. It was quite the thing to get stoned and go to see *Fantasia*. I don't remember a female centaur."

"Oh yes, she was white, with blonde hair. The male centaur had blue hair I think, and it was in the bit with Zeus—the Pastoral Symphony, wasn't it?"

"He had to take me out," Corinne said, "I was frightened."

"And there is a Botticelli," Äse said, "in the Uffizi I think, with a female centaur. She is not the main character, King Midas is the main character. But in the lower right-hand corner a female centaur is suckling her child while a male centaur is bringing her something that looks like a dead squirrel. So there's two. But there aren't many, I don't think. Centaurs are usually male. It is a very old myth."

"There must have been females," Fred said, "or there would have been no babies."

"I think the centaurs came from the union of women with horses." He smiled down at the place where Fred's hand had been, then turned to Corinne. "What do you think?" Was he teasing her? Flirting? She stood up.

"Let's go bet again."

Fred shook his head. "Hooked. One afternoon at the races and she's hooked. All right, let's go look over the horses — they're Arabian this time — and place our bets. After this race maybe we'll go on into town and find a lovely place to eat."

"Are you coming with us?" Corinne said to Åse.

"With your permission." He smiled and bowed. "Have you seen *The Black Stallion*?"

"Of course."

"He was an Arabian, is an Arabian, although not the most famous or most valuable Arabian in the world. That one is worth about ten million U.S. dollars. The purest stock is in Egypt. You can see paintings of these lovely creatures in Egyptian tombs. The Arabian horse has a closer relationship to man than any other animal except a dog."

"When his ship comes in," Fred said, "Åse is going to buy an Egyptian-Arabian and live in the desert like a Bedouin."

"Yes, that would be lovely. No more translating of memos and greetings."

"But no movies," Corinne said.

"Perhaps I could have a VCR that ran on a small generator in my tent."

"Åse says the Arabians know the sexual differences between human beings," Fred said. They were leaning against the paddock fence as the horses were being brought out.

"But it's true! When a woman leads the Arabian to serve at stud, the sperm amount is fifteen per cent. Higher than when a man is in control."

Corinne was embarrassed by this talk of studs and sperm counts and she had a feeling Åse knew she was. Could he tell she was pregnant, somehow, or was he just teasing her, trying to see how sophisticated she really was?

A small dark woman had been listening to them with great interest. Now she addressed Fred.

“Ex-coos me, are you breedish?”

Fred smiled down at her. “No,” he said, “we’re Americans.”

She shook her head. “No, no, breedish — *horse* breedish. Do you breed horses?” Fred managed to keep a straight face.

“I’m afraid not.”

The woman smiled, showing several gold teeth, and handed him a magazine. She said they could keep it anyway. It was all about Egyptian-Arabian horses, with photos and descriptions.

As soon as the woman had moved far enough away, they began to laugh.

“Breeders,” Fred said, the tears rolling down his face.

“Breeders!”

“And you said, in your oh so polite diplomat voice, ‘No, we’re Americans!’ ” Åse imitated Fred being polite. “ ‘No, we’re Americans.’ ”

And then she began to cry, because the reality of it all was that she was nineteen years old and pregnant and scared shitless and sooner or later she was going to have to tell somebody, probably Fred, and it was all such a horrible mess and how could she have been so stupid?