

Helle Helle

they

Translated from the Danish
by Martin Aitken

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Later she goes over the fields with a cauliflower. Goodbye to those Kung Fu shoes. All roads lead to roads. She carries on into Vestergade, past the front-gardenless houses. A man waves from his breakfast. But houses aren't front-gardenless if you come from round here.

The blacktop glitters, theirs is after the square. Through the glass door and up the stairs. She lets herself in with her elbow, scuffs off her shoes:

'It's me!'

And again after that.

It's quite a heavy cauliflower. The sun stripes the floor.

They live above *A Cut Above*, hence the involuntary step cut. She puts it up in a chimney, but half collapses. She blow-dries it with mousse and the mirror on a dining chair, sitting on her knees on the carpet. They always have wall-to-wall. It's a corner flat, not much to look at from outside.

The living room's painted to go with a candlestick. It's dusty pink, but they never light the candle. They light it twice, but it leaves a sooty mark. They sit by the window a lot, and on the settee, with the local rag.

She comes back from the cabin trip with a wrong set of cutlery. Now they've got silver-plated, engraved IB. She

puts the place mats out, fries them each a fish. Eelpout that muddies the pan. Her mum claps her hands together. This is last year. There's no recollection of extractor hoods.

On the third of April her mum says:

'I must have swallowed a stone.'

They go for a walk by the playing fields, the anemones are out. Some small boys are playing football, shrieks and shouts, one of them's crying against the goalpost. Her mum's in a winter coat. They're having beefburger, hence the walk. She's got an Icelandic sweater on herself, it's too early, the wind goes through the stitches.

'A stone stone?' she says, her mum nods.

'A heavy one. Here.'

She pauses a second and puts her hand to her coat, below her chest. They carry on towards the pond. The bushes are dotted with crocus, they don't care for crocus.

On the way back they bump into Palle, her mum raises a leg in delight. Palle's from the outfitters, sometimes he comes over and eats his packed lunch with her mum in the shop. When the sun shines they sit with their feet out of the back door. He has to be getting on to his niece, he's got a birthday cake on the luggage rack. He turns and waves to them, his bike wobbles.

They don't talk about anything on the way home. Just before the square her mum says:

'I think I'll ask Palle round for a roast beef dinner. What do you think?'

'I think you should.'

'It's not the sort of thing you do for yourself, a roast beef dinner.'

She rearranges her room. The noticeboard goes over by the window. She's got a number of cuttings and postcards and photographs. The cuttings are fixed with a single pin, they curl up from the bottom as the summer wears on. Her room faces out to the yard, she watches the dock plants grow at the foot of the rear building. The bin down there's full of hair. At one point a complete pair of plaits. They give her such a fright she drops the lid with a bang and steps in some coffee grounds, there's always so many coffee grounds.

In June her mum can't finish her jam butty. Normally it's no bother, she'll have one with honey too, and half a

slice of toast with cheese on top. The other half she wraps up and takes with her to the shop. She sits and drums her nails on the tabletop next to her plate, it's strawberry jam, she blows a strand from her face. She's just not hungry. But lots of people have no appetite at that hour of the morning.

She herself wanders between her yoghurt and the mirror in the hall, her German exam's in an hour, she changes her blouse as well.

'You're flitting about,' says her mum.

'I've not got much time.'

'Sit down, for crying out loud.'

'I'll be late.'

'You've plenty of time.'

'No, I haven't.'

'It suits you that, you just need the collar turned up.'

'It's only you who still does that.'

'I dare say,' says her mum and looks at her plate, flexes her fingers.

One of the cuttings is from a newspaper from the capital, she finds it on the pavement outside the baker's. She hasn't realised you can get it at the baker's, but you can't either, the baker woman tells her. Someone's had it with them and dropped it on their way out. It's from the day before, they study it over the counter. Tourists, most likely. She buys a wholemeal roll and often some butter, a little portion pack.

When school breaks up the teachers put on a sketch. Her mum only stops clapping to flap her song sheet in front of her face now and then. It starts a wave going. They open the door onto the fields. It's the emergency exit, they're not really supposed to. Outside,

everything's green and blue. During the speech from a senior student, in a short, breathless pause, first the cuckoo is heard, then the lapwing, and everyone laughs.

She has a bit of bother with her new school bag, it's supposed to be a rucksack. But the straps are too short and they can't be adjusted. She buys it at the start of the summer holidays, she spends all her money on it. She's meant to be going out with Lone and Lone's cousin. The cousin's left home, she lives above the old ironmonger's. She makes cider out of winter apples from their nan, she says they're for stewing. They sit in the cousin's little flat, each with a tall glass, listening to music. They sing along, and when the notes are too high

she mimes. She's not sure if the others notice or not. The cider spreads to her arms and legs, she flutters her feet on the mat. She's decided to stop dwelling on things. She thinks about the word substantive, whether it's right. She still needs blue and red pens to analyse a sentence, it's one of the things she's worried about going into sixth form.

Lone's cousin's got a cactus collection under the roof window. They stand and look at it, identifying the different types:

'Strawberry, banana, cowboy.'

Poking their heads out they can nearly see the water tower. In the other direction, the evening sun hangs above the square, there's a window open over in the flat.

Her mum sits in an armchair with the local rag in front of her, she finds it a good way of relaxing, resting her eyes on the pages without reading. The newspaper rustles, she doesn't feel like anything. She's in her comfy set. Sometimes it happens that someone comes to the door and rings the bell unannounced. For that reason she's learned to creep about below window height. Her stomach rumbles and makes a racket, a fly leaves the arm rest. She's getting to the point where she no longer swats insects. There are some little green-winged things in the kitchen at the moment, she releases them carefully onto the window ledge. Now she stands up. The slightest draught and she gets a sore throat, it only takes a swallow to flit past. She closes the window with a bang. It lingers briefly in the high street.

Lone's cousin shuts the roof window on Lone's head, all three of them fall down laughing. They laugh and laugh. She gets a mouthful of the cousin's sock heel and spits exaggeratedly. Lone bats the air above her head:

'Ow, ow.'

One of the tall glasses has got knocked over. She feels a long hair on her tongue and pulls it out with her mouth wide open. Lone's cousin gets to her feet and rescues a cactus. She tries to get up herself, but trips on the corner of the mat. It all starts again from there, the sky's still blue. Lone lies there sobbing. She's not going to sixth form, she's starting an apprenticeship to be a cook. She advocates leaving the fat on cast-iron cookware. They're supposed to be going to Step In, but no one normal goes out before midnight. That's two and a half hours yet.

They slosh down into the street to see what's happening. Lone's got a swelling. They pelt some signage with gravel, only someone comes. It's a man with two dogs, one of them's interested in Lone's cousin's shoes. The man pulls hard on the lead:

'Give over, Rover,' he says.

They sit down on a step and giggle. Once he's round the corner, they throw some more gravel. Lone gathers a handful. The air tastes mildly sour, perhaps it's the cider.

Her mum thinks about wet weather, hail on a tent canvas. She's lying on her back in bed. A downpour in the allotments, potatoes awash. She stands in a crochet dress in water to her ankles, she's not cut out for that life. It's sixteen years since. Weather clearing from the east, baby in a carry cot on the garden table. She turns

onto her stomach. When eventually she falls asleep she wakes up after forty minutes every night. In the beginning she staggers to the kitchen and puts some coffee on. That's back in February. She has a wash, even gets a pork roast ready once. Every morning in the shop she stares at the black marks under her eyes, reaches down for her camouflage shade, cloud. One time she nearly snaps at a customer, it's not her at all. She says so into the pillow:

'That's not me!'

Then she smiles and remembers something she mustn't forget to tell. A car brakes in the street. She turns over again.

Lone's cousin stops the town taxi, but there's a waiting list until two, a silver wedding at E4. Unless they feel like going now, he's got someone to pick up at the ferries.

Lone sits on the step with her head in her hands, she wants to bike it. Her cousin's not fussed. They can't make up their minds, the taxi drives off. But biking it's a non-starter. Her cousin's is in Onsevig and hers has got a flat. It punctures last year, she rides over a plank.

They fetch the rest of the cider, only it's gone warm. It's not a good night for going out anyway, no one's got any money until next week. She goes as far as the corner with Lone. They look at hairdressing prices, suck their cheeks in, then say goodbye for ever.

She imagines the novel *Pavement Thoughts* to be a thick brick of a book based on observations she's made on her way to and from school over the years. The work's been in progress ever since Year 5, even if she hasn't written anything down yet. She makes herself comfy on the settee with a pad and a pen. She's turning into a coffee drinker, usually she makes a Thermos jug. It can hold four big mugs in all. She sits with her feet up on the table and the pad in her lap. She doesn't know where to start.

On the third day, a pair of pigeons land on the roof. It inspires her, she writes a lengthy rhyming poem about their clucking, it takes her two jugs. But then she feels queasy and can neither sit nor stand, twinges in every hair root. She sees herself in the mirror on her way to the kitchen for a biscuit, her mouth hanging open, she's seldom seen herself so pale. When her mum gets home from the shop she's lying down under the throw with the shivers. She watches tennis with the sound down, her mum neatening the window sill:

'What a lot of cooing. Is there any coffee?' she says.

First thing after work every day her mum does the tidying. In winter she won't get her coat off before she's at it. In summer it's the opposite, she strips down to her underwear as soon as she gets in. Then she's through

the place, putting things back where they belong and watering the plants, clearing the table.

She offers her assistance occasionally in a meek voice. It's true that she leaves a mess, but she's tired herself after a hard day's work, for example she's a holiday replacement at *A Cut Above* all this week, she starts yesterday. She sweeps the floor and washes hair. She writes appointments in the book and stands ready with capes. She wears someone's old soft-sole clogs. While they're balancing the till at quarter past six she steps awkwardly and breaks the leather upper. She doesn't let on, puts them back in the cupboard. Cleaning for Annelise's better. You get milk there, and pears from the garden. But Annelise doesn't need help anymore, the main office has closed. She sits on a stool in front of her house from morning till night. Her mum works in the

shop before her mum, therefore they always shout to each other that they're to say hello.

Apart from that, the summer holiday passes with one thing and another. She tidies up in the photo album and bakes two kinds of bread. She looks after the shop for a few hours while her mum's getting examined. It's a quiet day, only three customers in. One's a girl from the same year at school, she browses the lipsticks. She tries all sorts of different ones, soon the back of her hand's all pink. Her name's Janni. She's got a fringe and a proper lady's handbag. After about twenty minutes she takes a hankie out of the bag, dabs her hand.

'Here, have a tissue,' she blurts, about to hand her one over the counter.

'No thanks, I've got sensitive skin.'

'OK. Are you off on holiday?'

'No, off to a party. We're going to Norway for Christmas.'

'Have a nice trip, then,' she says, and corrects herself as the doorbell, four little bells on a chain, jingles and jangles.

They're on their monthly trek to Holeby with the washing, the laundry's in an old farm building. They catch the bus from the bus station, it's Sunday, her mum's purse is heavy with coins. While the machines are on their cycle they walk up and down the street. She takes her shoes off, the blacktop's all warm. Marigolds droop over the pavements. They walk out to the new houses and lap the estate, then it's four o'clock and they hurry back. But their watch is wrong, the clothes aren't ready yet. They sit on the laundry table and play the ship is laden with, using a sock for the ship.

'The ship is laden with S,' she says, and tosses the sock.

'Shit,' says her mum, the laundry woman comes in, and they laugh into their laundry bags. She gives them a punnet of raspberries for nothing, they walk cautiously off with it balanced on the heavy washing.

They live in a two-room flat near the wood as well. Here she becomes acquainted with the delight of treetops swaying soundlessly on the other side of a window pane. Her mum wants to celebrate moving in, she sends her to the Co-op for something nice. She can get whatever she wants. Her mum herself stays behind unpacking the things and knick-knack figurines wrapped in newspaper. The carpet's burning hot, it's forty per cent nylon. Not that they've many, the glass trolls and the optimist are about it. She gets to her feet

with a table lamp, grinds to a halt at the window sill. She might crochet some curtains as long as they don't get fashionable. At the Co-op there are so many ways she can go, shrimps and French bread, warm liver paste. She ends up with a tin of tuna and two bread rolls, walks back along the footpath through the wood. Her mum's standing in the window and waves with the table lamp. There's a rose growing up against the outside wall, yellow or yellowish, blooms late July.