Communiqué

The invasion assault – an unprovoked attack by Germany’s land, sea, and air forces – began before dawn on a Tuesday in early April 1940 and ended before noon the same day with the kingdom of Denmark’s abject surrender. The previous June, at the insistence of German chancellor Adolf Hitler, the two nations had signed a treaty promising not to war on each other.

In the town where I was then living, hardly an hour’s drive north of Copenhagen, there was no sight or sound of the stunning event, but the staff at my school had learned of it from the radio. With somber faces revealing a profound state of shock, they sent all of us pupils home early and quickly without explaining why. None of us had to be told.

I biked back from school to my grandparents’ house as fast as I could pedal and found my grandfather Gideon hunched forward on the edge of his worn armchair, looking unaccustomedly grave and listening raptly to the news reports on the large Bang & Olufsen console behind him. Without acknowledging my arrival, he kept dialing back and forth between Radio Denmark and the BBC as if hunting desperately for a few words of solace while I sat on the arm of his chair, silently respecting his unutterable grief.

“We gave up without a fight,” he finally said to me, the charge of cowardice unmistakable in his muted tone. The radio confirmed that only a few shots had been exchanged at the border when the enemy crossed it in overwhelming numbers, and there had been just brief skirmishes outside the king’s palace, where a handful of defenders had died to salvage a sliver of Danish national honor. Berlin had announced, even as the Reich’s onrushing soldiers were seizing all of its innocent neighbor’s territory, that the German troops had been sent as protectors, not assailants, and promised that the occupation would be peaceable, provided the king and his government surrendered at once. Otherwise, the Luftwaffe bombers, droning above Denmark’s capital like a swarm of steel-winged locusts, would be forced to pulverize it, and any resistance to the invasion elsewhere in the country would likewise be crushed. Under protest that their nation’s long-standing policy of neutrality had been violated, King Christian X and his ministers yielded. In his short statement of capitulation, the sovereign urged his subjects to follow the directives of “everyone exercising authority” and to exhibit “absolutely correct and honorable behavior, as any rash act or utterance can have the most serious consequences.”
To my grandfather, his king’s words beseeching compliance with the enemy’s ultimatum amounted to outright betrayal of his people. My grandmother Helga, hovering close by, encircled my shoulder with a lean arm and quietly took issue with him. “The crown and the government did the only thing they could,” she said, as if their submission to a sorry fate should be regarded as a consoling, if not ennobling, act of sanity.

“He didn’t have to tell us to roll over,” Grandpa Gideon growled back, “like a pack of whipped dogs at their master’s command.”

“I don’t think that’s what he meant,” Grandma Helga said, pulling me closer. “And don’t start worrying Terence. Everything is going to be all right. You’ll see.”

Grandpa glanced up at us. “Nothing is going to be all right,” he whispered. “The filthy bastards will lord it over us – and our spineless leaders will make it easy for them.” He had been saying much the same thing since I had arrived the previous summer to live for an unspecified period under my grandparents’ roof, but until that day it had sounded like nothing more than an old man’s chronic nattering.

“You’re overreacting, Gideon. And there’s no need to alarm the boy,” Grandma Helga said, “or to use that degrading sort of language. We have to stay calm and collected and keep our wits about us, not go flying off the handle.”

As it would improbably turn out, both of them were right. But “the boy” was already alarmed by their seemingly irreconcilable responses to the day’s convulsive events. For the first time, I suddenly had to confront the reality that, as a practical matter, I was an orphan, even while surrounded by kin who had fondly taken me in. My own country, which providence had forced me to abandon, was a wide ocean behind me. I felt desperately alone and powerless. That night, wrestling with jagged memories of how and why I’d come to be there, I could only flirt with sleep. I was a stranger in a small kingdom by the sea, where I thought I had found a temporary haven from my brief life’s travails. With the invasion, that dream was over, as events were shortly to prove. What follows here is a painstaking retrieval – based on my best recollection of what I felt and witnessed, plus reports to me by others present when I was not, and a sheaf of salvaged documents – of those crucible years, once daily threatening but now swiftly fleeting, that I have waited most of my lifetime to chronicle.
I first visited Denmark in the summer of 1933, when I was eight years old. My mother thought it was past time for me finally to meet my Danish grandparents, who lived almost four thousand miles from our home in Alexandria, Virginia, and had never managed to forgive their older daughter for abandoning her sedate native land and settling in raffish America. So, they had never visited us, and my mother had always been too short of money for us to afford a trip there.

My boyish anticipation of the great voyage to a faraway enchanted kingdom was all the keener because I had never met my father’s parents either, although they lived – or so I was told – in Richmond, just a ninety-minute drive from us. Even more inexplicably, until I later learned from my mother about the Sayre family’s pitiable social aspirations, neither had she ever met her in-laws. Safe to surmise, then, that my parents’ clouded relationship was ill-fated almost before it began. You might even call it a disaster, especially for my mother, Katerina, whose life had opened with such high promise.

Kate was the second of four children born to Gideon and Helga Mundt, who had come of age as an egalitarian spirit was sweeping over Denmark. It brought progressive social values to the fore, particularly in Copenhagen, the cosmopolitan capital, where they made their home. Gideon’s father had partnered in a prosperous import-export business so the family had the resources to provide their son with a culturally enriched upbringing. After excelling as a university student of Scandinavian history and literature, Gideon
chose journalism over academia for his career and joined the staff of *Nationaltidende*, the country’s leading conservative daily, where he quickly displayed his talent as a phrasemaker.

While working his way up the editorial ladder, he met Helga Mortensen, whose family had for several generations been civil employees in the royal household at Amalienborg Palace. Her father, who served during the reigns of three Danish kings, eventually rose to the position of first secretary to the crown chamberlain, an exalted rank that brought with it rent-free lodgings in a generous flat within walking distance of the palace and also ensured his children admission to the royal grammar school. Helga’s easy and early access to the upper echelon of Danish society outfitted her with the social graces. Her contact with elitist circles was furthered by her family’s purchase of a country place in the coastal town of Riishavn (pronounced “Reece-houn”), fifty kilometers north of Copenhagen on the Oresund strait, with a view of Sweden on clear days.

On a racing weekend at the Riishavn Sailing Club, to which the Mortensens belonged, Helga, in training as a social worker, encountered Gideon Mundt, who had advanced to senior editorial writer for his newspaper. A guest of other club members, he caught Helga’s attention with his burly good looks and infectious laugh. Theirs was, in several ways, an attraction of opposites. The Mortensens, as appendages of the royal court, leaned dutifully to the political right, and Helga assumed that Gideon, whose newspaper propagated the conservative party line, shared her family’s allegiance. But Gideon, from a bourgeois background, was an apostate whose ideological compass was shifting toward the left and the Social Democrats, and he would not pretend otherwise to Helga. And so, sparks flew between them in this regard and several others, yet their differences served to stoke a mutual regard – and always would. When her mother hinted that Helga might attract a beau of loftier social status before settling for Gideon, Helga replied – famously, according to Mundt family lore – “Just because our people know their way around the palace, Mama, doesn’t make us royalty. Gideon is as close to a king as I could ever want.”

A pious young woman as well as a sensible one, Helga attended services of the Lutheran Church – the state religion – without fail
every Sunday, a custom Gideon declined to adopt but was at pains not to deride. Faith nonetheless soon joined politics as an issue between them, and so it took a two-year courtship for the cautious couple to decide that marriage would bring them a good deal more joy than conflict. The king, in recognition of the Mortensen family’s long fealty to the crown, sent the newlyweds a Georg Jensen tea service bearing the royal imprimatur.

Toward the end of their first year of marriage, Helga sensed an irritability in Gideon that she doubted (correctly) was due to unhappiness with their bond. Pressing him for the cause, she discovered he was bridling over his professional duties. Relieved, she counseled that it was unconscionable for Gideon to keep writing editorials for a journal that often embraced policies he did not agree with just so that, as a married man, he might continue to earn a respectable salary. Within days he resigned from his newspaper and was shortly hired, at a higher salary, as a ranking editor at Denmark’s foremost publishing house, which assigned him primary responsibility for new texts in the social sciences, a field presumably beyond political partisanship. With some help from his parents and Helga’s dowry – the pittance she had been making as a social worker was consigned to their joint savings account – the couple was able to buy an unassuming townhouse in Østerbro, a pleasant old Copenhagen neighborhood, and begin raising a family.

Kurt, their firstborn, was an obedient but lackadaisical lad more taken with kite flying, stamp collecting, and Loki, the family Schnauzer, than his studies, and parental attempts to instill cultural refinement proved unavailing. He failed, to his parents’ disappointment, to win admission to a gymnasium that would have qualified him to pursue a university degree, and he instead attended a vocational school, where he learned the printing trade. Katerina, the first of Kurt’s two sisters, was a far more scintillating – and complicated – child. A willowy sprite of unquenchable energy, my mother-to-be captivated her parents and all in the adult world who fell within her whirling orbit. In early childhood she exhibited precocious gifts in the performing arts; she could sing sweetly and on key, dance like a little dervish, play the piano with a light touch, and recite with verve, whether a psalm or a sonnet or one of Aesop’s fables. Before Kate
was eight, Helga had used her contacts to expedite her daughter’s admission to training classes offered by the Royal Danish Ballet School, where she excelled. At the age of twelve, she was viewed as a potential prima ballerina and was turning into a classic Nordic beauty: tall, slender, flaxen-haired, and with a long, pale face, wide mouth, and large, cornflower-blue eyes.

In her early teens, however, Kate suffered a nasty spill during a trying rehearsal and fractured an ankle that took longer to heal than she could endure. Impatient, she pushed to test the injured bones, stressed them unduly, and never regained her balletic poise. Still bent on a performing career, she was indulged by her doting parents in speech, singing, and acting lessons, in the course of which she displayed a confident bearing, fluidity of motion and gesture, and a voice of pleasingly low register, all of which won her a place at the Royal School of Drama. There she did well enough in student productions to earn ingenue roles with professional outside companies even while completing her course work at Copenhagen’s foremost gymnasium, a heavy dual burden.

Restlessly ambitious by age eighteen, Kate had become aware of the limitations imposed by her native tongue on aspirants to a serious stage career. Danish, infested with vowels that sound to foreign ears like something between gargling and gagging, was seldom spoken outside of Denmark. For a Danish actress hoping to appear on the international stage, fluent command of English or German beyond her schoolgirl’s familiarity with both was essential. She much preferred English to the harsh gutturals and sloshy sibilants of German and so talked her parents into subsidizing a two-year stay in London to study and haunt the West End theater district.

By the time she arrived, British spirits were reviving after the agony of the Great War and the ghastly effects of the nearly-as-lethal Spanish flu epidemic. Kate fell in love with the vitality of the sprawling metropolis that could have accommodated two dozen Copenhagens. She enrolled as a degree candidate in literature at the University of London, took language and acting classes, and, unable to find any sort of work in the theater district, became an unpaid apprentice with the Sadler’s Wells dance company, where her earlier training counted for something, and she also earned tips ushering. The dishy young blonde
even found time to turn male heads around town.

At a summer weekend party in the country, she met Graham Sayre, a nice-looking, carefully disheveled American on vacation from law school. A soft-spoken Virginian, he came equipped with a self-deprecating wit, behind which he seemed to hide, forcing Kate to try to peel away his reserve. All he revealed, though, was that his family was “in tobacco, like everybody else in Richmond.” Fueled by a surfeit of gin-soaked punch, they swirled through the night with a high-kicking Charleston that shamed every other couple on the broad veranda. The next morning, still bleary-eyed, they resumed their festivities by winning the mixed-doubles tennis tourney. He gave her the silver-plated loving cup to remember him by, then headed for the Continent the next day to continue his Grand Tour. At their parting, he asked if there was any near-term prospect of her visiting America, and when she answered coyly, he wrote out his address on a calling card, pressed it into her palm, and in the shadows of the topiary on their hosts’ rear lawn (according to my mother’s later replay of their romance), kissed her with an abandon of propriety.

After a year of juggling her multiple pursuits, Kate dropped her studies at the university and elected to test her growing command of English, now cleansed of its Danish catarrh, in any stage roles she could wangle. These were limited to six weeks in the chorus line at a Brighton music hall, a month with a start-up rep company in Bristol, and a few appearances in ill-fated West End comedies — “just enough work,” she wrote to Graham Sayre, with whom she corresponded playfully now and then, “for me to start thinking of myself as a show-girl (not quite the occupational category I had in mind).” It was a degrading occupation, she allowed — so wearying, so much competing talent, so many groping producers’ and directors’ hands. Dispirited, she jumped at an offer from Sadler’s Wells of a full-time position on the management side. It allowed her to remain in the performing arts, get off the parental dole, and gad about town, often among the small colony of Danish expatriates who, like her, relished escape from the cabin fever rampant in their native land. Yet she began to suffer twinges of latent homesickness, and within six months she was offered and accepted a position as assistant to the cultural attaché in the Danish embassy to the Court of St. James’s at twice her Sadler’s Wells salary.
After a giddy week’s reunion with her family at their country place in Riishavn, which was by then Helga’s inherited property and the Mundts’ weekend retreat, Kate took up her post at the embassy behind Kensington Palace. She did so well at it that within fifteen months she was appointed deputy cultural attaché to the Danish embassy in Washington. Her parents fretted that the coveted transatlantic assignment would augur Kate’s permanent expatriation to the English-speaking world and made no effort to hide their unhappiness over her move. But the lure was irresistible.

She knew just one person in the States and had only the haziest memory of him, but it was glowing enough for her to inquire at Graham Sayre’s law school about his current whereabouts. Her note, addressed to a law firm in Alexandria, Virginia – pleasingly close to Washington – began, “I don’t assume you recall this former Danish showgirl and remain an unattached barrister, but if so on both accounts, your advisory to that effect would be welcome, care of the Kingdom of Denmark’s Embassy, after the fourteenth of February, 1923.”

He did better than that, contriving to meet her train at Union Station, helping her move into a prearranged flat in a rooming house near the embassy, and conducting her on a motor tour of the capital’s monumental sights, all in a single entrancing day. During it, she learned that Graham, as mirthful as she had remembered him, and groomed as if prospering, was with a midsized law office that had asked him to concentrate on real estate law, in part because he had some familiarity with the field, thanks to his family’s ancestral farm holdings in Virginia.

“It’s a fine firm – very friendly and relaxed – not moneygrubbing like these big shops downtown,” he said, gesturing to the bland office buildings outside his car window; “or in New York.”

The truth, as Kate would learn only later from the wives of his professional colleagues, was that Graham had been no shooting star at George Washington University Law School, ranking in the bottom quarter of his class, and no big firm on Wall Street or in Washington was sufficiently enthralled by his honeyed patter to offer him a spot. While misled from the first, Kate had no basis for rebuffing Graham’s avid pursuit. The relaxed pace of his practice meshed conveniently with her none-too-arduous duties at the embassy, which required frequent appearances at social functions, at which he now served as her
decorative escort. Wary of being swept off her feet, she welcomed other eligible beaux as well, but Graham was more persistent than the rest, and yet courtly, never pressing her to engage in intimate relations unless and until she was ready to reciprocate his feelings. In the meantime, they made a striking couple among the District’s young partygoing set. Graham fit in smoothly on the embassy circuit, well lubricated by the free-flowing booze that, because it was served on not-technically-U.S. premises, was exempt from the Prohibition madness. And at events beyond those protective walls, he always had a silver flask at the ready. Kate was not alarmed at first by Graham’s drinking, though it seemed excessive at times, as when he introduced her to friends as “my irresistible Danish showgirl.” In time, she told him he was being ill-mannered and not in the least funny. “How about ‘my scrumptious Danish pastry’ instead?” he asked incorrigibly and went for a refill. But he never called her either of those things again.

For all their frenetic socializing around the capital and their weekend outings in the lush Virginia countryside, one place Graham never took her was to Richmond to meet his parents. It was evident to her on those rare occasions when the topic arose that he harbored a profound ambivalence toward them. As her relationship with him deepened, Kate could contain her puzzlement no longer.

“Is there something the matter with me? Am I so unpresentable to the Sayre family?” she asked. “Or does merely being introduced to Virginia socialites as one’s ‘good friend’ mean a lasting commitment is imminent? I’m not auditioning for in-laws, Graham, I assure you –”

He was evasive at first. “You’d hate my folks. I do, some of the time.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They have shallow values – and don’t know it. They desperately want to be accepted as FFVs, and they’re not even close. It’s . . . really sad.”

When she looked blank at his use of the abbreviation, he apologized and then slowly, painfully began to explain his parents’ fixation. Far from qualifying as one of the First Families of Virginia with antebellum roots, the Sayres had migrated as carpetbaggers from western Pennsylvania after the Civil War and bought up as much cheap tobacco land as they could. Off the sweated labor of Black
sharecroppers working the Sayres’ acreage in central and southside Virginia, the family made a living, but a precarious one due to cyclical crop failures and balky field hands. Eventually they branched into tobacco warehousing, which ensured a steady flow of commissions on every basket of the big golden leaves they auctioned off, until Graham’s father, Jason, cashed in most of his chips by first selling to Universal Leaf, the giant Richmond-based tobacco wholesaler, and then hiring on there as a middle manager amid genteel surroundings. The family hung on to some barely productive tobacco acreage largely because it fed the Sayres’ pretension that they were landed gentry and duly qualified for admission to Richmond’s upper crust.

“Didn’t happen,” Graham told her. Even settling in a select neighborhood and owning a fine home that pressed heavily on their bank account did little to enhance their social position. And no one at Universal Leaf had him pegged as executive timber.

“There was lasting resentment toward people like them – ex-Northerners masquerading as Dixie aristocrats – among the old bluebloods in town,” Graham explained, “and it didn’t matter how philanthropic or civic-minded my family tried to be. We were always considered outsiders . . . and uppity white trash.”

A further reason was that Jason Sayre had married his high school sweetheart, the daughter of a railway worker from the decidedly wrong side of the tracks. The Sayres’ response was to put on airs, mostly in the form of showy parties that drew only a handful of guests from the list of invited Brahmins, and to hope their two sons would marry well.

Graham’s older brother, Harry, proved a dud in that department. Endowed with a strong jaw, rippling biceps, and limited gray matter, he quit high school and was sent off to tend the Sayre tobacco holdings in remote Fluvanna and Prince Edward counties. At twenty he married the buxom daughter of a cotton gin owner, and when she was introduced to the fragment of Richmond society that graced the Sayre home, she was deemed even less respectable than her mother-in-law. Thus, his parents’ shameless aspirations now rested wholly on Graham.

His pathway was carefully planned for him: a college degree from a venerable Northern (but not too Northern) college – Princeton fit the bill – followed by a law degree from UVA and a position with a white-shoe Wall Street firm or a superior Washington office or, failing those,
an old-line Richmond one if an early, lucrative partnership was in the
offing. “None of which happened,” Graham told Kate with a shrug,
“not just because I was intellectually lazy – which I admit to – but
mostly because I resented having my life mapped out for me. Mediocre-
ity is my form of rebellion.” His employment at a lackluster firm in
Alexandria suited him fine despite his parents’ embarrassment over its
low visibility. His practiced underachievement left only one route open
for Graham to redeem himself in his family’s eyes and shine up the
Sayres’ bedraggled escutcheon.

“So, they want you to bring home a certified Southern belle,” Kate
filled in the rest, “with a splendid dowry and a pedigree going back to
the good old slave days, is that it? And you’re afraid they’ll cut you off
altogether if you turn up with an odd foreigner who’s not royalty?”

His sheepish look confirmed her rendering of his dilemma. “Well,
it needn’t be an immense dowry; a substantial one would satisfy them,”
he said, trying to make light of the wicked truth. “At any rate, it’s a
battle that doesn’t have to be fought just yet – but I’m steeling myself
for it. Meantime, I’d rather not expose you to their awful snootiness.
Can you live with that?”

It spoke well for Graham that he fully recognized his parents’ frail-
ties. And he had finally opened up to her, and that was progress. She
decided to accept his explanation for the time being, allowing him a
grace period while she came to grips with the family pathology.

“That was the worst mistake of my life,” Kate confessed to me
when I was old enough for her to deal with my repeated questioning
about why I had never met my paternal grandparents. Sooner than she
had bargained for, it was too late to force Graham to either choose to
present her to his parents – and defy their disapproval if it followed – or
to look elsewhere for female companionship.

When Kate turned up pregnant with me toward the end of her sec-
ond year working at the embassy, she declined to press Graham to
marry her; her condition was not a dire enough reason, she told him
frankly, to force them into a sacrosanct union neither of them was
otherwise ready to consecrate. Nor would she consider an abortion,
which she viewed less as a mortal sin than as an exercise of medical butchery. To his credit, Graham did not contest her wishes. They agreed instead on a cover story: telling friends and colleagues that they had tied the matrimonial knot at a private civil ceremony to save the fuss and cost of a church wedding and gala reception.

So, I survived, debuting on the fifteenth of July, 1925. Kate’s fondness for theatrical history, which she had studied at the University of London, prompted her to propose naming me Terence, after the playwright brought as a slave to Rome in the second century B.C. by a senator who educated and later freed him in recognition of the six comedies he wrote before disappearing at age twenty-five.

“But all of his plays have survived,” she told Graham. “They’re funny.”

“Terence it is, then,” he said obligingly. “Besides, it’s your baby.” Then he uncapped his flask so they could toast my christening. Leery that his remark might foretell a slack embrace of unsought fatherhood, she reminded him that mine was not an immaculate conception.

Kate’s expanding abdomen had fed talk that she had in fact been knocked up prior to their alleged nuptials, and that had led to the loss of her job at the embassy. Happily, Graham assured her he would do his best to protect and sustain our unsanctified family of three. His salary, even at its sluggish pace of advancement, and a stipend his parents sent him — of an amount he chose never to disclose to Kate — allowed him to finance, under his name, a little brick Victorian in downtown Alexandria and a second car, a used Chevy, for her to get around in. Without further discussion of marriage, my mother moved in with Graham Sayre as a kept woman and devoted herself to homemaking, serious reading, and raising me. Their future family status would work itself out.

It never did, though. Even feigned fatherhood demands a degree of self-sacrifice to the regimen of domesticity that Graham’s egoism could not — or refused to — accept. What ensued, in Kate’s retelling of it, was a degenerative process that, over years, turned from resentment to apathy to total emotional withdrawal, all of it mutual. Whatever strands of conscience were keeping him under the same roof with us steadily loosened over time as I outgrew my infancy. Since
he had no legal obligation toward Kate and only indifference toward me, Graham announced abruptly one day that their travesty of familial bliss had finally succumbed to his need to escape entrapment, most readily with an up-tilted bottle of illicit (and costly) hooch. He stayed away from the house for days at a time, sometimes vaguely explaining he had family affairs to tend to down in Richmond or “out in Fluvanna,” or equally unspecified legal business that required him to travel. Mostly he didn’t bother with explanations. But Kate understood the magnitude of his dissipation, courtesy of the wives of a few members of Graham’s law practice who confided to her that he was showing up for work irregularly, carrying out his duties in slipshod fashion, and generally exhausting the partners’ patience. Even when he deigned to stay at home for an occasional evening, his sullen presence was more robotic than human.

As for his interest in me, I have no recollection of Graham – at any time during my childhood – reading me a bedtime story or giving me a piggyback ride or the two of us playing catch. It was a rare Sunday when he took us out for a family drive and ice-cream cones. When I got older and asked now and then if we could visit what he dismissively called “the Sayre Plantations” in Fluvanna County, he’d say it was too far away or too hot or give some other lame excuse, so that all of it – he himself, his family, their domain, my having any real connection to the whole lot – was icily withheld and painfully illusory.

If my so-called father brought zero emotional sustenance into the household, his material support was equally meager. He paid the mortgage and the utility bill and doled fifteen bucks a week to Kate supposedly to cover all our food and other household needs. But there was never a shortage of booze in the liquor cabinet. As his binge drinking portended imminent dysfunction as a lawyer, my mother knew she and I could no longer survive in austere dependency. She got herself rehired at the Danish embassy, performing secretarial duties at a slender but badly needed salary. Once, when Kate could no longer contain her simmering rage, she threatened to go to Graham’s parents and reveal his clandestine family and the shameful misconduct of his life. He looked at her blankly for a moment, as if to say, “Go ahead, if you’d like, and see where that gets you,” then went out the door and stayed away for a week. Kate responded by moving
me into the master bedroom, buying a cot for me to sleep on there, and consigning Graham to my former space in the other bedroom.

The financial shock of the Crash hastened the death of Graham’s father, followed in three months by his mother’s suffering a fatal aneurysm. Neither of them had ever laid eyes on Kate or their only grandchild, and they had probably never even been informed of our existence. Graham returned a week after the second funeral had left him in a lather over the terms of his parents’ joint estate, which greatly favored his brother, Harry, of whom we had been told next to nothing. Harry inherited the Sayre farm holdings – fair enough since he had been in charge of their operation for fifteen years – but he was also awarded, without explanation, the bulk of the family’s stock holdings in Universal Leaf. Graham was left a cash bequest of an amount he would never reveal to Kate, but to judge by the length and depth of the bender he soon launched, it was far less than he had hoped. Then, a week before Christmas 1931, his law firm finally let him go.

An outcast soul, Graham now lingered about the hearth of our little brick house, wallowing in self-pity and apparently incapable of facing up to his addiction, finding a purpose in his life, and rejoining the gainfully employed. He spent his days reading newspapers on the rear porch and scandalizing the neighbors by peeing on the bushes that lined our backyard. Try as she might, Kate could not find a redeeming bone in his body or a merciful one in her own. She refused to fix his meals, straighten up or even go near his foul-smelling room, or speak to him at all except when spoken to. Yet her work did not pay enough for her to grab my hand, walk us away from our jailer, and look for decent lodging closer to her workplace.

I would learn later from my Aunt Erika, who corresponded sporadically with her older sister during those anguished years, how close my mother had come to giving up the struggle and going back to Denmark, with me in tow as the byproduct of a failed faux marriage. Her pride would not let her, though. Instead, by way of distancing me as far as possible from the Sayre family’s toxic bloodline, she began educating me about my Danish heritage. For the first time, I heard details about my Grandpa Gideon Mundt, portrayed as hearty, canny, perhaps a trifle overbearing at times but never tiresome.

“As a child, I always thought of Papa as a big, huggy troll,” Kate
reminisced to me. “He taught us all how to fish and sail and hunt with a bow and arrow – not that we ever killed anything – and how to pace ourselves on long bike rides so we didn’t struggle so much on the uphill stretches. And he’d serenade us at every celebration – Danes are great celebrators, by the way, on the least excuse – with his favorite songs and hymns in that funny, croaky voice of his.”

And there was Grandmother Helga, exceedingly proper, gently loving, charitable toward all, always forbearing her unruly brood’s antics. Then there were Kate’s siblings: older brother Kurt, described to me as quiet and amiable but a bit plodding; younger sister Erika (called Rikki by everyone), bright, prettier than she pretended, and a wholly trustworthy confidante; and kid brother Torben, quick-tongued, mischievous, and now grown – according to Rikki’s letters – into a whiz at physics and the guitar. I heard as well all about Kate’s upbringing in lively Copenhagen, tales of the family’s at-times-harrowing explorations of the countryside and seacoast during summers, weekends, and holidays, and the spirited mealtime clamor at their rustic hideaway in Riishavn. Most captivating to my young ears was Kate’s recollection of watching the king trot out on horseback from Amalienborg Palace for his regular morning ride through the nearby streets.

“I saw him twice, seated up there with perfect posture. There were no guards or attendants around him or anything, and he waved at us as he passed. Our Danish royals, you see, don’t stay locked up behind thick castle walls; it isn’t that kind of country. It’s so small and cozy and . . . and friendly because, well, because there really aren’t a lot of Danes, so they all need one another.”

Now aware of my mother’s lingering affection for her homeland, I began to wonder, in light of the stratospheric stress level in our house, why she stayed on in America. One day I asked her directly, suggesting that maybe things would be better if we went to live in Denmark.

She was silent for a long moment before replying, “I don’t think your father would care for that idea very much.”

“He doesn’t care very much about us. Why do we have to stay with him, anyway?”

Kate’s dejected look signaled that she had been thinking the same thing. “It’s . . . very complicated. Besides, you’re an American, and the United States is a great nation, even with all its problems. Denmark is
very small, and life there can sometimes be . . . pretty unexciting – ”

“But it sounds exciting – the way you talk about it.”

Mom saw that she had painted herself into a corner. “Yes, well . . . suppose we go there for a visit sometime? How would that be? And you can see for yourself?”

The prospect dazzled me; anything to escape our grim existence. And it came to pass astonishingly sooner than I had dared to hope. Kate got promoted to staff assistant in the trade and commerce section at the embassy, with a nice bump-up in salary, and she began to put some of each paycheck aside for our sea passage. A few months later, she discovered that Graham’s louche tendencies had sunk to an intolerable level – he was somehow luring women up to his bedroom while she was at work and I was in school – and that was the point of no return for Kate. Her self-respect demanded that he stop insulting her so blatantly or we would move out and leave him to his sorry, solitary fate. She was earning just enough by then to start looking for a small apartment in the District for the two of us.

Grudgingly, Graham relented, but the confrontation steeled her to approach the Danish ambassador and ask if she might be awarded a modest stipend to help pay for our round-trip passage to Copenhagen. Absent from home for so many years, she claimed that renewed contact with her native ground would make her a more useful Danish civil servant abroad. The ambassador commended such patriotism and awarded her half the price of our fare.