Inga Arvad, Chapter 1: "Miss Denmark"
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Miss Denmark 1931

She hadn't actually planned to enter the pageant. For some women, beauty contests could be an opportunity to advance socially, a step up the ladder. A way of getting ahead in the world. Marry a man of status and influence, be offered a film role. Many young women dreamed of making it in the movies. Inga Arvad was no different.

Certain circles viewed this new phenomenon, beauty pageants, as undignified. Letting women pose and compete on their appearance seemed almost vulgar, a mockery of the proud bourgeois feminine ideal. Other circles saw beauty pageants as celebrating the newly liberated woman: the woman who'd shorn her locks to her earlobes—what was then called a *bob*—and accepted that under the collar of her dress was a body of flesh and blood, nature and sensuality. Such was the age.

"If naturalness can be taught, mothers ought to send their young girls to Josephine Baker," wrote the architect and cultural critic Poul

Henningsen when the French-American vaudeville performer visited Denmark in 1928. Baker had appeared in Copenhagen with her *Revue Negre* from Paris, setting her little banana skirt and an entire cultural debate in motion. Daringly, she sang and danced in feathers and naked torso, bringing the Danes a greeting from the outside world: an elegant, exotic finger wag toward a new age, one with a freer body culture. Maybe even a new woman. To Henningsen, Josephine Baker demonstrated the many facets of the modern woman's mind.

He wrote: "She is a child's soul in animal skin. Isn't that precisely the depiction of the modern, young girl! She is the child, the girl, but also the mother, the lady, the clown. The repertoire of her *mind* seems limitless."

From the view of the Mother and Lady, beauty pageants were a vulgar idea, a mockery of the ladylike. But from the view of "the child, the young girl, the clown," they were a protest against a corseted feminine ideal. This modernism had supporters in many camps, even in circles where one stood on ceremony. A young German noblewoman, Baroness von Freyburg, bucked tradition to enter a beauty pageant (though to protect her family's reputation, she'd had the manners to register under an artist's name, Daisy D'Ora).

Inga Arvad fit somewhere in the middle. She could easily understand why girls from the upper crust of society considered

themselves above these kinds of parades. And she belonged to the upper crust—this, in any case, was the ambition Inga's mother, Olga, had for her daughter. Inga was to be an educated and practical young lady; she was to be a woman who moved with easy elegance within society's better circles. Circles that Olga, born Houmann, knew well; she had grown up outside Denmark and understood the meaning of "gracious living." For her entire life Olga had lived prosperously, supported by a family fortune that had dwindled with the stock market crash of 1929—when being rich came to an end, as did travels abroad. One could still be gracious, however; having style wasn't necessarily dependent upon wealth. Inga's mother had seen many examples of that—the women she met as a young girl in southern Africa, among others. Though they were poor and could neither read nor write, they carried themselves with a natural dignity.

Inga Marie Arvad is seventeen years old and lives with her mother on Willemoesgade in Østerbro, in Copenhagen. Craftsmen, musicians, stewards, and sailors live on this street, so the address doesn't have quite the ring of class and style that Olga desires. But they reside in a corner apartment with a view of the reservoirs along Østerbrogade.

Inga spent the first years of her life with her parents on Strandvej in tony Hellerup, where she was born. That house had a

view of Øresund. The apartment on Østerbro is small, but it is neatly furnished with expensive heirlooms, including an empire chatol and a piano. Inga plays the piano, and Olga pays for her lessons with pianist Max Rytter. He'd been a soloist in The Royal Orchestra and toured internationally. Many talented young pianists have been Rytter's pupils and enjoyed fine careers. Inga hopes—almost as much as her mother—that she too can become a pianist. Olga had dreamed Inga would become a ballet dancer with The Royal Theater, but this dream went unfulfilled. Though that detail never stopped Inga from later telling male admirers that one of the greatest moments in her life occurred when the ballet school had called her "a rising Pavlova," the celebrated prima ballerina at the beginning of the 20th Century.

In Denmark beauty pageants are, as in the rest of the world, a new phenomenon. They arose in the years immediately following WWI, and coincided in many Western countries with women's suffrage.

Danish women gained voting rights in Parliament in 1915, German women in 1918, and American women in 1920. The tabloid newspaper *B.T.* held its first beauty pageant in 1920; the magazine *Vore Damer* (Our Ladies) had held its own annual pageant since 1926. The liberated, body-conscious woman is praised at these events, but not all share Poul Henningsen's enthusiasm for the new naturalness.

At the sight of young ladies with broad smiles, bare shoulders, and wind playing in their short curls, one newspaper editor resignedly observed that "modern young girls are far different from the women we courted."

The pageants signal liberation, and they reflect a new feminine ideal: the women of the age are changing their image, refashioning themselves. During the course of the 1920s, the established feminine ideal is driven out by a new model, the free-spirited, outgoing young woman. Classic feminine virtues like innocence, modesty, reserve, and subservience are pushed into the background, replaced by a devil-may-care *garçonne*—a young girl with greater opportunity than her mother's generation. That was the theory, at any rate. A girl who shucks off her mother's norms and her curvaceous hour-glass figure. The modern woman is thin, flat-chested; she wears short skirts that reveal her legs.

Inga Arvad is no *garçonne*, but she's no paragon of bourgeois virtue, either. She is well spoken, quick at repartee, and, at seventeen, already well-traveled. She has attended the best girls' schools—those that recruit from the highest rungs of society, children of high-ranking officials, lawyers, and doctors. After journeying through Europe with her mother, Inga is equipped with strong language skills; she speaks

English, German, and French, and already comports herself like a little woman-of-the-world, no doubt assisted by her dazzling beauty. Inga sparkles. Her cheekbones are high, her complexion as light and fine as porcelain. Her eyes are blue, and her hair is blond and wavy, cut in the era's fashionable bob.

Inga is a pretty girl who can captivate a room. Slim and straight-backed, she moves with determined grace and a disarming smile. When she laughs, as she does frequently, it's clear that not everything about her is perfect. There's an observable gap in her straight teeth, a blemish Inga isn't happy about. But it suits her. It softens up her beauty, gives it a conciliatory feature.

Around New Year, *B.T.* announces its Miss Denmark pageant. The rules are simple: Young women interested in competing need only send a photograph. No measurements are necessary, just a faithful portrait. If the young ladies don't have a fitting image, *B.T.*'s photographers stand ready at its editorial office between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. The criteria are straightforward: "Any reputable, unmarried, Danish-born woman between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five can enter the competition," the newspaper writes. "The lucky winner will not only become Denmark's beauty queen for 1931, but will also earn a free roundtrip to Paris, including accommodation

for herself and a family member acting as chaperone—and first and foremost, of course, the chance to become Europe's beauty queen."

"My cousin was reading the newspaper at our place," Inga writes in a memoir sketch, "Beauty Queen," many years later. "'Listen,' she suddenly exclaimed, 'they're going to crown a Miss Denmark. The Miss Europe competition takes place in Paris. You're going there anyway, so why not let them pay for your trip and have some fun?'"

Hmm, why not? Though Inga would face many other attractive young women, her cousin takes it as a given that Inga will win if she enters. Inga hesitates for a moment. How will her family react?

"They'll throw a fit," she tells her cousin. "Maybe not Mother, because she's the adventurous type who'll go for anything, but the others. They would lie down and die of shame."

But this thought—that the family would be embarrassed—appeals to Inga. So on Monday, January 5, 1931, she enters *B.T.*'s office and has her photograph taken. She's one of many. Casting a wide net, B.T. asks participants from 1929 and 1930 to participate again.

"We have received a number of enquiries as to whether one can enter this year's beauty pageant if one has participated in earlier contests. Of course one can. You may not have won last year or the year before last. Perhaps this is your year!"

Each day, the newspaper publishes pictures of aspirants—or "lovelies" as they were called. Most of them have fashionable, short hair, cut right below the ears; many are photographed wearing a smart cloche hat. Some of the girls glance shyly away from the camera, others laugh obligingly. Inga's photo is different: she poses. She doesn't smile, but stares directly at the camera from the side; with her head dipped at a slight angle, she throws a serious, slightly dreamy gaze over her shoulder. A diva at seventeen.

"In the old days, a girl just had to be the prettiest," Inga writes in her unpublished memoir. "There were no agents, and the judges were impartial; they didn't look for girls for beer advertisements or to put them in bikinis. They just had to be pretty."

The photo of the posing beauty from Willemoes Street attracts attention.

"Although the committee of judges has made a more critical assessment of the photographs we've received than in previous years, it nevertheless remained necessary to send invitations to around one hundred young ladies," writes *B.T.*

One of them is Inga. Wearing a society gown in pink chiffon, she makes her way, one freezing January evening, to the *B.T* Club building in the heart of Copenhagen. And "if the young ladies were in suspense," *B.T.* writes, "the judges were in great anguish. There were

so many attractive women present that it was difficult to reach agreement on a winner." As the panel attempts to reach a consensus, contestants sit around small cafe tables, waiting. The judges vote. Thirty girls are selected for the final, deciding round.

"Not much was required of us," Inga explained later, "other than walking across the stage a few times, turning around, and returning to where we started."

As Inga points out, beauty pageants were different then. There were no business interests involved, no promises of commercial, film, or modeling contracts. Besides—possibly—the desire to reach a younger audience, *B.T.*'s intention may have been simply to find content during a slow news month, by creating a Copenhagen happening that interested both men and women. Contestants weren't required to have an opinion on matters of the world—though world events in 1931 certainly commanded attention; nor were the judges concerned as to whether or not they had a future as models, except perhaps in an artist's atelier. The panel consisted of painter Orla Valdemar Borch, ballet master Paul Huld from Tivoli's Pantomime Theater (each with a wife in tow), and sculptor Rudolf Tegner. A jury with a view of classic feminine beauty: a well proportioned figure, a pretty and elegant appearance. The newspaper's two editors joined them.

Another drama is unfolding that night in Copenhagen. As thirty lovely finalists weave across the floor in *B.T* Club's party hall, boxers sweat and punch at the arena on Østerbro. Danish professional welterweight Hans Holdt is attempting to take the title of European champion from Belgian fighter Gustave Roth. Holdt has been a professional for a few years and is only the third Dane to fight for European master in his weight class. So there's suspense in two camps. Later in the evening, under the bare treetops of January on the corner of Vester Voldgade and Strøget, near the Statue of the Lure-players, the city's residents gather before *B.T*'s headquarters to learn the results of both contests.

The contests end 1-1. Hans Holdt loses. Inga Arvad wins. She's named Miss Denmark 1931.

"Before I knew what happened," Inga remembers, "I was crowned. I hadn't thought I would win, and wasn't a trace interested, really. But when it happened, all feelings—apart from relief—hit me. When we got home, we didn't say anything to Mother. But I couldn't hide it too long, because the next morning it was in the newspaper, and my picture was everywhere. The telephone rang, my resentful, unmarried aunts calling to complain, saying they 'never could have done that.' It didn't bother me."

But in *B.T*. the following day, it's a "glowingly happy" young lady who's interviewed.

"May we inquire into your age, Miss?"

"Seventeen and a half."

"Do you work in an office?"

"No, not anymore. I study music with Max Rytter and am about to go to Paris to continue my studies."

"Who will lead you on your trip to Paris?"

"My mother—and naturally, I'm looking forward to it."

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On January 30, 1931, Inga sits in the Nordic Express on her way to Paris and the Miss Europe pageant. Her peeved aunts have become so conciliatory over their niece's fate that they gather at the train station to say goodbye. "In a vain hope of seeing their photograph in the newspaper," comments Inga.

"Are you nervous?" *B.T*. asks.

"Actually not nervous, but of course I'm excited for the outcome of the final competition."

"If you win?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Let's not talk about it now. It's always been my dream to make it in film, and even if I don't

win in Paris, I hope my beauty pageant title can be a springboard to the promised land of film."

The whistle blows. Mother and daughter are on their way to the French capital. This is the first time that Olga Arvad accompanies her daughter as a passenger. It had always been Inga who'd followed Olga. Now the roles have been reversed. And this was how it would be from now on.

Inga's mother, Olga Petersen, had become a widow in 1917, when Inga was four years old. Olga was raising her daughter alone, but hadn't even had much support while her husband was alive. Inga's father, Anton Margretus Petersen, was ill for many years before his death—presumably from Malaria contracted while he and Olga were on their honeymoon in southern Africa, in 1903. Anton suffered from depression and was periodically admitted to a sanitarium. In his last days he sat silently, staring into the air. When he died, an acquaintance wrote a condolence letter to Olga:

"His illness paralyzed him bodily and spiritually, and I can only imagine what he must've been like in his prime."

Inga is the couple's second child. Olga and Anton lost a daughter, who died of blood poisoning as an infant, before Inga was born. Each year in her diary, in her silent way, Olga recalled the

despair over losing a child: with a little note. Olga provides Inga the opportunities that Vita was never able to have. Inga would be somebody. Would do something useful. Marry well. And she would use the beauty she inherited from her father sensibly. Now, with her daughter, Olga sits in the train on her way to the Miss Europe pageant in Paris.

"She was neither for nor against," Inga writes about her mother's position to her participation in the pageant. "But when we arrived in Paris, we were in high spirits due to the intoxicating atmosphere, the sight of the Eiffel Tower, the blooming chestnut trees, and the memory of many earlier visits to the city." Mother and daughter must have been completely euphoric; Parisian chestnuts seldom bloom in the beginning of February.

Though the departure from Copenhagen's Central Station may have been crowded with old aunts who wanted to be in the newspaper, it's a youthful crowd that greets them at Gare du Nord. Here Inga is met by her friend, the young pianist France Ellegaard, who has offered to become her guide, her *cicerone*, during her stay in Paris. Though they are the same age, Inga looks up to France and wishes to be like her. She's a very talented pianist who, at age nine, had already begun studying at The Paris Conservatory; and when she was thirteen she debuted in Copenhagen. She was born in Paris to

Danish parents, Thorvald and Karen Ellegaard. Thorvald is one of the greatest professionals in Danish cycling history, a six-time world champion, and it is because of his international career that he and his wife moved to the French capital. Guided by France Ellegaard, mother Olga, and *B.T*'s Paris-correspondent, Inga drives to the elegant Hotel Claridge on the exclusive Avenue Champs Elysees. This is where all the participants in the Miss Europe Pageant will stay. Inga and her entourage are shown to their suite, and they unpack. In the suitcase is the gown—designed by the upscale dress salon Fonnesbech's—that has been fashioned for Inga's big night. It is sewn of *crepe phosphor*—"a new material as shiny and soft as Crepe Satin, but with an even warmer sheen," the newspaper writes. The long dress is a little scoop-necked, with small bows on the shoulders, and ending in a twenty-foot train. "Simply put, it was quite dashing, as captivating and fine as is befitting a young and glowing Queen. The entire gown combines elegance and style with feminine beauty and will be the right match for *B.T*'s beauty queen when she enters the fray with the other European beauties on the main stage in Paris."

Inga hastily leaves the hotel and heads directly to Rue de Richelieu and the newspaper *Le Journal*, which is sponsoring the Miss Europe pageant. Here she greets the leader of the pageant. Inga's French impresses him immediately. With her language skills, he says,

Inga is a natural choice for a trip to the South of France following the pageant, along with the winner and five other participants—regardless of how she places. In this way, Inga is crowned even before the competition begins. Not for her beauty, but for her brains.

Of the sixteen contestants in the pageant, Inga is the only Scandinavian representative. The other contestants hail from Greece, Belgium, France, Spain, Hungary, Austria, Turkey, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Russia, England, Estonia, and Yugoslavia. Inga is listed in the official program as being eighteen years old—but she is in fact only seventeen and probably the youngest in the competition. Whereas Inga rolls in to Gare Du Nord without fanfare, Miss Germany sweeps right into the front pages of French newspapers. Fräulein Ingrid Richard arrives in an airplane from Berlin wearing a "luxurious fur coat, emotional and smiling." At the airport she is received with orchids and champagne by none other than Miss France, Jeanne Juilla. And Inga quickly realizes that she will face stiff competition.

"One of the prettiest girls I've ever seen was the daughter of the famous Chaliapine and represented Russia," says Inga, referring to that era's biggest opera star, the Russian bas Feodor Chaliapine. "She was blond, almost an albino; her eyes were huge and gray, lightly

touched up with blue mascara. Miss Belgium was the most sophisticated of them all, Miss Hungary the most charming, Miss France a traditional, statuesque beauty with blue eyes and dark hair. Everyone looked exquisite."

In the official group photo, Inga draws attention to herself: seated, smiling, a little ill-at-ease and bashful among the other young women, she's the only one wearing a noticeably demure outfit. Though most show their legs in silk stockings and high heals, Inga's dress ends around her ankles; she doesn't reveal much more than the tip of her shoe.

"I remember her well," explained Aase Holten shortly before her death in 2005. Holten, born Clausen, was crowned Miss Denmark a year after Inga. She would go on to win Miss Europe. "To be honest, at the time I actually didn't think she looked terribly sophisticated. Don't get me wrong, but the impression she gave was more of someone very healthy and farmgirl-like."

Inga is determined to make a good impression. Her French is so strong that she's interviewed on the radio, and along with Miss France and Miss Russia she talks "cheerfully and fluently" into the microphone. Like the others, Inga is offered a role in a commercial for skincare cream. The one condition is that they must say it was

exactly *this* cream they have to thank for their "divine faces." Miss France is one of the beauty queens who says yes to the offer. But here Inga draws the line. "I rejected it primly," she writes.

The days in Paris are educational for a seventeen-year-old-Danish girl with her eye focused on the vast world; they sharpen Inga's view of modern continental luxury. She gets it practically handed to her: Parisian design houses give the girls pretty dresses. The best restaurants compete to welcome the girls for supper. On Monday, Inga and her competitors are the honored guests at the Gaffner brothers restaurant on Rue Colisée, on Tuesday they are guests at a large ball, on Wednesday evening they dine at Restaurant Embassy. They are given VIP seats at the theatre and at variety shows. And on Thursday afternoon the Miss Europe pageant will take place in *Le Journal'*s offices, followed by a gala dinner at Hotel Claridge.

The European Misses are invited to attend the most prominent and elegant event in Parisian society: the charity ball *Bal des Petits Lits Blancs* (the small white beds ball). An annual event at the Paris Opera, this year it takes place on February 3rd, a Tuesday evening following the theatre's scheduled production. The goal is to raise money for children suffering from tuberculosis at hospitals and sanitariums. The

ball attracts the Parisian society crowd, and the guest list is a Who's Who of nobles and aristocrats, diplomats, military men, literati, artists, politicians, names from the Gotha Almanac (the registry of nobles), and Bottin Mondain (the French blue book). At 11:00 p.m. France's president, Gaston Doumurgue, arrives and opens the ball to the sound of "Marseillaise," played by the Republican Guard. The opera house is decked in white and gold, and on Pont d'Argent—a specially constructed, so-called silver bridge that stretches across the orchestra pit from the stage—artists from French culture, theatre, and vaudeville appear. Inga and the other European Misses are to be put on display. She stands in the wings observing how members of the upper crust locate their seats, kiss cheeks, flirt, and converse. The writer Colette opens the ball with a prologue, after which follow two hours of entertainment, including, among other performers, Josephine Baker, the French-American musical actor Harry Pilcer, the Don Cossack choir, and a sampling of the era's most popular comedy from Parisian boulevard theatre.

"It's impossible to describe all the splendor of such a magnificent evening," writes *Le Journal*, calling the event "1012 night's adventures." The European Misses close the festivities. They are the highlight of the evening. Gracious and elegant, they march on the silver bridge, letting the audience observe and admire them. The

audience guesses at who has the best chance to win the pageant later that week. Could it be Miss Germany, "a modern Valkyrie dressed in red"? Or gracious Miss Austria? Or Miss Italy, perhaps? Claudia Nocetti makes an impression, in any case, when she waves to the crowd with a greeting from Benito Mussolini's Italy. She was, wrote a newspaper, both "slender and smiling when she gave her fascist greeting, shuffling and dancing with such an unconcerned, casual air on the silver bridge that her colleagues grew shy."

Whether it was Nocetti's dance steps or her raised right arm that intimidated the other European Misses, readers of *Paris Soir* could only guess.

"People were really excited for all of us, and we looked forward to the upcoming events, but first and foremost, of course, it was most exciting to see how the pageant would turn out," says Inga to B.T's Paris correspondent. "The common opinion is that the French, the German, and the Hungarian queens have the best chances—my own you'll have to ask others about, I can't judge, naturally, but now I have no reason to feel pressed in this company."

The charity ball closed with supper and dance under the rainbow walk in Le Grand Foyer. At this point the tally was calculated: Mesdames et messieurs—one and a half million francs to the T.B. children in their small white beds!

The many arrangements provide Inga with a glimpse of the life and conventions in Paris' upper circles. But now they have an eye on Inga's charm. One evening, a gentleman talks to her who has long admired her. He begins his conversation with Inga in the following way:

"Will you receive homage from this Egyptian?"

Yes, Inga would like that very much. "This Egyptian" is Kamal Abdel Nabi. She gives him her hand, and he kisses it. It is the first time that Inga has talked to—and received a hand-kiss from—an Egyptian. He is stylish. Handsome. Refined features and almond-colored skin. He has a thin moustache, and his hair is combed back. Carefree and elegant in his comportment. Polite and chivalric.

Inga likes what she sees. The next day, she and Kamal eat lunch together, alone. Here she breaks a promise the beauty queens have made with the arrangers: no private meetings. But Inga believes she'll be able to protect her good reputation without meddling from a chaperone, a watchful mother, or a committee of Frenchmen who are to protect the young ladies' reputations. Besides, Kamal Abdel Nabi is "frightfully respectable," as Inga reports in her later memoirs. He is twenty-two, the son of a landowner, and studies political science at

Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques, an institution known for educating rising diplomats and politicians.

After lunch they take a horse ride in the Boulogne forest. Kamal Abdel Nabi looks at the lively, cheerful woman who, apart from speaking fluent English and French, also turns out to be a good rider. He suggests they stop and rest for a while. They find a bench; Kamal unfolds a handkerchief so Inga can sit. And then Kamal proposes to her.

"I wasn't all that eager," explains Inga, adding that she had other offers to choose between—among them, a cadet from the military academy St. Cyr, who a few days earlier had flirted with her and suggested they marry. And it had only been half-a-year since a young man back home in Denmark, Erling, had sent her a postcard with an image from Tuse Church, near Holbæk. Here, he wrote, was where they should marry when Inga came of age.

"If I had been older," she recalls, "I would've known that 'if you're in doubt, run away.'"

According to Danish law, Inga is ineligible for marriage because of her age. And since the Miss Europe pageant was so close-at-hand, she couldn't just leave. So Kamal Abdel Nabi gets a coquettish "maybe."