

Continental Drift

by Tigerlily Jones ©1985

It was 1985, year of the 3rd International Fungi / Fiber Symposium and Exhibition, in Sorø, Denmark. In spite of my dislike for traveling, there I was, alone outside the Copenhagen airport, trying to decide which road to take. The inn at which I had booked reservations had told me it was within walking distance. The English-speaking Dane seated next to me on the plane said the inn was easy to find, that all I had to do was go left once I exited the terminal. There were no taxis or shuttles waiting as there are in American airports. As yet unacquainted with Denmark's fantastic public transportation, I resolved to walk. But now the question lay before me: did I take the far left-hand turn or the near-left, which some might call the middle, of the three-way split? Buoyed by the guide book's claim that most Danes spoke English, I stopped a conservatively dressed passer-by and asked him for directions, trying to pronounce the inn's unfamiliar Danish name.

"Ah, Gardener's House!" he nodded. I was not even sure if that was its English translation. The inn had been a former hunting lodge. Perhaps he meant guardsman, guardian, or game warden's house, but he seemed to know where I wanted to go. I simply smiled, waiting for directions. Unfortunately, those were the only two English words he knew. Out came a barrage of unintelligible utterances. It sounded complicated, which made me feel less secure. I fumbled with my Danish/English phrase book, but he waved it aside. Pausing as he spoke, he pointed to the rolled up tapestry that I carried under one arm.

It was my reason for being in Denmark. I was an expert in handweaving scenes created from handspun, natural-dyed yarns. A friend and guiding light, Miriam Rice, had discovered how to extract a surprising rainbow of colors from various wild mushrooms that grew in our North Coast (of California) forests and had encouraged me and others to experiment with using them as dye. As it turned out, Scandinavian forests contained similar species, and Miriam's recipes for mushroom dyes became an even more popular folk art there. We had been invited to participate in a mushroom dye

symposium and exhibition. To ensure that I would attend, Miriam had craftily arranged for me to receive a small honorarium, which I was too flattered to refuse. Hoping to create a piece worthy of international exhibition, I had pushed myself to design not just a landscape, but a small nature study of Stellar jay birds flitting through fir trees in afternoon sun... Now my would-be Danish guide inspected a corner of this tapestry which was poking out from the wrapping paper that protected it.

"Good!" he exclaimed, pointing out the diagonal lines that had been painstakingly crafted by adding and dropping triangular threads in a careful order. His finger traced the triangular areas of detail which depicted golden sunbeams spreading through tree branches. "Good!"

My eyes and mouth opened wide in astonishment. Tapestry weaving is a totally obscure and under-appreciated craft. At home, I was barely recognized. Yet here, a cultured European, stopped at random on the street, instantly saw how good my tapestry was! What a coincidence! I battled down an urge to unwrap the piece on the spot and show him the whole picture. Could he tell that I was the tapestry's weaver, and not just carrying it? I put my hand to my chest to signal that it was my creation. He smiled and patted me on the shoulder, or more accurately, the long dark blonde hair which covered my shoulders. "Good!" he repeated.

Then he turned his interest to my suitcase, which I had set upon the ground. Since I seldom travel, I had borrowed it from a relative; it was a cheap, well-worn piece of luggage, and rather unattractive: a vinyl colored to look like oxblood leather, held together with a clashing, mustard-colored zipper. I had packed it to excess, and it was bulging. The Dane patted the case, spoke a few more words, then specifically pointed out the zipper, and again said, "Good!"

The previous compliments lost some of their luster. I was mystified by the attention he paid to my suitcase. Perhaps he meant it was a good strong zipper to hold in spite of so much internal pressure. I inspected it to make sure it was secure. Already the

handle had been damaged on the flight here. It could only be carried at a certain angle now, or it would slip off its ring. With my arms laden with purse, camera, tote, sweater, and tapestry, I wouldn't be able to carry everything if that zipper gave way.

Seeing my distracted concern, the man straightened up, gesturing down the street and then pointing to his forearm, chattering confidently all the while. He held his left elbow out from his body and patted his left wrist emphatically with his right hand, the same gesture I would later use to command a tame parrot to step on my wrist. It looked like he was offering to escort me to my destination. Oooo, how gallant! A Continental gentleman! I gazed at him, trying to discern his motives. If I accepted, did he expect me to invite him in? Scandinavians were reputed to be loose, although this one seemed straight-laced. I saw only a trustworthy, reassuring consideration in his eyes.

Emboldened, I nodded, gently linked my arm with his and laid my hand lightly upon his wrist, smiling like a princess at a promenade.

Instantly, his expression changed to one of embarrassment. I saw that I had correctly judged his character, but not his gesture. He removed my hand with a regretful, paternal pat. His eyes darted up and down the street, as though hoping no one had witnessed us. I picked up my suitcase. After all this information, I still didn't have a clear idea which fork in the road to take. He waved me on, and I chose the middle one. Crossing the street, I glanced back, but he was already hurrying away.

The road led through a forested park. There were no more forks. Wherever paths me, it was clear that they were joining this one, which continued to veer slightly to the left. I saw picnickers and bicyclists although I decided against testing their English. I had been walked for at least 20 minutes when a large, historic building loomed to the right, but it turned out to be government offices. I stopped to rub my neck and shoulders. It was tiring carrying all of those parcels, but I was afraid that the tension in my neck signaled more than fatigue.

The park finally ended in a quiet section of town. Around the bend, to the left, an eye-catching building clearly announced its landmark presence. Brightly painted in stop-sign yellow, with a terra cotta tile roof and matching trim, it nestled among well tended shrubs and flower beds. It could only be the "Garden House".

Pausing in front of the entrance, I set down my suitcase to flex my cramped hand. I took a double-take as I glanced at the suitcase, then back at the inn. The suitcase was dark red with yellow trim. The inn was yellow with dark red trim. On sudden impulse, I looked up the English word for Yellow in my phrase book. . . "guld", pronounced similar to good! My brain went into overdrive as I recalled my interlude with the direction giver, now able to easily translate his words: "...You can't miss it, because it is bright yellow, see just like this color here (pointing to my tapestry), this exact color, golden yellow. Yes, gold like your hair (patting my shoulder) and gold like this zipper on your suitcase. The Inn's trim is also like your suitcase, dark red. It does not matter which fork in the road you take because they both join farther up the road. Just keep to the left, and when you get there, it will be on the left, see, the left side (patting his left hand)."

What a vain idiot I must have appeared, taking his plain directions for compliments and chivalry... And I suspect, somewhere in Denmark, an elderly gentleman nurses his own version of the day a winsome babe-in-the-woods picked him out from the crowd, took his hand, and beseechingly implored him with her eyes to accompany her to the "Garden Inn".

