

| *Prologue* |

A MAN OF MANY WORLDS

THE FLOORBOARDS CREAK as I walk through the mansion at Amaliegade 23, just as they must have done more than two hundred years ago when sugar barons made their homes here in Copenhagen, in one of the most elegant districts of the colonial world. Many people lived under this roof: white and black, European counts and baronesses, slaves from Africa and the West Indies. The lives of masters and servants, free and unfree, were largely separate, connected only by the winding stair between upstairs and down. Mere traces of their vanished worlds remain, in the architecture of the house and in its lore. The concierge confides to me a legend of a young black slave who once had to live in that dark little space beneath the staircase: ultimately he had enough of his bondage and ran away. The concierge can tell me nothing of who that young man was or what happened to him.¹

But I know. I know because an Icelandic woman, a neighbor of mine, in her old age had a dream. She dreamed that an ancestress, a black African woman, brought her roses and thanked her for thinking affectionately of her. She found she could not shake off this dream. Dagny Ingimundardottir was white; she lived in a little fishing village in the Westman Islands off the south coast of Iceland. She took pride in her great-great-grandfather, a dark-complected Danish

shopkeeper and farmer named Hans Jonathan who was known to play the violin, and she was keenly interested in his origins. She told her grandson of her dream, and he began to investigate. From archives abroad he would occasionally bring Dagny a new piece of information. Other members of the family also contributed, and gradually Dagny's dream of her ancestress grew clear: the young black slave under the stairs at Amaliegade 23 and Hans Jonathan of Iceland were one and the same. And his story does not end there, in Iceland. Hans Jonathan's great-grandson Georg Bjorn, who was born in Denmark, emigrated to the United States in 1913. Only recently did his descendants in New England learn about their Icelandic relatives and their common African-Caribbean roots.

For some years a department of the Danish Ministry of Welfare concerned with immigration has been housed in this mansion at Amaliegade 23. Perhaps that is appropriate. When I first arrive, the staff assume I have come to make a complaint about some aspect of social services, and I am asked, "Do you have a number?"

I reply that I am looking into the case of a refugee named Hans Jonathan, a dark-skinned slave who lived in this house more than two hundred years ago and who was the defendant in an 1802 lawsuit (filed in Denmark) that raises fundamental questions about human rights: *The General's Widow Henrietta Schimmelmann versus the Mulatto Hans Jonathan*. No one here has heard of Hans Jonathan, or the lawsuit, beyond the concierge's story of the black boy under the stairs. Oral tradition in this case may not be reliable. It is not certain the boy in question is Hans Jonathan—but not many slave boys can have escaped from this grand house.

Hans Jonathan's story, this tall tale of a Caribbean slave who became an Icelandic peasant by way of one of the most notorious slavery trials in European history, spans two eras and three continents, from West Africa to the Virgin Islands, to Denmark, Iceland, and the United States. Hans Jonathan was born into slavery in 1784, but he would not submit to the shackles his black mother was forced to bear. His life was full of paradox and adventure: it recalls the heroic

achievements of all those who campaign for freedom and human dignity. To tell it properly, one must recount not only his biography but *many* biographies—insofar as that is possible.

Biographers do not undertake their task lightly, but they may not be fully aware of their own motivations: the story simply will not leave them alone. My interest was piqued almost a decade ago when I saw a Danish TV documentary, *Descendants of Slaves*, in which one subject was an Iclander like me: Hans Jonathan. Much about his life sounded quite fantastical, and I felt it would repay my investigation. It seemed to me, an anthropologist, as though a long and important chapter in human history—the story of imperialism, colonialism, racism, human rights, and globalization—had been crammed into one brief life. Hans Jonathan casts light on questions of freedom and human rights that are as vital today as they ever were, all around the world. For he was a man who had the temerity, the courage, to steal himself.

