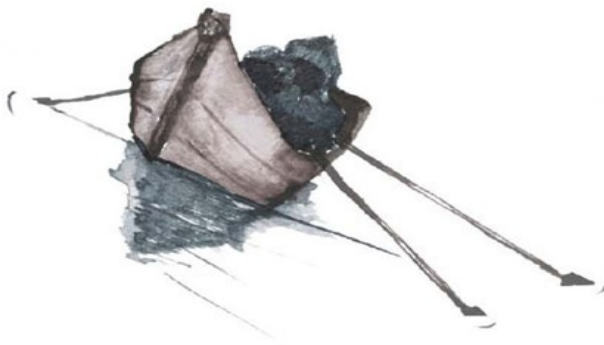


JÓN KALMAN
STEFÁNSSON

The Sorrow of Angels

“A wonderful, exceptional writer . . .
a timeless storyteller”

CARSTEN JENSEN



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JÓN KALMAN STEFÁNSSON

THE SORROW OF ANGELS

Translated from the Icelandic by Philip Roughton



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This book includes a guide to the pronunciation of Icelandic consonants, vowels and vowel combinations which can be found [here](#).

Our Eyes Are Like Raindrops

Now it would be good to sleep until our dreams change to sky, a quiet, calm sky, an angel feather or two floating down, otherwise nothing but the bliss of the oblivious. Sleep, however, eludes the dead. When we close our staring eyes memories overtake us, not sleep. At first they come singly and even as beautiful as silver, but quickly turn into a dark, suffocating snowfall, and that's the way it's been for more than seventy years. Time passes, people die, the body sinks into the ground and we know no more. Otherwise there's little of sky here, the mountains take it from us, as do the storms that these same mountains intensify, dark as the end, but sometimes when we catch a glimpse of the sky following a blizzard we believe we can see a white streak left by the angels, high above the clouds and mountains, above the mistakes and kisses of man, a white streak like a promise of great bliss. That promise fills us all with childish happiness and a long forgotten optimism stirs within us, but it also deepens despair and hopelessness. That's the way it is, a great light creates deep shadows, great fortune contains great misfortune and human happiness seems condemned to stand at the point of a knife. Life is quite simple but a person is not; what we call the puzzles of life are our own complications and murky depths. Death has the answers, it says somewhere, and it frees ancient wisdom from its fetters; of course this is damned nonsense. What we know, what we have learned has not sprung from death but rather from a poem, despair and finally memories of happiness, as well as great betrayal. We do not possess wisdom, but what trembles within us takes its place, and is perhaps better. We've travelled far, further than anyone before us, our eyes are like raindrops, full of sky, pure air and nothing. So it's safe for you to listen to us. But if you forget to live you end up like us, this hounded herd between life and death. So dead, so cold, so dead. Somewhere deep within the lands of the mind, of this consciousness that makes a person sublime and devilish, there still dwells a light that flickers and refuses to go out, refuses to give in to the heavy darkness and suffocating death. This light nourishes us and torments us, it persuades us to keep going instead of lying down like dumb beasts and waiting for what might never come. The light flickers, and thus we go on. Our movements may be uncertain, hesitant, but our goal is clear – to save the world. Save you and ourselves with these stories, these snippets from poems and dreams that sank long ago into oblivion. We're in a leaky rowing boat with a rotten net, and we're going to catch stars.

Chapter I

Somewhere within the murky snowfall and frost, evening is falling, and the April darkness squeezes between snowflakes that pile up on the man and the two horses. Everything is white with snow and ice yet spring is on its way. They toil against the north wind, which is stronger than everything else in the country, the man leans forward on the horse, holds tightly to the other's reins, they're completely white and icy and are likely about to change into snow, the north wind intends to gather them before the arrival of spring. The horses trudge through the deep snow, the trailing one with an indistinct hump on its back, a trunk, stock-fish or two corpses and the darkness deepens, yet without turning pitch black, it's April, despite everything, and they press on from the admirable or torpid obstinacy that characterises those who live on the border of the habitable world. It's certainly always tempting to give up, and in fact many do so, let everyday life snow them over until they're stuck, no further adventures, simply stop and let themselves be snowed over in the hope that sometime it will stop snowing and clear skies will return. But the horses and the rider continue to resist, press on despite the seeming existence of nothing in this world except for this weather, everything else is gone, such snowfall wipes out directions, the landscape, yet high mountains are hidden within the snow, the same ones that take a considerable portion of the sky from us, even on the best days when everything is blue and transparent, when there are birds, flowers, and possibly sunshine. They don't even lift their heads when a house gable suddenly appears in front of them from out of the relentless snowstorm. Soon another gable appears. Then a third. And a fourth. But they fumble along as if no life, no warmth has anything to do with them any longer and nothing matters except for their mechanical movement, faint lights can even be glimpsed between the snowflakes, and lights are a message from life. The trio has come up to a large house, the mounted horse moves all the way up to the steps, lifts its right foreleg and scrapes vigorously at the lowest one, the man grunts something and the horse stops, then they wait. The lead horse is upright, tense, its ears perked, while the other hangs its head, as if thinking deeply, horses think many things and are the closest of all animals to philosophers.

Finally the door opens and someone steps out onto the landing, his eyes squinting into the obtrusive snowfall, his face drawn against the ice-cold wind, the weather controls everything here, it models our lives like clay. Who's there? he asks loudly and looks down, the blowing snow sunders his line of sight, but neither the rider nor the horses reply, they just stare back and wait, including the horse standing behind with the hump on its back. The person on the landing shuts the door, feels his way down the steps, stops just over halfway down, thrusts out his chin to see better before the rider finally makes a hoarse and rattling sound, as if clearing ice and muck from his language, opens his mouth and asks: Who the Hell are you?

The boy steps back, up one step, I really don't know, he replies with the sincerity that he hasn't yet lost, and which makes him a fool or a sage: No-one special, I suppose.

Who's out there? asks Kolbeinn, the old skipper, who sits hunched over his empty coffee cup and directs the broken mirrors of his soul towards the boy, who has re-entered and wants more than anything to say nothing, but still blurts out, Postman Jens on an ice horse, he wants to talk to Helga, before hurrying past the skipper, who sits in his eternal darkness.

The boy quickly ascends the interior staircase, rushes into the corridor and clears the steps to the garret in three leaps. Gives himself entirely to the race, shoots like a phantom up through the opening and then stands panting in the garret, completely motionless, while his eyes become accustomed to the change of light. It's nearly dark there; a little oil lamp stands on the floor and a bathtub appears against a window full of snow and evening, shadows flicker about the ceiling and it's as if he's in a dream. He discerns Geirprúður's coal-black hair, white shoulder, high cheekbones, half a breast and

drops of water on her skin. He spies Helga next to the bathtub, with one hand on her hip, a lock of hair has come loose and falls across her forehead, he's never seen her so carefree before. The boy jerks his head as if to wake himself, turns around abruptly and looks the other way, even though there's nothing special to see besides darkness and emptiness, which is where a living eye should never look. Postman Jens, he says, and tries not to let his heartbeat disturb his voice, which is of course entirely hopeless: Postman Jens has come, and he's asking for Helga. It's perfectly safe for you to turn around, or am I so ugly? says Geirþrúður. Stop tormenting the boy, says Helga. What can it hurt him to see an old woman naked? says Geirþrúður, and the boy hears her stand up from the bath. People get in the bathtub, think something, bathe themselves and then stand up from the bathwater, all of this is rather ordinary, but even the most ordinary thing in this world can conceal considerable danger.

Helga: It's safe for you to turn around now.

Geirþrúður has wrapped a large towel around herself but her shoulders are still bare and her December-dark hair is wet and wild and possibly blacker than it's ever been. The sky is old, not you, says the boy, and then Geirþrúður laughs quietly, deep laughter, and says, you'll be dangerous, boy, if you lose your innocence.

*

Kolbeinn grunts when he hears Helga and the boy approaching, contorts his face, which is covered with lines and deep grooves from the lashes of life and his right hand moves slowly across the table, feels its way forward like a weak-sighted dog, pushes aside the empty coffee cup and glides over the cover of a book before his expression slackens suddenly, fiction doesn't make us modest, but sincere that's its nature and that's why it can be an important power. Kolbeinn's expression hardens when the boy and Helga enter the Café, but he continues to rest his hand on the book, *Othello*, in the translation of Matthías Jochumsson. "Be still, hands! Both you, my men and the rest; were it my task to fight, I could perform it without prompting."¹ Helga had thrown on a thick, blue shawl; she and the boy walk past Kolbeinn, who pretends not to be interested in anything, and then they're outside. Helga looks down at Jens and the horses, all three nearly unrecognisable, white and icy. Why don't you come in, man? she asks, somewhat sharply. Jens looks up at her and says apologetically: To tell the truth, I'm frozen to the horse.

Jens generally chooses his words carefully, and is, what's more, particularly reticent just after finishing a long and difficult winter delivery trip; what's a person supposed to do with words in a blizzard anyway, up on a stormy heath and all directions lost? And when he says that he's frozen to the horse, he means it; then the words are completely transparent and hide no meanings, no shadows, as words are wont to do. I'm frozen fast to the horse: which means that the last large stream that he crossed, around three hours ago, concealed its depth in the darkness of the storm; Jens was soaked from his knees down yet the horse is tall, the April frost clamped around them in a second, horse and man froze together so tightly that Jens couldn't move a muscle, couldn't dismount and had to let the horse scrape at the lowest step in order to announce their arrival.

Helga and the boy have to work hard to pull Jens off the horse and then assist him up the steps, which is no easy task, the man is big, around a hundred kilos, no doubt; Helga's thick shawl has turned white with snow by the time they manage to get Jens off the horse, and there are still the steps. Jens snorts angrily; the frost has deprived him of his virility and transformed him into a helpless old man. They plod up the steps. Helga once wrestled down a drunk fisherman in the Café, a man of above-average size, and then threw him out like a piece of rubbish; Jens thus transfers most of his weight automatically to her; who is this kid, by the way? There doesn't seem to be much to him, he could break beneath snowflakes, let alone a heavy arm. The horses, Jens mutters on the fifth step; yes yes,

replies Helga simply. I was frozen fast to the horse and can't walk unsupported, says Jens to Kolbeinn as Helga and the boy half carry, half drag him in. Take the trunks off the horse, says Helga to the boy. I'll handle Jens myself from here on; then take the horses to Jóhann, you should know the way, and then let Skúli know that Jens is here. Can this one manage the trunks and the horses? asks Jens doubtfully, glancing sidelong at the boy; he's more useful than he looks, is Helga's only reply, and the boy carries the trunk into the house with difficulty, dresses warmly and heads out into the darkening night and gloomy weather with two exhausted horses.

Chapter II

Jens has changed into dry clothing, his feet have warmed up, he's consumed an enormous quantity of curds diluted with milk, smoked lamb meat, drunk four cups of coffee by the time the boy returns with Skúli, the editor; the horses have been taken to Jóhann, Geirþrúður's secretary, who lives alone, is always alone, which is of course understandable since people are so apt to let one down. Skúli is tall and slim, often resembling a taut string, he accepts a cup of coffee but refuses a beer by shaking his head, sits down opposite Jens and arranges his paper and pen, his long fingers very impatient. Kolbeinn strokes *Othello* as if absentmindedly and waits for Skúli to start interrogating Jens, giving them the chance to hear the news that the editor will print in the next edition of *The Will of the People* which is published once a week, four pages packed with details about fish, the weather, death, leprosy, growth of the grass, foreign cannons. There's ample need to have existence freshened up with tidings from the world, the winds have been hostile, unusually few ships have come so far this April, and we thirst for news after the long winter. Jens, of course, is no ship that the sun has shone on in foreign lands, but he is the thread that connects us to the outside world during the long winter months, when our only company is the stars, the darkness between them and the white moon. Three to four times a year Jens goes all the way to Reykjavík to fetch the mail, when he replaces the postman for the South but otherwise he travels from the Dalir district, where he lives on a small farm, surrounded by gentle mountains and the summer-green countryside, along with his father and sister, who was born with such clear skies in her head that there was little space left for thoughts, although no sins took root there either. Jens' postal route is likely the most rugged in the country, costing two postmen their lives in the last forty years, Valdimar and Páll, storms claimed them both on a heath in the month of January fifteen years apart. Valdimar was found soon after, frozen solid, not far from a newly built mountain refuge, but Páll not until spring, after most of the snow had melted. The post itself, the letters, newspapers, was fortunately undamaged in the trusty canvas-lined trunks and in the bags that hung over the men's dead shoulders. Valdimar's horses were both found alive, but were in such bad condition from the cold that they were put down on the spot. Valdimar's body was intact, for the most part, whereas ravens and foxes had gotten to Páll and his horses. The postman for the South transmits to Jens the news that he hears in Reykjavík, Jens delivers it to us, besides everything else that he learns of on his route; this person died, that one had a bastard child, Gröndal was drunk down on the beach, fickle, changeable weather in the South, a thirty-ell long whale beached in Eastern Hornafjörður, the Fljótsdalur Valley Cooperative Society is drawing up plans for a steamboat service on the Lagarfljót River and has ordered a steamboat from Newcastle, which is in England, adds Jens. As if I didn't know that, replies Skúli brusquely, without looking up; he questions Jens and writes so rapidly that the paper nearly ignites. The boy observes how the editor proceeds, how he formulates his questions, even tries to look over his shoulder, to see whether there's much difference between what the postman says and what's put down on paper. Skúli is engrossed, so focused that he hardly notices the boy, yet twice looks up, half annoyed, when he comes unnecessarily near. Time is pressing, Jens has finished eating, filling his big body with curds, smoked lamb, English cake, coffee, warm as Heaven, black as Hell; the time has come for his first beer and first shot of liquor, which Helga brings him. Liquor has the tendency to change our ideas about significance, birdsong becomes more important than the world's newspapers, a boy with fragile eyes more precious than gold and a girl with dimples more influential than the entire British navy. Of course Jens says nothing about birdsong or dimples; that he would never do, yet after three beers, one shot, he's a poor informant for Skúli. He becomes rather complacent, loses interest in momentous events, major news, troop movements, whether the governor of the country sits or stands or appoints his young and inexperienced son-in-law

as pastor at þingvellir. Did he do that? asks Skúli, hotly, my poor fellow, what does such a thing matter now, it all turns out the same anyway, they're all the same on the loo, says Jens, on his third beer, before telling Kolbeinn new stories about Páll, who roams the heaths in search of the eyes stolen by ravens and foxes, tells them to please the old man, has personally never seen a ghost but the living are certainly bother enough, he says, taking a drink. Skúli gathers his papers and stands up. Won't you have a look at these? asks Jens, he has thick blonde hair and would be good-looking if it weren't for his huge nose, he hurriedly pulls two envelopes from his bag and hands them to Skúli; certificates or declarations from two farmers, stating that Jens couldn't have traversed the mountains any quicker due to storms and snow and is therefore behind schedule, to the vexation of many, Skúli among them. It's unnecessary, replies the editor curtly, nodding to Helga, not bothering to look at the boy and Kolbeinn, although he hesitates and nearly gives a start when he sees Geirprúður appear at the door behind the counter, she hasn't bothered to put up her hair, black as night, it flows over her shoulders, over the green dress that suits her so well that Skúli hardly thinks of anything else on the way home; he plods through the gloom with his mind full of black hair and a green dress, and lust like a storm around him.

Chapter III

The night is dark and very silent in the winter. We hear fishes sigh at the bottom of the sea, and those who climb mountains or traverse high heaths can listen to the music of the stars. The old folks, who possessed the wisdom of experience, said that there was nothing up there but exposed terrain and mortal danger. We perish if we don't heed experience, but rot if we pay it too much attention. In one place it says that this music wakens in you either despair or divinity. Setting out for the mountains on still nights, sombre as Hell, in search of madness or bliss, is perhaps the same as living for something. But there aren't many who undertake such journeys; you wear out valuable shoes and the nocturnal vigil makes you incapable of taking on the day's tasks, and who is to do your work if you are unable to? The struggle for life and dreams don't go together, poetry and salt fish are irreconcilable, and no-one eats his own dreams.

That's how we live.

Man dies if you take his bread from him, but he withers without dreams. What matters is rarely complicated, yet we still need to die to come to an equally obvious conclusion.

The nights are never as quiet down in the low-lying areas, the music of the stars is lost somewhere along the way. But they can still be quite silent here in the Village, no-one out and about except perhaps the night watchman, doing his rounds between unreliable streetlamps, making sure they don't smoke and are lit only when necessary. And now night lies over the Village, dispensing dreams, nightmares, solitude. The boy sleeps soundly in his room, has curled up beneath his quilt. Never before has he had his own space to sleep until Bárður's death brought him to this house three weeks ago, and at first he had difficulty falling asleep in the silence; no breathing close by, half-stifled coughs, snoring, the sound of someone tossing and turning in bed, farting, sighing in the depths of sleep. Here it's he who decides when to extinguish the light and can therefore read as long as he likes it's a dizzying freedom. I'm extinguishing the lamp now, said the farmer, when he felt they'd stayed up long enough in the family room, and then the darkness clutched them. He who stays up too late is poorly fit for the next day's work, but he who doesn't follow his dreams loses his heart.

And day breaks slowly.

Stars and moon vanish and soon day comes flooding in, this blue water of the sky. The delightful light that helps us navigate the world. Yet the light is not expansive, extending from the surface of the Earth only several dozen kilometres into the sky, where the night of the universe takes over. It's most likely the same way with life, this blue lake, behind which waits the ocean of death.

Chapter IV

*I miss you lads and somehow I find it harder to live now, writes Andrea from the fishing huts. She'd sat down on their bunk in the garret, used her knees and the English-language textbook for a desk. They were at sea: Pétur, Árni, Gvendur, Einar, and two itinerant fishermen brought in to replace the boy who lived and the man who died. The sea breathed heavily somewhere out in the snowfall that filled the world, and swallowed everything. Andrea couldn't even see the other fishing hut, nor did she give a damn. Yet the breath of the sea could be heard clearly through the storm, the heavy aspiration of a senseless creature, this treasure chest and grave of thousands. They rowed away early in the morning and were perhaps waiting over their lines as she wrote her letter, Pétur with fear in his veins because everything seemed to be leaving life, *I miss you lads*, she writes. *Sometimes, though, I wish that I'd never met you, yet little better has ever happened to me. I don't know what to do. But I feel as if I should and need to make a decision about my life. I've never done so before. I've just lived, and I don't know of anyone whom I can ask for advice. Pétur and I barely ever speak, which could hardly be comfortable for the others, except maybe Einar. He's a vermin. Sometimes he stares at me as if he were a bull and I a cow. Oh, why am I writing you such things, you're far too young, and have enough of your own to deal with. And my scrawls are hardly legible. I think I'll tear up this letter, and then burn it.**

I miss; days have passed.

The distance between Bárður and life grows relentlessly every day, every night, because time can be a rotten bastard, bringing us everything only to take it away again.

The boy is awake, sits up in bed, stares out into the semi-darkness, the dreams of the night evaporate from him slowly, vanish, turn to nothing. It's approaching six o'clock; perhaps Helga had knocked lightly on the door, awakening him instantly. Nearly three weeks since he arrived here with deadly poetry on his back. Of what other use is poetry unless it has the power to change fate? There are books that entertain you but don't stir your deepest thoughts. Then there are others that cause you to question, that give you hope, broaden the world and possibly introduce you to precipices. Some books are essential, others diversions.

Three weeks.

Or thereabouts.

A room as large as the family room in the countryside, where eight to ten people worked and slept together; here he's alone with all this space. It's like having an entire valley for oneself, a solar system next to life, he probably doesn't deserve it. But fate deals out fortune or misfortune, fairness has nothing to do with it, and then it's a person's job to try to change what needs to be changed.

You'll have the bedroom, Geirprúður had said, and here he is, sitting confused between sleep and waking, half waiting for everything to disappear: the room, the house, the books on the bedside table, the letter from Andrea, no, she didn't burn it, the fishing-station postman stopped by the huts shortly after she finished writing it, constantly in doubt as to whether she should burn the letter or not, sort of let the postman have it inadvertently, changed her mind immediately and ran out to demand it back but he was gone, swallowed up by snowflakes, gulped down by the whiteness.

*

Afternoon and evening can be quite tranquil in this house, except when the Café is occupied; the stream of patrons had been rather heavy half a month ago, when the clouds lifted for two days and sailors from the ships poured into the Village. Then the boy served beer, toddies, shots, received

taunting remarks in return; in general it's easy to use words and some believe that a harsh or uncivil demeanour makes them bigger. Yet most evenings are calm. Helga closes the Café, the four of them sit together in an inner room of the house, the pendulum in the big clock hangs motionless, as if trapped in bottomless melancholy, the boy is reading for Kolbeinn from the English poet Shakespeare and most often the two women listen as well. He's finished with *Hamlet*, is halfway through *Othello*, but it certainly didn't start off well; Kolbeinn was so angry after the first reading that he swung his cane in the direction of the boy. Soon started snoring softly during the reading, which wasn't exactly encouraging, the boy's mouth went dry and for a time it felt as if his throat were going to close; he chirped rather than read. You shouldn't read as if you're out of breath, said Helga when Kolbeinn was gone, having left the room like an angry ram; just read as naturally as you breathe, it's very simple when you get the hang of it.

When you get the hang of it.

The boy could barely fall asleep that evening. He tossed and turned, drenched in sweat, in this glorious bed, lit the lamp numerous times, scrutinised *Hamlet*, plunged into the dizzying stream of words and tried to make some sense of it. I'll be thrown out, he muttered; how the hell does one breathe words?

The next reading was disastrous as well.

So unsuccessful that this English poetry, which has the flavour of deep sky and great despair, was turned into lifeless, arid wasteland.

After five minutes Kolbeinn stood up, the boy shrunk instinctively but no blow came, the cane lay lifeless against the chair and Kolbeinn reached out a hand that resembled the paw of a shaggy old dog, held it out most impatiently. You're supposed to hand him the book, said Helga finally, extremely calmly, and then the old ogre stalked out of the room, swinging his cane, which had acquired a cranky spirit of its own in his hands. Well, thought the boy, sitting there, a failure, so it's over, I'll just try to get work salting fish this summer; this was also too good to be true, it was a dream and now it's time to wake. He stood up but for some reason sat right back down. Geirþrúður sat in her chair holding a cigarette; that was likely the worst reading I've ever heard, she said, slightly hoarse, having, as she did, a raven's heart. But don't fear, you haven't hit the bottom, you could get even worse if it continues like this. I hardly think so, he muttered. Yes yes, never underestimate humankind, there's extraordinarily little that it can't ruin. She took a drag on her cigarette, held in the sweet poison for several seconds before blowing the smoke out through her nose; but as Helga said last night, you shouldn't think, just read. Read the text up in your room later; then you'll have time off around midday tomorrow to prepare, read until you stop distinguishing between the text and yourself – then you can read without thinking. But Kolbeinn took the book.

You'll get it back later, we'll go and fetch it, he can hardly read much of it himself.

*

The boy is still sitting in bed.

Listens to the dreams of the night trickle from his blood and disappear into oblivion, then gets out of bed and pulls back the heavy curtains. The light is almost grainy, hiding nothing, yet it's as if everything is slightly distorted, or blurred, as if the world is slowly sorting itself out after the night and the snowstorms of the last few days. No tracks in the snow below, but now of course it's six o'clock and soon someone will set out and spoil the purity. A housemaid on her way to a shop, Reverend Þorvaldur on his way up to the church to be alone with God, seeking the strength not to bend beneath the back-breaking struggle of life, kneels at the altar, closes his eyes, tries unsuccessfully to ignore the ravens that shuffle on the edge of the roof, stepping heavily, as if sin itself were plodding

there, making its presence felt. Maybe it wasn't God who created sin, but vice versa.

~~The boy sits in the soft chair, runs his hand over the letter as if to say, I haven't forgotten you, and~~
how could I forget, then grabs a book from the bedside table, poems by Ólöf Sigurðardóttir.² Is going
to read one or two poems, needs to go downstairs, Helga is no doubt waiting with some work for him
to do, shovel snow from around the house, clean, scrub the floor, read to Kolbeinn from newspapers or
magazines, go down to Tryggvi's Shop. He reads, and she speaks, such words:

She speaks; such words. She laughs, oh, ringing heart.

She hates, such spite. She commands; what a sentence.

She labours; such vim. She loves; oh, sweet fire.

She threatens; such power. She implores; what a prayer.³

He stops reading and stares into space. She loves, she threatens, what a sentence.

Chapter V

It's been nearly a week since Helga sent him down to Tryggvi's Shop. He was supposed to buy a few trifles, chocolate and boiled sweets for the evening coffee and bitter almonds that Helga was going to daub with poison and scatter throughout the cellar for the mice that have made themselves far too much at home. Gunnar had been standing behind the counter, with his moustache and sardonic sneer, clearly planning to say something to amuse himself and the bystanders and making the boy sigh; there never seems to be a scarcity of those who take trouble to put down others with their words. The Devil drives his claws into them and they open their mouths. And there stood Gunnar with his mouth open, two shop clerks watching, but didn't manage to say much more than "Well", because Ragnheiður came out and pointedly asked the three of them whether they had anything to do. The two clerks disappeared so swiftly that it was as if they'd gone up in flames, but Gunnar didn't go far, simply stepped to the side and started fumbling with some tins, his expression sombre.

Ragnheiður regarded the boy from beneath her brown hair, meditative, distant; he cleared his throat and asked in a low voice, hesitantly, for delicacies for humans, death for mice. She didn't move, her eyes didn't leave his face, her lips were slightly parted, he caught a glimpse of her white teeth, rising like icebergs behind her red lips. He cleared his throat again, about to repeat his question about chocolate and almonds, but she started to move and all he could think was: Don't look at her.

She prepared his order.

And he watched.

But why watch a girl; what use is that, what does it do for the heart, uncertainty; does life become better in some way, more beautiful?

And what's so remarkable about shoulders? he thought, trying unsuccessfully to take his eyes off them, everyone has shoulders and always has had, throughout the entire world. People had shoulders in the days of the ancient Egyptians and will probably still have them after ten thousand years. A shoulder is the area where the arm connects to the shoulder-blade and collarbone; it's surely a waste of time to look at such things, no matter how rounded they are, don't look, he ordered himself, and managed to look away as she turned her white and cold profile towards him. Gunnar watched them, and so closely that he didn't pay attention to what he was doing, bumped into a stack of cans, which toppled loudly to the floor. When the boy looked away from Gunnar, who stood swearing among twenty or thirty cans, Ragnheiður was standing before him, with only the counter between them, and had a boiled sweet in her mouth. Now, there's nothing remarkable about having a boiled sweet in one's mouth, not a whit, but she sucked it slowly and they looked each other in the eye. And a thousand years passed. Iceland was discovered and settled. Or just under two thousand; Jesus was crucified, Napoleon invaded Russia. And then she finally took the wet and shiny sweet from her mouth, leaned over the table and stuck it in the boy's mouth. His hand trembled slightly as he counted out the money. Ragnheiður took it and suddenly it was as if he no longer mattered.

Maybe she's just tormenting me, he thought as he tramped off from Tryggvi's Shop, through the snow, astonished at how good it could feel to be tormented. The sweet was also incredibly good, the boy sucked it enthusiastically and his heart pumped agitation through his blood. That agitation had its ridiculous outlet the next night when he woke suddenly from a dream about Ragnheiður; she lay naked next to him, with one leg over him, though he had no idea how she looked naked, but she was delightfully warm and she was incomprehensibly soft and he woke with a start, all wet. Had to sneak into the basement to rinse out his underwear, among mice that died slowly from the bitter poison.

Chapter VI

The boy has finished dressing; he reads two poems by Ólöf before going down.

Jens' snoring meets him on the stairs. The postman is sleeping in the guest room on the lower storey the few days that he's here in the Village, never stops longer than two days, just long enough to let the horses rest, though longer if there's a storm, if foul weather ascends from the bottom of the sea bearing ancient malice. The aroma of coffee blends in with the snores after the boy has come down, breakfast awaits him, bread and porridge. Kolbeinn chews his bread, spread with a thick layer of pâté. You've come to save me from Kolbeinn's ceaseless merriment, says Helga, and the boy feels so much at home that he smiles and doesn't let the skipper's sombre expression trouble him. How can Jens sleep through his own snoring? he says. Bliss for some to sleep, says Helga, listening to the coffee brew, the previous brewing intended only for Kolbeinn, who's so grouchy before his morning coffee that most living people, and even life itself, shrink back from him.

The coffee brews.

Oh, the aroma of this black drink!

Why do we have to remember it so well; it's been so very long since we could drink coffee, many decades, yet still the taste and pleasure haunt us. Our bodies were devoured to the last morsel long ago, our flesh rotted off our bones, dig us up and you'll find just white bones that sneer at you, but despite that the pleasures of the flesh stick to us; we can't get rid of them any more than the memories that overpower death. Death, where is your power?

It's warm and cosy in the kitchen. Kolbeinn sniffs the air, his large hands holding his empty cup; do you want more? asks Helga, and the old man nods. Have you spoken the first words of the day; did I miss them? asks the boy, but Kolbeinn doesn't grant him an answer. Words cost a lot first thing in the morning, says Helga, before yawning; they went to bed late, except for Kolbeinn, who no longer tolerates staying up late, is worn out and useless, had sat in the Café and Jens, at Geirþrúður's request, told them more news of the world until the drink wore him down. The boy sits down at the table and only then notices the scratches on the skipper's cheeks, quite deep in two places, yet not particularly visible against his dark skin. He looks inquisitively at Helga, drags his index finger down his cheek to draw attention to Kolbeinn's wounds, she shrugs her shoulders, apparently knowing nothing. Is there a meeting tonight? asks Kolbeinn, meaning a meeting of the Craftsmen's Association, held monthly in the Café, his first words since the morning, incredibly ordinary, commonplace words, yet it's as if he manages to fill them with hostility. Yes, eight o'clock, replies Helga, taking a seat at the end of the table, sipping the coffee that warms her veins, makes her heart feel better; she sighs. If there's a Heaven, coffee beans must grow there. Shouldn't I put ointment on those scratches, they could become infected, says Helga. How did you get them? asks the boy, without waiting for Kolbeinn's reply, too young to be tactful. Kolbeinn snorts, wriggles to his feet, walks out of the kitchen like a grumpy ram, swinging his cane all around him, knocks it against the wall, twice hard close to Jens' room, Jens wakes up with a start, his snoring ceases abruptly and he has a piercing headache. They listen as Kolbeinn goes up the stairs, lashing out with his cane, hoping perhaps to wake Geirþrúður as well. Damn, he's fun sometimes, says the boy. Yes, but you shouldn't have asked like that; those scratches assuredly didn't come from anything good. They hear a door slam upstairs, Kolbeinn has entered his cave, has slammed the door hard enough to be certain they hear it down in the kitchen. He can't tolerate anyone but himself now, mutters the boy into his porridge, are you so certain he even does that? says Helga softly, looking up, as if to try to see into Kolbeinn's room, through the floor and walls.

The old skipper lies dressed in bed, stroking his cane as if it were a faithful dog, his room as big a

the boy's, a heavy bookcase next to the bed, around four hundred books, some thick and many in Danish, all from the time when Kolbeinn could see, when his eyes had purpose. Now he lies in bed and his eyes are useless, they can be tossed into the sea, they can rest on the seabed, full of darkness. The skipper sighs. It's sometimes good to talk when you feel awful, Helga had said as the coffee brewed and it was just the two of them, I have excellent ears; but Kolbeinn had just muttered something that he himself hardly understood. Many choose to keep silent when life stings them hardest, since words are often just lifeless stones or torn and tattered garments. And they can also be weeds, harmful disease vectors, rotten pieces of wood that can't even hold an ant, let alone a man's life. Yet they're one of the few things that we actually have handy when everything appears to have betrayed us. Keep that in mind. As well as that which no-one understands – that the least important, most unlikely word can, entirely unexpectedly, carry a great load and bring life undamaged over dizzying ravines.

Kolbeinn's eyes shut, slowly but surely; he sleeps. Sleep is merciful, and treacherous.

Chapter VII

It has started snowing again when Ólafía bustles in to join them. The sky holds an endless amount of snow. Here come the angels' tears, say the Indians in northern Canada when the snow falls. It snows great deal here and the sorrow of the heavens is beautiful, it's a cover protecting the earth from the frost and bringing light to a heavy winter, but it can also be cold and devoid of mercy. Ólafía is dripping with sweat as she knocks on the door of the Café, so lightly that she needs to wait many minutes, perhaps twenty; her sweat has become chill against her flesh and she's started shivering, a b like a big puppy, by the time the boy finally opens the door. You should have knocked harder, he says without realising how absurd it is to demand such a thing. Ólafía would never have been able to indicate so determinedly, even impertinently, that she existed. Well, I've still managed to come inside, is all she says, and starts changing her shoes; she'd diligently brushed herself off outside and there's hardly a snowflake left on her as she steps in. The boy sticks his head all the way out and his black hair whitens, the ground lies everywhere beneath a thick layer of the sorrow of angels, no grazing either in pasture or on beach, all the livestock kept inside and the farmers counting every hay blade going into them, in some places little remaining but leavings and the animals bleat and low for better life, but the clouds are thick and no sound is carried to Heaven. Ólafía's track cuts desolately down the road and is starting to be erased, drifting snow has long since covered the track of Þorvaldur who trudged his way up to the church early in the morning to thank God for life and grace; what grace? we ask. Þorvaldur cursed the ravens when he came out, threw several snowballs in their direction but seemed perfectly unable to hit them; they didn't move from their places there on the ro ridge, simply looked down at the priest and croaked derisively. The boy closes the door on the world, opens the inner door and calls out loudly, yes, Ólafía's here! She's startled to hear her name called out so loudly and unhesitantly, because what name has deserved to be called out loudly enough for many others to hear, what life has earned it?

*

Fate can actually create unexpected connections, let us be thankful for that, otherwise much would be predictable, with little movement in the air surrounding us, so little that it would stagnate and life would be sleepy and dull. Surprise, the unexpected, are the catalytic forces that stir the air into motion and give life an electric charge: you remember Brynjólfur, hopefully? The skipper of Snorri's ship, who slumped onto the table in the Café, overwhelmed by twelve beers and chronic insomnia. The boy had sat down opposite Brynjólfur but stared at his dead friend behind the skipper until he dissolved into cold air. Dead was the beauty of the world.

Helga had simply laid the skipper on the floor; he doesn't deserve better, she said, when Geirþrúður wanted to have Brynjólfur brought into the guest room where Jens snored until Kolbeinn hammered the wall with his cane out of innate sulkiness, or the despair of one who's lost his sight and is incapable of speaking. Yet Brynjólfur's deeply etched head was given a pillow to lie on. It's like a chunk of rock, muttered the boy as he struggled to position the pillow. Helga spread a blanket over the skipper, a thick Scottish woollen blanket, and then went to Ólafía.

She had an idea of where Brynjólfur and Ólafía lived, but not much more than that, had never spoken to Ólafía, never stood close enough to her to scent the heavy, semi-sweet smell of her big, awkward body, much less look in her eyes, which are oval and often appear to be full of rain and wet horses. Those eyes follow me everywhere and force me to drink, said Brynjólfur, leading many here to blame Ólafía for his excesses; just a glimpse of the woman filled one with hopelessness. The truth is,

few things can have more influence on a person than eyes, we sometimes behold all of life in them and it can be unbearable. But perhaps Brynjólfur drinks because he's given in, despite his enormous physical strength; a man's misfortune comes from within more often than we suspect. Helga was just going to let Ólafía know where her husband was, that was her only errand, she found the house after a little searching, Ólafía opened the door, guardedly, and Helga looked into the oval eyes full of rain and wet horses.

Since then, Ólafía has come several times to help with one trifle or another.

Has come in the morning, left in the evening, before supper, before they close the Café, sit down in the parlour and the boy begins his reading, which improves continuously, one can even detect a satisfied look on Kolbeinn's face at times, although it could be an illusion. Ólafía blushed when Helga asked her once to sit with them, muttered a goodbye and hurried away without any further reply.

You're so kind-hearted that life would kill you if I weren't with you, Geirþrúður had told Helga after meeting Ólafía for the first time. Would you be opposed to her coming here now and then? No, no, it's good to have fragile people around; it helps us to understand this world better, though I don't always know what I'm supposed to do with that understanding.

Ólafía doesn't work quickly, she moves a bit labouredly, as if there's sand in her blood, but she's constantly busy and does her job well. Her hands are thickly calloused and hard as wooden boards, her fingers slender and quite dextrous, as it turned out.

*

Helga had woken Brynjólfur from a twelve-hour sleep, or a twelve-hour coma, and rather harshly.

Ólafía deserves a much better man than you, said Helga, as Brynjólfur sat stooping over his coffee and hearty plate, with a horrendous headache; someone was trying to tear his skull apart. He was going to say something about the repressive eyes of his wife, her ponderous presence and even sheepish manner, everything that made it difficult for him to stay at home, but he had the sense to keep quiet, besides his having to work hard to keep the copious meal down; his imposing shoulders slumped; he looked like an old man. My ship has rejected me, he finally said, softly, as if to himself, or to the tabletop that didn't reply, since inanimate objects don't know many words. Helga looked at the boy; go up to your room for a moment, she said.

Half an hour later she asked the boy to take Brynjólfur down to the ship, accompany this old seadog to his own ship, renowned for his daring but now old and weak, according to him, and convinced that the ship had rejected him. Helga told the boy to take him down to the spit, where the ship was waiting. I told him that you had special abilities, sometimes it's vital to lie in order to help people.

Snorri's ship is the only one still waiting on the shore, held upright by large posts, the others long gone. Brynjólfur stopped when they still had several hundred metres to go, looked at the ship, which most resembled a dead whale, then grabbed the boy's shoulder tightly, deriving strength from it. The boy simply stood there motionless, pretending to have some special abilities, as Helga had told him to do, but bit his lip because for a time it felt as if Brynjólfur were going to crush his shoulder. Then they boarded the ship; it welcomed its own skipper. Brynjólfur lay down flat on the deck and kissed it.

It took Brynjólfur some time to open the fo'c'sle, the hatch was frozen shut. You'd think I wasn't meant to go down, he muttered, sighing, yet in the end it opened, they went down into the fo'c'sle, which was so dark and cold that it was as if Brynjólfur had cut a hole in existence and they were about to descend into hopelessness itself, were it not for the morning light that streamed down through the opening and stuck like a spear into a dark, giant beast. Brynjólfur fumbled his way forward in search of light, because living men see nothing in such darkness, finally found a kerosene lamp; the light kindled and with it hope. Shortly afterwards, the crew members, whom Helga had got to their feet,

started coming on board, one by one.

First to arrive was Jonni, the cook, a short and burly, shaven-headed man with a swollen face and curious but friendly eyes. He threw his arms around Brynjólfur, as if the latter had been recovered from Hell, which wasn't entirely ludicrous, and was almost completely swallowed up in the skipper's expansive embrace; the boy saw only the bald crown of the cook's head, making it look as if Brynjólfur were embracing the moon itself. Jonni went and grabbed a bucket, clambered back down to the spit, filled it with snow, returned and started brewing coffee. Struggled to light the stove, needing to blow on the embers for a long time in order to wake a flame; one must blow on the embers constantly to keep the fire alive, no matter what name we give it: life, love, ideals; it's only the embers of lust that one never needs to blow on, the air is their fuel and air envelops the earth. The aroma transformed the icy fo'c'sle into human living quarters; it ascended through the open hatch like a cry of joy, and the men streamed aboard. Most were the same age as their skipper, men with rough skin, nearly cured, their movements stiff, they don't loosen up until the ship is at sea. A stranded whale here on the foreshore, a lifeless whale, yet which shines like silver as soon as it hits the waves.

They sat for a long time down in the fo'c'sle and Jonni went to fetch more snow, which he transformed into black coffee, a bit like a comical god; they shook themselves in the cold, chewed tobacco, swore happily, gulped down coffee, it'll be lively here tomorrow, said one of the men to the boy, who sat squashed between two broad-shouldered men and was warmed by them. Their rough, weather-beaten faces all gazed at Brynjólfur with such warmth and joy that they were as beautiful as summer day. One of the bunks was boarded up, two slender planks in a cross; there's Ola the Norwegian's bunk, you didn't know Ola, they say to the boy, now there was a champion, and then they sighed over the memory, but also at how time passed, they sighed, had another cup of coffee, more tobacco and shared stories about Ola. Blew into the embers of memory, imitated his unique language moved nearly to tears. He'd lost most of his Norwegian and never learned Icelandic to any useful degree, invented a new language that was right in between, sort of both and neither, and it was only his shipmates who understood him without difficulty. Then he died, simply drowned up near the Lower Pier in a dead calm, saw the moon reflected in the tranquil sea and tried to dive in after it. Drowned in the pursuit of beauty. Oh, indeed. And settled himself in the best bunk for when we sailed next, here's where he wanted to be and nowhere else. How tedious it's been for the poor man these long winter months! But this is why the bunk is boarded up, you see, they tell the boy in conclusion, Ola needed a place to stay and he chose the best bunk, we had to accept it, and he in return protects us from many evils. Such as what? asked the boy. The men looked at him in surprise, one really shouldn't ask such a thing. They shifted in their seats, had more tobacco, chewed it silently, perplexed, well, he's got to sleep somewhere, the dear man, said Jonni finally and the men nodded; this was a good answer, Jonni's clever. And then, of course, the boy blurted out: But do the dead sleep?

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