

A Girl's Tale

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The infants, ever so small, lie in glass bassinets at equal intervals, like chessmen on a board awaiting the start of the game. The blankets they're wrapped in are either pink or blue and determine what square each will begin on. Gangly little arms and legs squirm about, eyes curiously dart about the room amidst babbles and whimpers. Only one child, a girl, lies absolutely still and silent in the middle of the nursery. She lies there, completely alone and immobile in her glass boat on life's open seas, so fair that if it weren't for her bright blue eyes gazing into the distance, you might think that she was but a trick of the light.

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Life is beautiful. After a long and grueling wait, Matthildur and Guðmundur have been offered the chance to adopt a five-month-old baby girl, born in January in the year of our lord 1959. The child's birth parents are an alcoholic mother in Reykjavík and a recluse in the countryside on the other side of Iceland and aren't thought to be capable of taking care of her. The girl has been in the maternity ward for weeks while a home was found for her, but she's now been given to this lovely couple—a police officer and housewife—in a reliable home in Reykjavík. She's chubby with golden, wavy hair, deep dimples in her cheeks, and lively, sky-blue eyes that are only calm when she sleeps.

The couple's ten-year-old boy, Valur, who was also adopted and who came to them when he was nine months old and his divorced mother fell ill, is rather unenthusiastic about the arrival of his new sister. But they live in hope that that will change after some time has passed. The sweet boy has probably been an only child for too long. The parents are truly delighted about the little girl and now have the children they've always wished for—a boy and a girl—even though they've had to traverse a long and difficult road to make it a reality. Matthildur cuddles the babe and decides to ask Guðmundur whether they shouldn't christen her Björg, after her mother, since Valur was given a name from Guðmundur's family. She gently places her beautiful new baby in a Silver Cross

pram that looks like a streamlined, mirror-bright boat on its lily-white wheels, covers her with a woolen blanket and secures the bonnet of the pram overhead. She walks the pram down the row-housed street with her head held high, wearing a coat and lipstick, hat and gloves—proud and with a full heart. Now everything is just as it should be. She strolls along the sidewalks on the east side of the city with her child in the mild July sunshine until it's time to go home and wake little Björg and give her a bottle.

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6

“Basket-baby, basket-baby! You're adopted and your mom isn't your mom!” howled one of Björg's cousins, crying her eyes out as Björg holds her down at a family party. Björg doesn't believe a word; this horrible cousin of hers is obviously lying. She pinches her even harder. But she begins to have second thoughts when she hears the same thing again out on the not long after.

“No one wanted you! They just threw you away—no one knows who your real mom is. And everybody knows!” singsong the children standing over Björg where she's huddled in a corner behind the garage. They kick gravel, spit at her. She wants to run away, but she's numb with fear and there's a glint of terror in her eyes, like an animal that knows it has no escape. She doesn't understand what they're saying to her. It can't be true. They're just being mean.

Her mother has a fit, calls up the homeowners one street over and tells them they'd better make sure that from now on, those beastly children leave Björg alone or else they'll be sorry. Others get the same treatment. A war breaks out in the neighborhood and everyone takes part.

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“So, is it true that I'm not really your daughter?” Björg asks her parents with a hitch in her throat. She's eleven years old, big for her age, and she's standing in the middle of the living room with her fists clenched and her head bowed. She's just barely managed to get up enough courage to utter this horrible, terrifying thing out loud.

“The kids say I'm not your real kid, they say you're not my real mom and dad. Is it true I'm not really yours? And why wouldn't you have told me that? That I'm not really yours?” Tears

have started streaming down her cheeks and she hits her thighs with her fists as she rocks back and forth.

Matthildur and Guðmundur both get up from their heavy easy chairs and go to her, distraught. They rush to explain that they'd planned to wait until she was a little older, so she'd understand a little better—it's such a complicated thing to explain.

"Yes, but Björg, honey, you were never supposed to hear about this from other people," says Guðmundur. "We're so sorry—it's just awful, but this kind of thing is fodder for kitchen-gossip around here and little pitchers have big ears. It's just really bad luck that it happened like this."

"I want to meet my real parents!" says Björg in a rage. "My *real* parents—not you!"

"Sweetheart, your mother is a drunk who lives up north and your father is a reclusive farmer out east. They were entirely unfit to care for a child and, at least as concerns the woman, their situations were in total shambles. Fortunately, you came to us when you were just a few months' old. We legally adopted you and you are our child now. As much our daughter as it's possible to be!"

"I still want to meet my real mom and dad. I'll just go and find them myself. I'll do it! I know I can," says Björg with her hands on her hips, so adamant that her whole body trembles and tears practically splash from her eyes. She feels like she's exploding.

They promise to see if it would be possible and ask her to calm down now, to not make such a big deal out of this. In reality, nothing has changed—she simply knows, like Valur does, that she was adopted. He's really the son of Guðmundur's sister and so is related to his adoptive father by blood. Their family is a bit more complicated than the average one, but they are still her real and loving family and that's all there is to it.

The idea that she's not their real child adds to Björg's inexplicable feelings of despondency. As if it wasn't enough that she constantly felt like she was trying to get her footing on the slippery surface of daily life, she now also feels like the ice is giving way beneath her. Otherwise, however, her life continues to bumble along as usual.

Valur stops sleeping in the hall bedroom and moves away to work on the construction of a new hydropower plant on the Þjórsá river. This means that Björg gets the hall bedroom, with its royal blue, daisy-patterned wallpaper. She's delighted to have a big, teenager's bedroom. There's even a little guest bathroom with a lemon-yellow sink and toilet in the hall, which she essentially has all to herself. She gets to have her dad's big desk and Luxo lamp in

her bedroom to do her homework, but thinks it's more fun to draw pictures on the big sheets of paper she gets for free from the printworks down on Síðumúli street.

9

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Björg continues to talk about meeting her birth parents. She's curious, positive that she'll be well-received and that she'd even feel better being around her own blood kin. She feels like she'll never really be her adoptive parents' child in the same way as her little sister, who everyone orbits like some kind of miracle child, or so it seems to her.

After evading the subject for a long time, Guðmundur and Matthildur surrender to their daughter's stubbornness. They look into the situations of her blood parents and find out that the woman is still drinking and so it won't be possible for Björg to meet her. They have it from unspecified sources, however, that her birth father lives alone with his livestock on a farm out east and that his elderly mother usually stays with him over the summer, even though she lives elsewhere. So they think it'll work to let Björg go to the farm for a short visit over the summer. Maybe it will even be fun for her to get a taste of country life; it's not uncommon for kids to spend summers in the country and she's no more trouble than other kids. Valur, for example, had spent summers with a farmer and his family in the country even as he'd gotten older. He still went there during lambing seasons and especially during the round-up. Björg is mature for her age and should be able to cope for a short time. Their relatives didn't think much of the news that Björg would be allowed to go all the way across the country to see her birth father.

"She's an odd duck, that girl," they said. "She won't stop until she gets what she wants. Maybe this'll force her to grow up a bit."

So the family still packs up the car and heads east, with an overnight stop in Höfn í Hornafirði where some friends of theirs live. Björg will never forget the visit, because it's there that she sees the most beautiful stones she's ever laid eyes on. The man of the house has sawn them in half and sanded down the surfaces so that their beauty can be appreciated to the fullest. After spending the night there, they drive up Almannaskarð mountain pass,

alongside sheer, towering screes and in and out of fjords and valleys until they reach their destination—a farm called Torfa.

In spite of the rain and fog, it's lovely in its peacefulness, and beautiful green mountainsides with alternating divots and hummocks of lava are visible. It looks like good land for farming; good lowlands with flat and well-irrigated fields for haymaking. The farm itself is located in a pretty spot not far from the road, although the buildings have a rather run-down appearance and sorely need tending. The main dwelling has seen better days, at least in terms of the paint on its exterior. A blocky, old Soviet jeep well on its way to becoming a rust heap is parked next to the farmhouse wall and a dog with a curly tail comes yapping out to meet the new arrivals.

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In the courtyard, they step out of the car, stiff after the long drive, and out comes Skeggi—the farmer and Björg's birth father—short and a bit fat around the middle, wearing a cap and raggedly dressed in blue workpants and a torn sweater. They exchange handshakes and the farmer asks if they'd like a spot of coffee and some refreshments before they head back. Björg carries her red-checked suitcase inside and Guðmundur a duffle bag with a blanket and pillow. Matthildur follows at a distance, distrustful of the whole enterprise.

They take a seat in Torfa's kitchen where Old Jórunn, the farmer's mother and therefore, Björg's paternal grandmother, has brewed coffee and is ready to receive them warmly with cream-filled crepes laid out on the worn table. The coffee is poured into cloudy glasses and they're offered rock sugar to put in it. They hem and haw awkwardly, but then the weather saves the conversation, as it always does, and after then that, the outlook for the harvest and whether the hayfield is like to freeze. With that, all the possible topics of conversation have been exhausted and it's time to stand up and say their goodbyes.

Björg is terrified now that they're about to leave her with strangers in the middle of nowhere, but she knows that she's the one who pushed this and can't back out now.

"Listen, will you call me soon?" she asks her parents, downcast.

"Yes, we'll call you very soon," says Matthildur. "But keep in mind, they have a country phone, with a party line, and you can be sure that everyone will be listening in, as is the custom in the countryside, and so you must watch what you say, Björg,

sweetheart.” Guðmundur adds that they can also write, but that it isn’t a long visit—it’ll be over before she knows it and then she’ll take the bus back home to Reykjavík.

“Home.” He pronounces the word *home* sharply and looks at her with faintly moist eyes.

Björg hugs her parents unusually tight and long and then, they’re gone.

10

Björg is shown up to her room in the attic where she’ll be sleeping with Old Jórunn, as the farmer sleeps in the other bedroom. She’s met with a comingled scent of old man and sheep shed. But the room is cozy nonetheless. Right away, she likes this short, lively woman who offers her a glass of milk and a biscuit on top of all the cream crepes she’s already eaten—not to mention vanilla sandwich cookies—and asks Björg to tell her a bit about herself as she sits down to her knitting.

“Sure, well, it’s really nice to come out to the countryside—it’s so beautiful here,” stammers Björg shyly, adding that she loves the dog. She finds out his name is Happy, which suits him to a T.

The farmer is aggressive, says he’ll show her just how old and stiff his mother is, how little she notices. He doesn’t think twice about fondling Björg’s backside when Jórunn isn’t looking, which shocks her. She tries her best to not get too close to him. When he shows her the outbuildings, his fondling becomes more aggressive. It’s horribly uncomfortable for her and makes her feel even more insecure than she already did. Björg instinctually knows that she needs to stay on her guard and cleaves herself to the old woman. She sticks close to her, mostly keeps indoors in the mornings and evenings, although during the day she goes exploring, walks up the cliffs and mountainsides where the sheep keep themselves, chewing sedately. She also takes walks down to the seashore, since Skeggi is always gone for the better part of the day, either with work around the farm or taking the boat out to fish when the weather is good.

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It certainly is beautiful here. Tall and majestic mountains encircle the fjord, lush and green all the way up to the highest precipices, and they look like they’re keeling over because their strata all run at a conspicuous diagonal. Atop some of the peaks, sharply

pointed egg pyramids point heavenward, reminding Björg of her snorting old maid of a teacher, one finger held accusingly in the air. Grassy outcroppings of lava give way to flat, emerald green fields. The shore is crowded with moon snails and shells, though mostly mussels, which cover the beach like a blanket. The sea is violet like a smooth flannel, often calm and sometimes absolutely clear. It can also turn black and angry when a strong wind blows. Then it's better to keep clear of the surf.

Happy is of two minds about which of them he wants to follow, Skeggi or Björg, but he runs along with Björg when the farmer goes out to sea, following her every footstep. Björg grows fond of this clumsy, black and white dog, flopping and hopping around her with his curly tail and nosing his jaw into her palm when he wants to be pet.

Björg often chats with Jórunn, who is fond of her and tells her various stories about her husband, her children, and her life in the countryside. It's clearly been no bed of roses, but the old woman doesn't dwell on things past, tending instead to tell funny stories while her knitting needles click through the sheep-colored wool skeins, transforming them into patterned sweaters. Björg usually builds a house of cards while they chat and sometimes, she manages to build two levels before everything collapses. Her hands aren't still enough to build much out of cards; they tremble too much.

In the evenings, she's allowed to watch the TV, which was only recently purchased in town but isn't used much, as it hasn't been all that long since broadcasting began and people out east still don't know how to use the contraption. They mostly watch news reports of the aftermath of the eruption in the Westman Islands, which is the biggest thing that's happened all year.

Not long after Björg arrives, Skeggi drives past a young Dane on the street who's been caught in wet weather and, since his camping gear is so paltry, is chilled to the bone from the storm and rain. The young man, whose name turns out to be Leif Sörensen, is offered a place to stay at the farm. Björg fancies him, but Skeggi wants to get rid of him as quickly as possible. Around the same time, two French women and an Icelandic girl arrive at Torfa, travelers who are hiking around East Iceland's rugged wilderness and geological enthusiasts to boot. These people and their unfamiliar ways are exciting to Björg, and she does her best to chat with them during their stay. The Frenchwomen have pitched their tents on the edge of the hayfield and camp there a few days longer than expected. Then, just as quickly as they

appeared, they leave, one after the other, and Björg misses the diversion.

After she's been there for a while, she writes to Anna Sigga. Says she's started smoking and that she's getting bored, particularly now that Leifur is gone, and that she looks forward to coming home and seeing her again.

11

Skeggi is often outdoors, but he comes in at mealtimes. Most often, the old woman serves boiled fish or offal, depending on what ingredients she has to work with. He flops down at the kitchen table, clenches a coffee mug in his swollen, grimy hands, and sticks an unfiltered cigarette in the corner of his mouth. Says little, although he mutters or hums a bit. They listen to the afternoon news on the radio and no one says a word in the meantime. Neither do they speak while the weather report and death notices are read. Then he goes back out without so much as a *takk fyrir matinn*, or "thanks for the meal."

The old woman goes to bed rather early at night since she generally wakes up very early in the morning. At night, Skeggi flings himself onto the couch to watch the eight o'clock news on TV and smokes and slurps his coffee, sometimes with sour mash. Then he perks up a bit and starts talking, shares whatever news he's heard going around. Björg can't get out of talking to him but sits as far away from him as possible and otherwise tries to stay out of his way as much as she can; she's quite distressed by his uninvited touches and fondling.

Her efforts do no good, however, because one night, not long before Björg is supposed to take the bus back south to Reykjavík, the farmer, blind drunk, manages to corner her in the downstairs bathroom when she sneaks down to pee and the old woman is asleep. She's no match for this heavy, fierce man, who pins her down and savagely rapes her while she thrashes desperately in pain and horror. He spatters her with saliva and snot when he's finished and rolls over onto his side as though dead.

On hands and knees, she crawls to the front door, rises to her feet with some difficulty, opens the door, and takes her clothes out into the darkness. In a blind terror, she rushes out of the house and across the hayfield. The dog runs with her into the summer night and starts to bark, though he's never been prone to doing so. In the half-light, she doesn't see the irrigation ditch until it's too

late and topples down into the wet and cold mud. When, sobbing, she gropes her way out, her nightgown is heavy with clay.

Happy gives up on following her and watches Björg as she staggers off the path and along the beach. She feels shards of stone cutting the soles of her feet and tastes blood in her mouth. The lights of the next farm are faintly visible. Out in front of her, the sea sighs heavily. She forces herself to quash the scream that wants to burst out of her and into a silent night, where nothing can be heard but her footsteps, her rapid breathing, the surf, and the occasional cry of gulls.

After what seems like an eternity, she knocks, exhausted, on the door of the neighboring farm, and stands on the front step, wretched and trembling from the cold, her eyes swollen with tears and covered in grime. A woman comes to the door and gasps when she sets eyes on her. She wraps the girl in her arms and doesn't even need to ask what's happened—Björg's appearance says it all. This isn't the first time that bastard's done this. She hurries the girl into the warmth of the house, pulls off her bloody, dirt-covered shift, and cleans her from head to toe. Then she lies down next to her under a blanket and hugs her tight until her sobs fade and sleep spreads its oblivion over her. "Goddamn monster," thinks the woman. "Will it never end? Why can't he kill himself in a booze-up or shoot himself with his blasted rifle so that men and beasts might finally be safe from him? And this, his own child!" She shudders and places an arm over the girl as if to protect her, even though it's far too late.

37

It's freezing, sleeping behind the garbage cans in the courtyard, even though Björg has been using a ragged blanket that she pilfered for shelter. The fall wind is frigid in Reykjavík and she can hardly move her fingers for the cold. Their skin is stretched taut, blue, and swollen, their nails broken and unclean. She's stiff and sore all over. And hungry. God only knows what time it is. She sold her watch for some rubbing alcohol. She has to walk around to keep warm until the clinic opens and she can get something hot to eat. As if eating a hot meal makes any difference when you have to sleep outside.

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Hreinn had refused to let her come back home and said that she should just go somewhere else when she got out of the ward. Said he'd had enough of what he calls "the never-ending bullshit about those kids." Not for the first time. To hell with him—he was dealing some kind of anti-depressants himself, calling people up and threatening to beat them or kill them if they didn't come up with the money they owed him. Such a loser. Still, it would be better to sleep inside with him than behind the garbage bins. She can't take it anymore. Maybe the best thing would be to just go back to him and ask him to let her in. They are married, after all. And there are definitely some good things about him, too. It's just so hard to be good when there's nothing that belongs to you. Not even yourself.

She wanders around the city. A friendless, 49-year-old orphan in a tattered, dirty parka and holey men's shoes. She's getting colder and colder. Dirty hair hangs across her sunken eyes, her face is swollen and red with cold, her hands are shoved into her worn pants pockets. She doesn't have anyone in this world.

Hreinn eventually takes her back. This life has gotten too heavy for her heart to bear. No matter how Björg tries to dull the pain inside her, her heart now beats faster and faster from the stress and her body trembles as if her skin were being pulled away from her bones. She feels the splintering rhythm of her heart and her chest fills with heavy, dark waves that wash over her like the surf. Everything goes deathly still.