

# 1.

Once two swans flew overhead, eastward.

The world is like a stage where everything has been set up for an extravagant musical: the fragrance of birchwood in the lava fields at Þingvellir,<sup>2</sup> cold gusts of wind from Súllur, violet light in the Esja sky, the azure deep and cold over Skjaldbreiður, but darkness no longer descends. Nightlessness and insomnia in all directions.

The basalt Ylfingabúð<sup>3</sup> stands on a grassy strip of land between crevices in the surrounding lava rocks. The wild birch is shaken by the gusts and scrawls invisible signs on the evening sky, and a young girl comes out from the house onto the veranda on the south side. She looks westward beyond the path leading through the copse and leans out upon the railing. She stretches her neck like a mountain grouse, tilts her ear to the west and listens, innocent and bright like a mythic character who has grown up alongside white, wild lambs. The clock inside the house strikes ten.

An old woman wearing a long, dark dress, her hair beginning to gray and her appearance imposing and distinguished, steps out onto the veranda.

“Diljá,” she says, “I simply can’t understand why they haven’t arrived yet. I mean, it was nearly eight when Örnólfur called to say that they were leaving. God help Jófríður, to have to board ship tomorrow – didn’t you just hear a clatter?”

“No, Grandma, not a single clank,” answered the young girl ruefully.

“Who knows? Maybe something went wrong. Haven’t I always said that those automobiles aren’t very reliable? They’ll probably end up watching the ship sail away from shore from somewhere up on Mosfellsheiði! Run inside, Diljá dear, and fetch my knitting and bring me my shawl. I’m going to sit out here on the veranda for a bit, since the weather’s decent.”

The girl came back out onto the veranda after a few moments, chewing. She had put on a white flannel jacket, and was holding a half-eaten cookie.

Although her eyes were young and clear, they were not devoid of a kind of heavy miragelike grayness that is often a sign of hysteria, her lips damp with youth and purity, spongy and red, with lines slightly drawn around her mouth, as if a sculptor used his scraper to shape her head in outline only. The rest of her body was much the same: a seedling, fresh and tender, like an ear of grain in the spring, when the new moon watches over the fields, burnished white and slender. Her hair was the only part of her young body that had volume: it was thick, glossy, and bright, twisted into one braid, with crisp curls hanging down around her cheeks.

“Imagine it, Grandma,” said the girl, after she’d handed the old woman her things and munched down the rest of the cookie. “It wasn’t until I read about it in *Morgunblaðið*<sup>4</sup> yesterday that I found

out the Grímúlfur family was planning to sail away! And Steinn Elliði, who tells me everything, didn't say a single word about it a week ago when we were together in Reykjavík. We walked out to Laugarnes. Why are they leaving so suddenly like that?"

"They'd been planning it for a long time," answered the old woman, as she made the first of her stitches. "But folk hardly know about the brothers' plans until they're well under way. The last time Örnólfur was abroad he opened a new market, as they're called. He was in Portugal and southern Italy. One of them's got to stay down there in the south pretty much all of the time in order to manage the market. One can't trust foreign office workers to keep things running when so much is at stake. But they kept it fairly quiet that it was Grímúlfur who was going to be moving, until the last minute."

"As if Jófríður wouldn't die of anxiety down there in the south just like anywhere else!" said the girl. "She can't put up with much for long, what with her consumption and her nerves – I predict that she won't be able to stick it out very long down there! And what business does Steinn Elliði have down there, when he's all wrapped up in his art and literature?! And hardly anyone down south can read! As if Steinn wouldn't miss home, as if he wouldn't turn right around and come back to see Iceland, that Steinn of ours! Our Steinn, who worships the mountains! I couldn't see myself going to Italy even if someone invited me. What's so great about Italy anyway?"

"The Ylfingur Company doesn't really concern itself with whatever's great about Italy, Diljá my dear," said the foster mother. "Ylfingur isn't interested in anything but the market. And you should know that the pope can read. But as far as Jófi is concerned, she's never more contented then when she's out and about, and I couldn't wish

anything better for little Steinn than for him to leave Reykjavík, so that he can get away for a while from that gang of boys that's always hanging around him because of his father's money, not to mention those damned dreams of his of being a poet, which are sure to end up ruining him."

Although it was evening, the breeze could not be called cold; in fact it was wholesome and peaceful, and the girl regarded her foster mother, Valgerður Ylfingamóðir.<sup>5</sup> This woman was a superior power: she respected neither youth nor talent, misunderstood Steinn Elliði, and put no stock in poets. She was from an old plutocratic family and thought about things as if she were a bailiff from the days when regents governed Iceland. But tonight the girl was in no mood for submission, and she shook her index finger haughtily at her foster mother as she spoke.

"No, Grandma, I really must inform you that Steinn Elliði doesn't have friends just because of Grímúlfur's money. Steinn has friends for completely different reasons than the fact that Ylfingur sells salt-fish. Because Steinn Elliði is far richer than his father, Grímúlfur, let me tell you, yes, even richer than the Ylfingur Company itself. You'll see later, when Steinn becomes famous. Yes, just wait a few years, although you might smirk at the thought now. What did his lyceum teachers say? Didn't they say something along these lines: that Steinn was the most incredibly gifted boy who'd graduated from there in years? Didn't he graduate with honors in philosophy in the spring, eighteen years old? And what did the German professor say, the one Steinn traveled with up north last year? Weren't these his exact words: that he'd never encountered such fiery talent in all of Germany? 'Eine feurige Begabung,'<sup>6</sup> that's what he said to Örnólfur,

Grandma! And what do his friends say, many of whom are both famous and cultured? They adore him and worship him, because he's such a great poet, so inspired, so innovative, so astute—"

The girl was so ardent that from her lips flew words one never sees except in *Eimreiðin* and *Skírnir*.<sup>7</sup> She was clearly determined to convince her grandmother.

But Valgerður Ylfingamóðir's only reply was "Well now." She glanced sharply at her foster daughter and smiled faintly at her simplistic enthusiasm for the words "innovative" and "astute," but could not be bothered to make any further reply.

As she peered down at her knitting her mind was drawn away from her grandson to her sons, those steady, tight-lipped men who had known better how to follow their own lead than even those Icelanders most renowned for innovation and astuteness. The control that they had over the management of the national household determined to a significant extent what might be called the order, the security, or the welfare of Icelandic national prosperity. She was the mother of kings.

## 2.

One of the Ylfingurs' personal cars, a bulky brownish yellow vehicle, came driving quietly up to the veranda two minutes later, and the fragrance of the copse was blended with the stench of grease and gasoline.

The director of the fishing company, Örnólfur, sat behind the

wheel. He tipped his thin felt hat courteously toward Diljá and his mother, who had come down the veranda steps to smile at the new arrivals. Steinn Elliði was sitting next to Örnólfur and didn't wait for the vehicle to stop, but instead threw open the car door and leaped out in order to be the first one to greet the women, extending one hand to his grandmother and one to Diljá. Grímúlfur pulled down the handle of the rear door with thin bluish fingers and helped his wife step out. They all kissed each other, except for Örnólfur, who circled the house in order to turn the car around, and then began checking it over like a true chauffeur before going inside.

Steinn Elliði acted as spokesman for the new arrivals. "Well, old toughie!" he said to his grandmother. "It's an old custom that those who go to sea receive the blessing of their matron, and you've hopefully remembered to cook some pancakes for us. Twenty-four hours from now we'll have lost sight of land, heading south, Grandma, south, toward warmer regions. Imagine Leith, that great city on the other side of the sea, where the cargo cranes howl like the elements and giant Belgian hacks thrust out their tongues and snort in the coal dust!"

And without giving a second thought as to whether his grandmother had heard him or not, he turned to Diljá and continued to speak in the same tone of cavalierish nonchalance:

"Now then, Diljá! It hasn't been more than, say, three or four days since I learned what the fates had up their sleeves. Father told us about it at the breakfast table two days before yesterday, almost as an afterthought, just as if it had nothing to do with anything. He said that I could actually decide for myself whether I stayed or went, and I thought about it for two days. Finally I came to the conclusion

that I must go. Who else was going to read out loud for Mother from nonsensical theosophical essays and English half-crown novels written for 'benevolent readers' with crazy hair and bad teeth, wearing boots with lopsided heels and artsy bow ties? And who was going to lead the missus through the museums in Firenze and show her the masterpieces by Cranach and Michelangelo in the Galeria Pitti? Who, if not me? Isn't the son born into this world to support and pamper his mother? Diljá, damn it, you should have said you'd come with us! And just look at you! Are you angry?"

He grabbed her quickly by the shoulder and spun her around like a top; suddenly they were staring straight at each other. Usually they laughed at everything whenever they met, but this time no joy shone in her eyes. And this caught him off guard. Neither of them could manage a laugh. He took his cigarette case out of his trouser pocket and fingered it nimbly for a moment, then stuck it back in again.

"I need to talk to you," he said, and they went into the house.

### 3.

He was about eighteen years old, but full grown, big and strong, his body agile and svelte. His disposition revealed itself passionate at times, bearing witness to the intractable power of his soul. He was a stately man no matter how one looked at him: neither timidity nor bashfulness obscured his splendid deportment. His bearing, freewheeling and blustery, had effects similar to sunshine hues: the dashing youngster's look captivated others like an apparition

in the sweltering banality of everyday life. His forehead was particularly high, although not quite as wide, and oddly rounded on top. His hair was reddish blond, dense and firm. It was combed back and swept in long locks down the back of his head: this splendid mane lent his face a magnificent and imposing quality. Nothing in his person was, however, as charming as his eyes; they had a deviant gleam; they were jewels; it was tempting to stare into their radiant azure; they were deep-set, and their beauty revealed itself best when he glanced upward; they were protected by long eyelashes. His eyebrows were thick and strong; sometimes he knitted them tightly into a ball and looked quickly upward, reminding one of the commander of an army. These eyes either radiated the wild joy of his multifaceted genius' soul or reflected tranquil refulgence, as if his consciousness were raised in an instant over all visible things and shed light on a hidden world; he had been granted an extra personality that had its home on the other side of everyday life. If one looked, however, from his eyes to his mouth, one noticed something imbalanced in his features. The irregular shape of his mouth drew attention; his upper gums jutted out a little, and his two front teeth were always visible, except when he closed his lips; his mouth seemed fixed in a sneer. At a glance this sneer seemed only to lend a manly look of discontentedness to his face, bearing witness to the easily forgiven complacency of a youth who has the whole world at his feet. On closer inspection, one could read in this look a cold refusal to acquiesce: impudence, even shamelessness. And finally, this sneer could be taken as an outspoken witness to the fact that this man was forever prepared to oppose, to respond mercilessly,

savagely. It was just as detrimental to stare too long at his smile as it was comforting to gaze at the psychic beauty of his eyes.

His hands were small, with thick palms, his fingers short and slender at the tips, the backs of his hands and wrists covered with blond hair all the way up under the cuffs of his sleeves. He appeared to have come directly from a social gathering, clad in a dinner jacket, potato yellow socks and broad-heeled but slender-cut patent-leather shoes, a long muddy-gray overcoat covering the rest of his clothing, a bright hat upon his head. He held snow-white gloves in one hand.

## 4.

The old woman took one of her daughter-in-law's hands in both of hers and listened compassionately to her despondent complaints about the pressing concerns of the last few days and various other afflictions. She had been struggling to decide on what she did not want to bring with her, to put things in order in trunks and cabinets, and finally to sort out her luggage: pack, pack. No one but God could imagine what a bother all of this had been. Three of the maids had been up to their ears in the work for four days. Finally, however, an end to it had come into sight, thank goodness. But who knows, maybe the girls had skimped on the packing material, and everything would be smashed and shattered to smithereens if the trunks were overturned!

Madam Jófríður sighed. But she comforted herself with the

thought of being able to get some rest tonight, here in the peace and quiet of Þingvellir – if, that is, she could catch a wink of sleep with all of this nonsense going on – it was as if she had just arrived from a flight over the North Pole! She had decided to come here tonight to get away from the ruckus in Reykjavík – as usual, whenever someone decides to go somewhere, everyone else suddenly shows up, wanting to do this and that; it's only then that people realize how much they'll miss someone. “Oh, Madam Valgerður, how poorly I've felt since the blood appeared in my saliva last spring; my only hope is a prolonged stay in the warm air down south.”

Although Madam Jófríður was the mother of an eighteen-year-old son, she bore none of the marks of a middle-aged woman. On the contrary, her skin was smooth and youthful, her body chubby, swollen with full-flower femininity, her face milky pale, her lips kelp-red, and her hair auburn, but her dark eyes burned with dangerous embers, bearing witness to a number of different things at once: passion, consumption, hysteria; her eyebrows were two dark arches high above her eyes. In her facial expression, however, there was something that recalled a mask, the stylized face of an automaton or a wax image, but which had one thing beyond those, in that it was made of flesh and blood. But despite the ever-vigilant womanhood that shone from her with each word, every glance of her eye, every movement, there still appeared from time to time in her bearing something that reminded one of a tired child. She was not just formed of astoundingly delicate, perishable material, but she also seemed to know precisely how precious, fragile, and costly she was. She was like a vase made of Oriental glass. Every slight occurrence in her vicinity distressed her; she was perpetually afraid, perpetually

annoyed, perpetually confused; it seemed as if she would die, were she to dip her hand in cold water. There was a depressed comeliness in her fumbling hand movements.

“Alright, Jófí dear! And what are you planning to do with your house in Rauðarárvík?” replied the mother-in-law. “Have you decided to leave it empty?”

“Yes, and I was the one who got to decide,” she answered with childish pride. “Grímúlfur wanted either to sell the house or to rent it, because he says that it’s foolish not to earn interest on one’s possessions. But I don’t find it foolish; I absolutely refuse to listen when Grímúlfur starts talking about interest or compound interest. Don’t you think I’m right, Mama? Haven’t I always said that Grímúlfur is and always will be a child in everything that touches on our family’s welfare? Because when our house is sold we’ll be left without a home in the world. Who knows, maybe one day I’ll find out that it’s better to own an empty house up near the North Pole than nothing in the lands to the south. And then there’s Steinn, who so dearly loves the beautiful view from the west windows, who has sat there so often in the spring, writing beautiful things at sunset.”

Grímúlfur sat down discreetly in one of the wicker chairs on the veranda; his mood was pensive. He cared as little about the beauty of Þingvellir as he did the smoke coming from his cigar. He was still a man in his prime, yet somewhat short – he scarcely reached all the way up to his son’s shoulders, but he was burly, with prominent shoulders and an evenly shaped head. His face was marked with deeply drawn lines, and he had large, bushy eyebrows. His eyes were gray and keen, shielded with gold-rimmed glasses. His upper lip was carefully shaven, while his hair was dark and grizzled, parted

meticulously in the middle of his forehead. His face retained an aura of dry business concerns. It was obvious that this man's work was the only reality that concerned him.

Suddenly from inside the house came the sounds of singing and the grand piano being played, just as Örnólfur came up the veranda steps after having finished tinkering with the car. He kissed his mother on the forehead and asked what was new at Þingvellir, and when he was told that everyone at the Ylfingabúð was doing fine he said:

“Since tomorrow is Sunday I'm going to do nothing but enjoy the peace and quiet of Þingvellir until tomorrow night. Father and son can hopefully handle driving south tomorrow morning.”

He glanced at his hands – his fingers were dirty from touching the grimy engine parts. “I'm going in to wash up,” he said, and he smiled and went into the house.

He could still be called a young man, not yet thirty-five years old, his hair longish and thin, he himself well-built and dashing, with manly shoulders. His manner was calm and determined, almost crafty. His face bore the same qualities of thoughtfulness and acuity as his elder brother's, was marked with similar lines from the nose to the corners of the mouth, but on his forehead, over the bridge of his nose, were runelike marks that would deepen with age. His eyes were quicker and livelier than Grímúlfur's, his eyebrows at least as bushy, his hair dark. Something in this man's face would have reminded one of an eagle or a hawk lying in wait to snatch its prey, had not another quality come into play that spoiled his raptor's likeness: namely, his gentle, modest smile, and the beauty that it lent to his face. The smile played about his lips every time he spoke. It also

appeared every time he listened to others speaking. In fact, every time he looked into someone's face, even if he were just passing through a room where others were gathered, this smile appeared on his face and warmed everything around him. No one was more skillful at sealing business deals than this great industrialist with his gentle smile. His personality contained an energy that found its outlet in pliancy.

After Örnólfur went inside, Madam Jófríður shook her head and looked plaintively at her mother-in-law.

“What really gets to me,” she said, “is when I hear this man complain about laziness, because if any man is going to die from ungodly overstress it'll be Örnólfur. That Kristján, one of their managers, was even talking about it with me yesterday at breakfast. It's been nearly a week now since Örnólfur came back from his little trip to Akureyri, on some kind of wretched fishing tub, and Kristján said that he would venture to swear an oath that this entire week he hasn't slept more than three hours out of twenty-four, if in fact he even tried to sleep at night at all! 'It's no mortal man who works like the director of this fishing company'; those were his exact words. He, who's in charge of so many offices. He confided to me that Örnólfur didn't just think for and control the company, but literally knew every single thing that concerned the company inside and out, both at sea and on land, by night or day. He knows where every ship is stationed at all times; he knows about every worker in the company, man and woman, what each one is supposed to be doing at all times; he knows about every truck, yes, every wheelbarrow! It's as if he knows every item by rote, every number in the accounts, both small and large, and I'm sometimes close to believing that he flies off

on his broomstick to the company's offices in Genoa and Barcelona so that he can get their numbers as soon as they're written down. He's the kind of man I would dare to trust with a kingdom."

After concluding this description Madam Jófríður added: "I've never heard anyone talk about a mortal man the way the workers talk about Örnólfur."

"That's right," answered Madam Valgerður, without taking her eyes off the door, which had closed behind her son. "How often haven't I said to the boy: 'You must have built such an expensive summerhouse here for something if it's not just for your foreign guests, like the ones who were here last year and the year before, or for me, the old lady, and those impetuous girls, Diljá and her girlfriends.' Last week there were sometimes seven of them here, surrounding me with their constant music and racket. He himself has never enjoyed a single week's rest here in this blessed beauty—"

"No, it's not a week's rest that Örnólfur needs," interrupted Jófríður, "and the last time I told him that was yesterday, when I stopped him in the foyer of the National Bank and ordered him under threat to invite me to midafternoon coffee at Hotel Iceland. It's something else he needs to be getting. He needs a wife. And I said to him: 'I would have been willing to be your wife if your brother hadn't already spoken for me twenty years ago. You should get yourself a darling young wife and a comfortable home; you obviously have your choice of women both here and abroad,' said I; '... a beautiful and loving wife, yes, a devoted wife, dear Örnólfur, who waits impatiently for you to come home from your office at three and serves you your afternoon coffee; receives you with both hands whenever

you return from a trip abroad, throws her arms around your neck, kisses your eyes and mouth, and runs her hands through your hair. Just like that,’ said I, ‘that’s what you need, my boy.’ There’s nothing like a wife. Nothing can keep a man in line but a wife. A wife’s the best elixir of life there is if you pick the right one.”

“And what was his reply?” asked Madam Valgerður in a low voice.

“Oh, it was completely useless! He smiled and said, ‘Mmhmm; first we’ll wait and see how the new markets are doing in Portugal and Sicily.’”

“Oh, yes, I’ve heard such answers before; Lord knows how I’ve been put to the test by Örnólfur’s eccentricities!” said Madam Valgerður.

Both of them shook their heads and looked sadly into the distance. Grímúlfur was still sitting pensively, waiting for both his cigar to burn out and the moment when it would suit the women to get up and his mother to invite him to coffee. No more music came from the parlor. The clock in the house struck eleven.

## 5.

He had greeted her as cheerfully as ever. But, truth to tell, there had been no joy in their parting. It was night; he had come to say good-bye; in the morning he was gone.

He said he had come to speak to her, but he ended up saying nothing. All he did was ask her to play the grand piano; he would accompany her. But it hadn’t worked – neither of them was in