

Sölvi Björn SIGURÐSSON

From *THE LAST DAYS OF MY MOTHER* – CHAPTER 1,

The doctor handed me a calling card with an emergency number and told me to be in touch as soon as we decided how we wanted to proceed. We took a taxi back home. Mother went straight to her bedroom and left me all alone in the living room, surrounded by a silence impregnated with years of memories. I had grown up in this apartment, left home and returned again well into my forties with my tail between my legs to hide away once more in the loft. The expansion of my body the past few months provided a strong argument for those who believe that obesity is a growing social problem. In the mornings I'd stand naked on my bedroom floor and glare at a full-size mirror. My bloated body was like a warmly dressed person on a fishing trip, donning a flesh-toned parka over neoprene waders. I imagined that hyperactivity in some gland or other was to blame, but deep inside I knew that the real culprits were the bakery across the street and the sherry-marathons Mother and I regularly indulged in. It was four months since Zola had thrown me out and shackled up with a French dentist with a lantern jaw, whom I just couldn't see rhyming with her expectations in life. After that my life had been devoid of any substance. I lived in a world limited by the seams of my pyjamas. The diminutive nature of this world was confined to even less significant acts like fly tying and online car racing. In the evenings I'd pop down and have a drink with Mother – her own home brew, which she claimed was better than the wine sold in the liquor store. Almost every aspect of my body and personality confirmed the law of gravity.

My face was bloated and the rest of me somehow gristly, as if I was one, big tennis elbow, from head to toe. There was nothing to suggest, as I had claimed when I first moved in, that my stay in the loft was a temporary arrangement until I'd find a flat for myself. I came into Mother's life like a stand-in for the company she craved, and we'd grown used to this little by little; spending our days drinking sherry and reading tarot cards while I continued to tell myself: Tomorrow I'll get going, tomorrow I'll get off my fat arse and start a new life. But it wasn't until that day, the day Mother was told that she was to die, that reality finally got to me. I walked around studying the flat in a trance-like state that intoxicates those who must face the certainty of impermanence. Each nook and cranny became a tunnel to the past. Freud in dust form. A biography of molecules. My life slid by, a hologram generated from fractions of the past; but suddenly, without warning, I was overcome by relief – this was not the end of everything, but a new beginning. Time itself, that mismatched resin of shapeless days and self-pity, became an unbroken, unwavering and crystal clear image before my very eyes. From now on each day would be a work of art and the brushstrokes governed by this one goal: To make Mother happy the last days of her life.

From *THE LAST DAYS OF MY MOTHER* – CHAPTER 3,

Four hours later we stood in front on the airport terminal in Amsterdam. The sunlight filtered through the thick clouds and weaved a rainbow over the car park. I felt like a character in a phone ad where the theme was the bliss of being North European, and that I should immediately phone all my friends and get a group discount on roaming services. The sunrays gave a greyish clarity to the morning, reminding me of Linda, a friend from secondary school, who used to abuse solariums and ended up with melanoma. It turned out that I lacked strength and character to help her in her time of need and so she ended our friendship from her hospital bed, paler than ever before and practically at death's door. Much later, when Zola and I separated and I'd almost forgotten all about it, Mother pointed out that it hardly came as a surprise that I couldn't sustain a relationship when even terminally ill girls felt they were better off without me. She had a knack for putting events in my life into context; the franker she was, the more her words rang true. Like a painted subconscious with a veil: she knew me better than the feet that directed me.

"I'll wait here while you find us a cab," she said and sat down on a bench outside the building. I left her there with our luggage and walked towards an old fashioned car I had spotted. The car had the Libertas logo on it and next to the handsome vehicle stood a man in his forties, slightly built with black hair, wearing a white shirt and khakis.

"Mr. Hermann Willyson, sir?" he asked. "I'm the driver. I drive you to Lowland."

"Hi," I said and shook his hand. "I think it's best we head to the hotel first and get rid of the luggage. My Mother, you see ... We've been travelling since early this morning."

"Very good, sir. I drive you."

I walked back to Mother who was done smoking and stubbed out her cigarette on the pavement. The driver followed me and stopped in front of the bench. "Mam BrieMam, I am the driver," he said and smiled before carrying the luggage to the car.

"We get a chauffeur? Wow, it's like Breakfast at Tiffany's. How fabulous!"

I took her hand and walked with her to the car, which she admired as much as the driver. The radio blasted out Bollywood music, which he turned down a little bit as we headed off. "Mam BrieMam," he said when were on the dual carriageway.

"Eva," she corrected him. "For god's sake, call me Eva."

"EvaMam? Okay. Does EvaMam want to go to hotel, Mam, or directly to Lowland?"

"Just anywhere you like, dear. I'm up for anything."

She tilted her head and stared wistfully out the window. The seats were soft and the view unobstructed by the large, clear windows, which increased Mother's appreciation of the car.

"We'll go to the hotel," I said and leaned closer to the driver. "Mother has to ..."

"No. No. No," she said slowly but loudly with her legs crossed and draped over the back seat. "No special needs, bitte schön, not for me. We couldn't be more comfortable than in all this plush." She waved a cigarette over the driver's head to let him know that she was going to smoke in the car, which soon became a smoke filled version of the past. The foul smell conjured up memories of being car sick out in the country and of badly ventilated glacier trips with Thor, Mother's friend, who owned a minibus. I rolled down

my window, leaned my head out and breathed in Holland. Mother was in her own world so when I pulled my head back into the car, I felt I had to engage in some sort of conversation with our driver and so I asked about the car.

“Ambassador, sir. Indian car. 1800 ISZ.”

“Really? I didn’t know you could get them here.”

“I bring it. From Nainital, sir. That is my village in India.”

“And did you drive it all the way here?”

“Exactly, sir. I drive.”

“That must have been some trip.”

“Yes, sir.” He seemed determined not to be tricked into conversation, but then added tentatively: “I change engine in Carta.”

I liked this quiet driver. A man, who drove 10000 kilometres across two continents and found an engine replacement the only thing worth mentioning, had to be a very reliable driver. There were fewer cars on the road as we left the city behind. Our driver pointed to a sign with a Dutch place name, turned off the dual carriageway onto a narrow road. The houses were scattered here and there like farmhouses but soon they fl ocked together around a small church. Next to it was a restaurant and a large house with the Dutch fl ag fl ying

high. Two men sat on the veranda outside the pub and stared into their beer jugs while a young woman seemed to be giving them a talking to, fi nally throwing her hands up in despair and walking off. Spring was making its way to Lowland. Squirrels nibbled seeds by the roadside while the sun fell over the winding road and disappeared behind the trees. At the edge of the small town was an even narrower road leading to a gate, which read *Libertas*,

and behind it an alley of trees cut through the estate. Our driver got out and opened the gate, then back behind the wheel of the car and burped like he’d done every fi fteen minutes or so since we headed off from the airport. He would later explain to me that people who eat spicy food on a daily basis tend to have a livelier digestive system than salad-people, and should therefore not hold back the burps.

I felt myself drifting off as we drove past the trees. There was complete stillness, the weather was sweet and only the soft purring of the car penetrated the silence. I rolled down the window again and felt the coolness of the morning rain fl ow into the car. The foliage emitted humidity so that the earth smelled of carbon, decomposing wood, and vegetation that winter had hidden away under a layer of snow. I stared at a trio of skeletal men with golf clubs on the other side of the trees; they were pallid, almost transparent against the white bathrobes that hung on their slight frames. Once in a while they’d stop and swing their clubs with little success. It was as if laughing corpses had been let out into the daylight to welcome spring, pumped up on Codeine.

FROM THE MURAKAMI GIRLFRIEND

I was frying eggs in the kitchen when the phone rang, just before six on a Friday afternoon. I had grabbed a beer from the fridge, not knowing if it would be followed by a second. I was in good mood, I suppose, whistling along to Radiohead's Fake Plastic Trees. I turned off the stove and walked into the bedroom.

"Hello."

"This question might surprise you," the person on the phone said without introducing herself, "but I need to know how honest you are."

Strictly speaking this wasn't a question – a question puts the verb in front of the pronoun and ends with a question mark: *How honest are you?* But that was probably irrelevant.

"How honest I am? Rather honest, I suppose. Not that it's any of your business, honestly."

*Gallup, great. They'd been calling me incessantly since I moved in and it was starting to get to me. Maybe I wasn't used to having my opinions appraised by others, but still, I'd had enough. What were these surveys worth anyway if they always called the same people?*

"Listen, I really don't have time for this," I said. "I was just frying eggs in the kitchen."

I was going to add, *goodbye*, but the Woman on the Phone interrupted me.

"Where else would you? What I mean is: what are the odds of you frying your eggs some place else than in the kitchen?"

*Metaphysics freak, great. I had heard these companies were short of people but still*

*"Sölvi Björn Sigurdsson's second novel, The Murakami Girlfriend, is an innovative combination of a love story, a crime novel and science fiction with a stop-over in world literature – the strangeness*

*of Kafka and Plato's Cave Theory. It contains very intriguing speculations on the possibility of fiction and its impact in larger context. The strength of this story is an exciting plot and bold*

*confrontation with a new literary tradition. It also bears witness to a certain zeitgeist, reference to coercion,*

*self-destruction and the escapism of modern life in addition to the classical vices such as greed, arrogance and lust. One cannot help but become fascinated by the book's clever narrative world, it*

*inspires you to look for other books in the shelf, and is itself quite worth reading over again. A powerful,*

*original and modern story that bravely takes on the literary traditions and the present."*

thought they should take more care in who they hired. Wasn't Gallup one of the largest companies in its field?

"I really don't have time for this," I said and felt like my good mood would end up in the sink along with the eggs if I wouldn't soon be free of this woman. „And if you'd be kind enough to remove me from your list, that would be great.“

"Unfortunately that's not an option, Tomas."

Tomas. She might as well have casually caressed my genitals, addressing me by my name like that. One's name simply wasn't within the communication frame available to Gallup.

I hung up.

Two minutes later the phone rang again.

"You hung up on me. That's an honest answer, of sorts. But I have to tell you that I'm really hurt by you treating me this way. I did not expect that, when I wrote the letter."

*The letter, Christ.* This must be one of the freaks that had written about the room.

"If this is about the room I'm sorry to tell you that it's already let." The truth was that I had decided not to let out the room, but that really wasn't anybody's business but my own.

"I really had great hopes for this relationship. That's something you should think about when you get involved with other people. There are consequences. You can't just walk away like there's nothing to it, *like there are no feelings at stake.*"

What was this woman on about? I was afraid that if I didn't get rid of her right away I'd be stuck with her for a long time.

"There are no feelings at stake. The room's been let, I'm being as honest as I possibly can and now I'm asking you to stop calling me."

"You can't just walk away from what's already happened. If you go through life that way you'll never be able to live with yourself."

This was hopeless. I took the receiver away from my ear and stared into this little space that contained all the potential nutcases of the world, and listened till I'd had enough.

I was nineteen at the time and had rented a small top floor flat on the High Street, with a view down to the street on one side and the mountains and the sea on the other. I suppose you could have called it a flat. There were four rooms divided by a communal space in the middle, which meant that I didn't really live alone, but in cahoots with any- and everyone who found their way up there. An innocent trip to the loo in the night was a potential question of life or death. To make things worse the lock to the house was broken and so I felt even more exposed to unwelcome visitors than the bars down the street. Still, no one ever came up there. I don't think I've ever, neither before nor later, been as reclusive and by myself as these first weeks of autumn 1998, when I moved to Reykjavik for the first time and spent my days staring out the window at the people who passed in the street below, between making coffee and listening to the records I had brought with me from home. The only thing that interfered with this seclusion were the systematic and repeated calls of The Woman on the Phone:

"A diamond or Elton John's bra?"

Was this a real possibility?

"I'll have to say diamond," I said, without giving it much thought.

"A pint or a thousand acres on the moon?"

Did I believe enough in modern science? Probably not.

"A pint."

"A night in jail or a night with Miss Tokyo?"

Finally, I thought, *something for the ethicist to think of.* I had signed up for Introduction

to Ethics along with a few other courses in the University's Literature Department, and if anything drew me to *The Woman on the Phone* it was her ability to define the world by these relative measures. Had Miss Tokyo been prepared to spend a night with me and teach me a few tricks in bed, I would have answered without hesitation: *A night with Miss Tokyo*. But if a night with Miss Tokyo meant I would have to take her against her will, possibly, or somehow trick her into bed with me, then spending endless nights in jail would be the least of my worries. Did I have the strength to ignore basic morality and ruin another person's life? I doubted it.

"I guess I'd spend a night in jail," I said.

"You'll never be happy," said *The Woman on the Phone*.

As autumn passed I got used to these phone calls. People could have phoned me to let me know that the beer I was drinking contained cyanide or that my mother had died a murky death in a religious gathering in a remote Japanese village, and the news would not have affected me. Because despite all the world's phone calls, I was the most normal guy in the most normal attic in the most normal capital of the world. Well – Reykjavik's perhaps not that normal, but you'd hardly call it sophisticated. More like fried eggs – all right, but you generally know what you get.

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#### FROM RADIO SELFOSS – CHAPTER 1

When the family returned to Iceland, the longing for Denmark grew almost as strong as the patriotism that had impelled it to leave. The first days of the homecoming were spent visiting relatives in the capital who all insisted on feeding the family with cuisine that was bound to inflict cancer of the colon and coronary occlusion. We soon suffered so badly from nausea and foul temper due to excessive intakes of protein, that the cacophony of blabber and bleat made it almost impossible for our father to keep his eyes on the broad road to the promised land, which to him disproved all slander about the Icelandic highway system. According to him you were fine until you reached Hveragerdi. Typical for the town, where you could hardly put a foot down without stepping into a scalding hot spring, that the coffee there was the most tepid piss in all of Scandinavia.

"Not half as bad, though, as the stench of envy in Reykjavik," my father continued.

"It'll all change when we get back to Selfoss."

"Your dad has extraordinary faith in Southerners," mother said. "He believes they're kinder in nature than people in other parts of the world."

"Well, he hasn't been able to talk about anything else for months," said Anna who was

the oldest and not too fond of moving to *this shitty piece of turf far from all civilization*. “Hormone-hell at an early age,” said mother who didn’t, any more than the rest of us, grasp her daughter’s loaded language. “How will she be by the time of confirmation?” “Fat chance I’ll get confirmed.”

“Confirmed or not,” said dad and ran a hand through my mother’s thick mane of hair, “I know that she’ll become the fairest lady of the North like her mother. Now, kids, look!” He stared with such intensity beyond the cliff’s edge that mum had to grab the wheel as he pointed out into the distance. “There,” he said. “The lights out there are Selfoss.”

The capital of the South welcomed the family with open arms. Our parents had invested in a half-finished house in a new neighbourhood in the outskirts called the Fields. The vastness that lay before our kitchen window was praised by our father but provided Anna with an important argument in her belief that in Iceland the flatness reigned supreme. There was not so much as a single building of any substance, she said. Dad objected and said that the garage of the new house was an excellent example of *profound* architecture. Anna submerged

herself in letter-writing where she described to her Danish friends the sour-faced and rude nation of Icelanders, which in her opinion were completely free of all courtesy and manners. The more people stared the more she felt that she was justified in her belief and the more pleased she was with herself. Our parents were relieved that the child was finally behaving and didn’t interfere. In one way or another everyone had found happiness again. Mum was overjoyed at our father’s drive, which manifested itself in him hanging on the outside of the house, stacking red tiles on the roof and enjoying the so-called Fieldbrew, which was a home-made product to substitute the illegal Danish beer. The house became a home and the profound garage a studio and a music school that according to my dad was the only way to go if he was to stay in the music business. You couldn’t dwell forever on past fame abroad.

So nothing had changed since Copenhagen, except maybe that the proximity to the Swedes was finally over and done with, those bloody bores that dad liked to refer to as “an insult to mankind.”

It was probably only to be expected that all hell broke loose in the Fields when the new people moved into the house next door. In one instant my father’s dream of the tranquillity of home turned into a nightmare.

The house had stood vacant for some time and no gossip heard of the new owners. Dad had wondered if they might be in the ‘biz’; there weren’t that many people that could afford a hoard of builders working noon and night for several weeks like that.

“Not that I give a toss, a neighbour is never more than a neighbour,” he said and claimed not to be concerned with the future of the neighbouring house. “It can’t get any worse than Osterbro. I doubt I’ll ever forget the whining bastard.” But when the new people finally drove up in a blue Volvo my dad started to have second thoughts about the neighbour being better than the one in Osterbro. “There is no escaping the bourgeoisie.”

It seemed extremely unlikely that these new people had any experience of the music business, as my father had hoped for.

“Worst of all is the lack of taste in everything from the Swedes. This,” he said and pointed at the Volga, which despite everything was strangely similar to the Volvo, “is what

you call design.”

Our father’s resentment of the newcomers intensified with each passing day and reached a peak of disgust when he found out that they had lived in Sweden for years. When *Wanker*, who turned out to be far worse than the one in Osterbro, suddenly took it upon himself to paint the house, our father said he’d had quite enough. That nauseating yellow colour and that bloody blue roof ... “... like the frostbitten nose of Ingmar Stenmark in his ridiculous piss-yellow suit,” he grumbled.

It was just a few weeks after we arrived but this time in history made it possible for him to regard our neighbours as immigrants. Dad spoke as dreamily of the Fields’ past as our years in Denmark. The newcomers might regard themselves Icelandic but that didn’t do them any good, he said. The unfortunates born in Sweden could hardly help it, and could do little about it but flee to another country, but those who moved to Sweden of their own accord had to be particularly insane and even more Swedish than those born there. When the neighbour then kindly asked if there was any chance of having the scrap metal in front of the house removed, our father declared that he’d had it.

“*Joint cleaning effort!* Who the hell is he to be telling me to clean up my own damn yard? This is what happens to people who linger too long in Sweden.”

“Actually, Sweden is the country that welcomes most foreigners. It can’t be all bad living there,” said mum.

“They have to have some way to dilute their natural boringness,” dad replied.

“I see no reason to judge these people right off. I have told you a thousand times to get rid of that junk.”

“Yes, but a joint cleaning effort ... and on a bloody Saturday too.”

“We’ll just do as we’re asked and then we’ll forget it.”

Dad couldn’t leave it at that and sank deeper each day into the divan in the garage that he called the Love Couch, contemplating the brutal attack launched by the Swedeophile, then rattling on about it over dinner. It was of course not enough for the damn man to plant normal trees and shrubbery in moderate Icelandic height and proportion, he had to set down god awful trees that stretched several feet up into the sky, towering over all other vegetation in the neighbourhood. If this went on like this the Fields would look like a Swedish suburb in no time at all.

“I am sure the twat nicked them off the National Forestry. No one sells trees of that size.”

“If I remember correctly, darling, just the other day you went on and on about how barren everything is around here,” mum said.

“Huh.”

“Look at it this way; you can hardly see their house anymore. We should be pleased by those trees. And you know, I think we should just invite them over for a coffee, they have a kid of Siggí Óli’s age. They’re bound to become friends.”

“The kid’s bound to be as ga-ga as the rest of them.”

After weeks of frustration our father decided to be grand in this intercultural conflict and not give a toss about the Swede’s ‘mental abuse, his niggling, and intolerable lack of patience towards the diversity of life.’ He simply accepted the fact that Swedes were not and would never be easygoing. He had decided that he, at least, would not alter his relaxed



outlook on life or let the stressed quirks of some anal perfectionist affect him.  
That was when I seized the opportunity.

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