

SCRIMSHAW

And there was the body, lying at the foot of the cliffs on top of thick coils of oil-black seaweed. I smiled. I was walking to my uncles Arthúr and Níls's summer house in *Rauðasandur* and I'd left the path to get closer to the puffins and fulmars, maybe get myself some eggs if I could, and then I'd looked down and seen it. Even from that distance I could tell it was huge. I didn't tell Arthúr and Níls about it. I knocked on their door, didn't wait for an answer, just ran in and let them hug me and feed me and fill up my backpack with stuff for ma and pa. Not so good, I said. She's really tired. He doesn't know who I am. We have to keep the door locked, else he disappears. She cries. So does he.

Arthúr and Níls are like a walrus and a polar bear made a nest together and filled it full of cakes and music. We'll be over on Sunday, Arthúr said, his big hands on my shoulders. But be sure to call if there's any change. Any change at all. Promise us. And take this, said Níls, slipping a bottle of whisky into my bag. You never know.

I was the only person on the beach. I always was. I turned away from the thumping surf and ran towards the body, very excited. I could feel my blood pulsing through me and imagined it foamy and full of bubbles, like hot tomato soup. My brain felt like it had another life outside my head, like a satellite dish, like part of it was in my skull but part of it was on another planet or star, or somewhere out there in infinity, orbiting the earth. Tiny droplets of sea spray frizzed my hair as I ran. One day, I

thought, I'll shave all this hair off. I'll be clipped like the sheep and I'll never have to use a comb again.

The summer sky felt like a gift. The months of winter darkness were over now for these few short, wondrous weeks. The sleet, the ice, the shin-deep slurry, the exhausted sheep, the hours of sitting in front of the TV with my parents, my mama's tissues filled with bright red spit, and my papa's dull, bewildered, eyes, gazing at the screen, not a clue anymore what he was even looking at, all over now, for a few golden weeks. I would not be kept inside like a wintering cow. I would not sleep in my bed, would not be tethered to routine, would not be a slave to age and illness.

I stopped running. I could taste salt. I licked it from my top lip. The salt was laced with the stink of decay.

I walked slowly around the body, calming myself, studying the colours, the scarlets and the blacks, the pale fatty yellows, the gashes and teeth marks from the birds and foxes. The huge fluked tail spread out over a tangle of old fishing nets. I imagined the tail moving through the ocean, the force of it pushing the whale deeper and deeper, pushing the wild and wondrous whale far away across continents, across the whole world. I ran my hand along his cold black skin, smelled the death and mammal of him, imagined his life free from this beach of seaweed and netting and plastic bottles.

The whale's jaw hung open, as if he'd died mid-song. His teeth protruded from the flesh: long yellow-white pegs, maybe two dozen of them. I touched his cheek, ran the palm of my hand over the strange rough skin, then took my scarf and knife from my backpack. The extractions would be messy, and the smell was rotten. I wrapped the scarf over my nose and mouth, leaned into the whale's jaw and began to cut.

The sky shifted from gold to blue-white. I checked my watch. I had to go. Above me, snipe were tumbling through the air, their tails feathers whirring and whistling. They made a thin, feminine, ghostly tune, I thought, almost as if they were mourning. I carefully wrapped the whale's teeth in an old t-shirt. I stroked his cheek again, pressed my own against it and willed him a thank you.

The teeth could be very valuable, to the right person. I would take them home and clean them, then think about what to do with them. I would check on ma and pa, have a bath, get something to eat. I jogged back across the seaweed, away from the cliffs, then down to the surf and along the hard sand for fifteen minutes. I could cover this distance easily, like a fox. It was nothing. When I reached the mouth of the river and the sand turned into thin grass and gravel, I took the track inland, away from the beach. After two minutes, I could no longer hear the sea.

The door was unlocked, which was unusual. I ran into the kitchen calling hi, I'm back, I've got something to show you, and pulled the t-shirt out of my bag. I tipped the twenty-two teeth into the washing up bowl, then filled a kettle, went to the cupboard and got myself some crackers and a tin of tuna. I called again as the kettle boiled, louder. I've got something to show you. I waited. I let the kettle click off and listened. I went through the house. I climbed the stairs slowly, still calling but halfway up I felt a catch in my voice. I stopped on the landing and listened. I called one more time, I've got something to show you, but I was, I knew it now, speaking into empty air.

I stepped into my parents' room. My ma's oxygen tank was by the dressing table. The bed had been stripped down to the bare mattress. Packs of my ma's medication sat on one side of it, a box of papa's nappies on the other. The window had been opened a little way.

I loved the view from this room, over to the river mouth and estuary, the snowy ridges of the fjords resting like a giant's knuckles on the water's edge. I had a clear memory of climbing out of this window as a child, maybe four or five years old, and lowering myself onto the turf roof below. Papa appeared at the window, laughing and scolding as he reached down to pull me back up, and now years later, that memory and a thousand others crashed to the front of my head, filled my ears, turned my hot, soupy blood into a flash flood.

Two envelopes rested against the dressing table mirror, one of them large and heavy and addressed to Arthúr and Níls. The other had my name written in ma's handwriting, surrounded by kisses. I picked it up, and as I did I felt the word 'no' forming itself on my lips and tongue but I don't remember if I actually made any sound at all.

As time changed its shape and texture, and as the snipe fell whistling through the sky, I sat on my parents' bed and read the letter, which began, 'To our dearest, bravest Siggy.'

*

The telephone had been ringing - for how long I had no idea. I was dreaming of my parents, dreaming they were standing in the sea, laughing and splashing around like children. I had run up to them. Jumped in. My ma looked much younger, maybe even my age. My pa said he had a yellow car that went underwater. I knew I was trying to make him talk sense, make him talk to me about anything except the yellow car but that was all he would say. It goes underwater. It goes underwater.

I pushed the dream to a place where I could later revisit it and focused on the incessant, infuriating ringing. 'Hello?'

'Sigmunda?' The voice was male.

I frowned. 'Who's this?'

'It's me. Ras.'

I leaned back on the couch and focused on the study window, on the grey clouds beyond. Two whooper swans appeared, flying low, their thick necks rippling. 'Hello, Rasmus.'

'Hello. I know. It's been a while.'

I stood up and walked to the window, tucking the phone between my chin and shoulder. I lifted the latch and pushed the window open. The swans were heading over the estuary and out to sea. 'Yes. Yes it has.'

'You must be all grown up now.'

'You must be old.'

'Smart.' Music played behind Rasmus's voice, something fast, repetitive. 'So, how are you? You OK? Considering?'

Was I OK? Considering? The air was clean and cold. I felt the dream slipping further away and worried that I wouldn't be able to fetch it back. Of course I was OK, considering. 'Where are you?' I asked.

'Ísafjördur.'

Way too close. I turned from the window and sat back down on the couch. 'What do you want?'

'Are you there by yourself?' Rasmus asked. 'I'm walking upstairs, it's quieter up here. Hold on.'

I held on. I pictured Ras as I had last seen him. Here, in this house, in the kitchen, ten years ago, a bitter afternoon. A car had arrived in the yard, and I'd ignored it, I was busy drawing, but there had been shouting. I didn't understand why, my parents never shouted, at least not in anger, so I'd run from my room to see what all the fuss was about. Rasmus was standing by the stove, wearing a heavy black coat, a black hat, black everything. He'd been saying something, I had no idea what, and then he'd seen me in the doorway and gone silent. He'd stared at me, narrow-eyed, and the excitement I'd felt on realising he was visiting changed to a different feeling. He said something loud and crude to papa. Mama had yelled that he was papa's son, not hers, and she would not have him in the house. The police, she said, she was calling the police. Papa realised I was standing in the doorway, listening. He shouted for mama to take me outside, take me away. He would deal with it. And mama had scooped me up, and we had crossed the yard and headed down to the estuary. Only once had we reached the beach had mama let go of me, and we both sat on a washed up tree trunk until mama had stared at the waves for long enough.

'The pig,' mama said, trying to light a cigarette. 'The fucking, fucking pig. Jesus Christ.' The sea in front of us was a bright mercurial silver.

'Why is he a fucking pig?' I asked. I remember the wind being sharp enough to bring tears to my eyes, and although I wasn't crying, mama rubbed her thumb across my cheek.

'Don't use that language, *elskan*. He hurt Ursula. You know Ursula. Nice Ursula. From my work.'

I knew Ursula. 'Why did he hurt her?'

'Because he's a fucking pig.'

I was ten, Rasmus twenty-two.

'That's better,' Rasmus said. 'So. Are you there by yourself?'

'Arthúr and Níls come every few days.'

'Batman and Robin? My God.'

'They're very good to me. I wouldn't have -' I stopped. 'Wouldn't have what? Survived? Been allowed to stay? 'They're wonderful.'

'Well whoop-de-do.'

'Whoop-de-do?'

A long pause. 'Never mind.'

I'd guessed what he wanted. 'You haven't been here for years.'

'He was my father, too.'

'You didn't even come to their funerals.'

I heard him breathing. 'That was not my fault!'

A couple of weeks ago I'd found a seal's spine and ribcage on the rocks under the cliffs. I'd brought it home and now had it drying on a table by the fireplace, a new project. I looked beyond the ribcage and saw ma and pa, their images shimmering like they were in some old movie. They wore necklaces of bones and yellow feathers and were saying something I couldn't hear. As they spoke they shook their heads over and over, and then they shook their whole bodies, just like dogs fresh out of the sea.

Rasmus made his voice chatty and light. 'Anyway. How old are you now, Sig?'

He should know, he should know. 'Almost twenty-one.'

'Yeah, of course. Twenty-one. And what are you doing? Studying? Working? Got a boyfriend out there?'

A boyfriend. I picked up my magnifying glass and squinted through it. The whole room changed, like I was looking at it from under water.

The dream. I grasped at it and felt a fraction of understanding. Then it was gone.

'Both. I'm doing both.'

'What do you mean, both? Boys and girls?'

'I'm working and I'm studying. Here. On the farm.'

'Studying what exactly? Sheep? You study sheep and grass and sheep shit and snow?'

There were no sheep, not now. No more sheep, no more shit, no more sticking a struggling lamb's neck.

'Hey. I asked you a question.'

And I heard the thing in Rasmus's voice then, and I remembered it. A splinter driven under a fingernail. I held the phone away from my ear for a moment and looked at it. I put down the magnifying glass. Ma and pa stared at me, still shaking their heads.

'Bones and teeth. I study bones and teeth. I find them and - ,' I searched to find the right words, '- I change them.'

I waited for Rasmus's reply but none came.

'Scrimshaw,' I said. 'It's called scrimshaw.'

Rasmus arrived two weeks after the phone call. He was more or less as I remembered him, even down to the black coat and hat, the black jumper, black jeans. He had aged, of course, we both had. For me, the last ten years had seen my body experience a nondescript puberty and evolve into the frame I now inhabit. The truth is that is very few people do in fact ever look at me, but nonetheless I've always thought it bizarre to fuss about my hair or fingernails or eyebrows in the way that preoccupies so many of my gender. I eat enough. I sleep. I exist, and one day I will not.

But the years in prison had turned Rasmus grey. His whole being seemed infused with grey, saturated with it. It wasn't the soft, cobwebby grey you see around the whiskers of a seal pup, or even the thrilling, gunmetal grey of a January storm cloud. It was the grey of a skin that saw no sunlight, that received no nourishment, had no vigour.

He sat at the kitchen table. 'Is there anything to eat?' he asked.

'Yes, of course,' I said.

He waited.

'In the cupboard,' I said.

He stood up quickly, huffing and puffing. 'You look like someone from a concentration camp,' he said.

I left him to his rummaging and went to my study, to the seal's ribcage. Such a rare and beautiful find, the spine completely intact, each vertebrae perfectly aligned to the next. I stroked the curved bones, each one a cool, crescent moon. I would take my time with it.

'This is where you do your skeleton stuff, then?'

I jumped. Rasmus was behind me. I turned, my smallest drill in my hand. He held a plate of cheese and crackers.

'What the hell?' He stepped past me, not waiting for an answer.

'Don't touch,' I said. 'Do not touch anything.'

Rasmus walked around the study, chewing, dropping bits of cracker onto my surfaces. He went over to the glass cabinet, bent down to peer into it and put the plate onto the floor. He opened the cabinet door and picked up one of the whale's teeth. He squinted at it, held it up to the light, rolled it around in his hand. He was silent for a long while, then stared at me. 'Are you serious? Is this - pa?'

'I said don't touch. Please put it back.'

But Rasmus held onto the tooth, staring at me, then back at the tooth, like a cartoon. He opened both cabinet doors wide and began to pick up all the other teeth lined up there. 'What are these? Are they from a horse? A cow?' he asked, his back to me.

The air in the study felt thick with his stupidity.

'They're from a sperm whale. There's a clear difference. Please put them back.'

This project, this story, was finished. I hadn't known I was going to do such a thing, but after I'd read the letter with the kisses all over it, after I'd called Arthúr and Níls, and Arthúr had said over and over again, stay in the bedroom, Siggy, love, just stay there, wait for us, do not go out to the barn, do you understand, do not go out to the barn, on no account -

I'd gone out to the barn.

When the helicopter and the police and the ambulance had all finally left, when the reports had been written and the coffins were in the earth, I spent months with Arthúr and Níls while everyone wondered what to do with me. When eventually I was allowed to return home, to unlock my own front door, I stepped back into the kitchen and my whale's teeth were still in the sink.

This project, this story of my ma and pa, had taken me the best part of three years, much longer than I had predicted, but it was my first attempt and I had made some stupid mistakes. A drill piece that was too big and had shattered my first effort, an image of my ma sitting on a piece of driftwood, looking out to sea. An ink solution that was too dark and bled through an outline of my pa's beard. A bad temper and a slipping hand causing a deep scrape across an image of the moon rising behind the barn. I had learned from these mistakes, of course. I'd had no choice.

But I had not expected that Rasmus would return here, let alone be dropping cracker crumbs on my surfaces.

He went and sat on the couch, holding a tooth. It was the one with an image of me running across the beach towards the whale. He spun it around on his palm.

'It was your fault, really,' he said, smiling a little. 'When you think about it.'

'Please give me the tooth,' I said. 'It's not for playing with.'

'Don't you feel guilty, Sig?' he asked. 'Not even a little bit?'

I put out my hand. 'I said give it to me.'

'They just couldn't cope,' he wrapped an imaginary rope around his neck and yanked it, 'with looking after you.'

'Give it to me.'

'Thing is,' he said, still spinning the tooth, 'this is my property, now, in principle. I've made enquiries. So you need to be thinking about, you know. Moving on.'

No. I tipped my head back, clenched my fists. 'Are you deaf?' I screamed. 'Are you deaf? Are you? Are you?'

He hadn't expected me to scream. He stood up. 'Christ,' he said. 'Here.' He threw the tooth across the study, much too quickly for me to catch it. It hit the wall and landed on the floor by the book case. 'Fetch,' he laughed. 'There's a good girl.'

I didn't fetch. I watched his face. His eyes moved away from mine, looking behind me, and widened. A flush of pink appeared across his cheeks. I stayed very still and I suspected that right then he was having some very, very complicated thoughts.

'Chlamydia,' Ursula said, coming into the study and standing beside me. She smelled of flowers and soap. She squeezed my hand then went to my desk and picked up one of my etching needles. 'And double incontinence, for a while. That was fun.'

I could almost see the question mark above Rasmus's head. 'Wh -?' he started, but he couldn't find any suitable words.

Ursula turned and walked out of the study. Rasmus followed her into the kitchen and they stood facing each other. For a moment the only thing that moved was a bluebottle that had begun to buzz dementedly against the window.

Rasmus spoke first. 'I was locked up because of you,' he said. 'Locked up like a dog.'

Ursula's face was unreadable. 'Siggy? Would you mind?' She handed me the etching needle, then went to the cupboard.

I moved to stand beside Rasmus.

Ursula reappeared, unravelling a roll of bin liners. 'And I lost an ovary.' She frowned. 'Sounds like a bad comedy, doesn't it? Where's my ovary? I knew I had it this morning? I can't think where I put it. Typical, eh, Rasmus? Silly, forgetful little woman.'

Ursula ripped the bags off the roll, slowly, one by one.

Long moments passed. The bluebottle fell silent. I felt my mouth drying and suddenly longed for water.

Rasmus stepped closer to Ursula. 'No. You loved it. You were wet through,' he said.

Another step closer. 'I felt it. You *came*.'

Ursula didn't move. She ripped another bag from the roll.

'Like a dog,' Rasmus whispered. 'You *kunta*.' He made a sudden grab for Ursula but she ducked easily to one side and he lurched towards the kitchen table. Ursula nodded quickly at me, and honestly it was as easy as pushing a finger into pastry. The skin resisted for a brief moment, then the etching needle slid into the back of Rasmus's neck between his first and second vertebrae, and as he made to grab Ursula again I pushed harder, and down the needle went, down into his spine, into the spinal cord.

I let go. Rasmus crumpled to the floor, his eyes rolling, a kind of hissing sound coming from his throat. His feet kicked a little and then became still.

Ursula had tears in her eyes but her voice was steady. 'And an abortion. A little girl. I don't know why I needed to know.' She handed me half a dozen or so bin bags.

Arthúr and Níls came later that evening, with overalls, whisky and muscle power.

The following morning Arthúr drove us down the track to the estuary in his 4x4.

When the river met the ocean, he turned left and drove across the beach until we reached the line of seaweed. A cold wind was blowing off the sea and the sand lifted up and danced away with every footstep we took. The whale's body had decomposed to almost pure skeleton, its flesh and fat now in the bodies of the birds and foxes and a million microorganisms. Arthúr and Níls lifted Rasmus from the back of the 4x4. They pulled the bin bags off him then dragged him across the sand and

laid him down beside the whale. Ursula whispered some words to the sky.

We began to cover him in seaweed. A hundred flies and hoppers leapt up around us, disturbed by our actions. Rasmus blinked at me, his eyes still rolling wildly, and then his face was gone, so easily, so gently, covered with more and more seaweed.

Every moment passed in silence apart from our breathing, apart from the thumping of the surf, and the snipe flying far above our heads, dipping and diving and their tail feathers whirring and then –

and then I heard them before I saw them, the beating wings of the two whooper swans, the otherworldly wump wump of air whistling over feathers, momentarily above me, flashes of yellow across their bills, their shining eyes meeting mine, their thick necks rippling, their bodies huge and strong and steady and then they were away out to sea, out over the churning grey ocean and I stared and stared and stared at them until I could see nothing, nothing at all.