

Sample Translation

Crossing Over

(Oversteken)

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Chapter 1

Never is a very long time, I know that. Yet I know for sure that I'll never forget this. Never! The river, the ghost on top of the tent and the yellow truck coming to our rescue. Not to mention all the rest.

This is a story about slices of troll-bread. And about two different stones. But it wasn't until the last moment that I understood that myself.

My mother had fallen in love again, that's how it all began. I already knew how it was going to end. Like the last time and the last time but one and the time before that. The same way it always ended.

My mother wasn't thinking of those other times. She was only thinking of Bjarni. 'Well?' she asked. 'You like him?'

I shrugged.

It had been Bjarni's first visit. My mother had just finished waving him goodbye.

'We'll be seeing more of him, I suppose,' she said. 'That's why it's important. Come on, tell me what you think of him.'

I pretended I needed a long think.

'Nothing?' my mum asked.

'He has a strange name,' I said.

'Bjarni is his first name. Would you like to hear the rest as well?'

I was about to say no, but actually I was curious. 'Well?'

'Einar Steinarsson.'

'Be serious.'

'That is his real name,' my mum said. 'It's an Icelandic name. Don't blame me.'

'Bjarni Einar?'

'Steinarsson,' my mum said. 'He's having dinner here tomorrow.'

'Must he really?'

‘Yes, Meetje,’ my mum said. ‘He definitely must.’

Bjarni had dinner with us the next day. Then he had dinner once again and then he stayed the night. On my birthday I found him standing at my bedside, singing along with my mother. He sang out of tune and shouted hooray more often than he should. I feared he might continue up to twelve times. Fortunately my mum stopped him when he was halfway through.

He had bought me a diary. A fat pink exercise book with two little hooks attached to the covers. It had a little lock.

I pulled the duvet up to my chin, as I didn’t want Bjarni to see my pyjamas. I said: ‘Thanks,’ but I never for a moment considered keeping a diary. If I did, I would first need to do some thinking, then write down my own thoughts and then read what I had written down. And all for my own sake.

My mother’s boyfriends were all alike. They were all just as bad. They wanted a lie-in on Sunday mornings and they walked about in the bathroom in their underpants. They kissed my mother and hugged her while she was making dinner. Or they wanted to do the cooking themselves and then my mother was supposed to sit on the sofa with a glass of wine.

[...]

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The next morning my mum woke me up. ‘It’s still cold,’ she said. ‘I’d dress up warm if I were you.’

Lying on my back I wriggled into my jeans. Then I put my sweatshirt on. And my coat on top of that.

Outside, on a little table, there was a thermos of tea. Bjarni poured me a cup. He offered me skyr in a plastic bowl. There was a big squirt of purple goo on it.

‘Blueberries,’ my mum said. ‘Bláberja.’

Bjarni smiled at her.

Maybe mum had been practising, too. ‘Bláberja, bláberja, bláberja.’

I took a big spoonful. Not bad at all.

‘Did you sleep well?’ mum said.

‘Excellent,’ I said. I glanced at Bjarni, who winked at me.

‘Tell me what happened next,’ I said. ‘To Grettir.’

‘No, he won’t,’ my mother said. ‘Not over breakfast.’

‘But you’re finished,’ I said.

Bjarni hesitated. He sat down in a little folding chair. ‘Nothing wrong with a bit of saga for breakfast.’ He told us about the time Grettir was exiled. He was to leave Iceland and stay in a strange country for three years. There he went up to a burial-mound to fight a corpse. That really was something, for nobody else was brave enough to fight it. There was a treasure in the burial-mound. Grettir beheaded the corpse and took the treasure. And of course he made up a poem about it.

‘It went like this,’ I said: ‘One mighty blow and that was it! Head and body had been split.’

‘You’re a poet!’ Bjarni said.

‘How does it go on?’ I asked.

Bjarni told us about Grettir’s next fight. He defeated a whole band of men. They were called berserkers. Dangerous warriors. Fearless and as strong as bears they were. When they went berserk they had special powers, that’s how they got their name. When they were about to attack a farm, Grettir stepped in. He defended the farmers and flung his spear. He flung it with such force that the spear pierced one berserker and went right through the next, who had been standing close behind.

In the middle of the battle my mum left and sat in the Landrover.

‘She can’t take much,’ Bjarni said.

‘Fights aren’t her thing,’ I said.

Bjarni stared at a mountain ridge far away. ‘There’s always something,’ he said. ‘There’s always something that isn’t her thing.’

It puzzled me. One moment my mother and Bjarni were in love and the next something was all wrong.

I was afraid argument number three was coming up.

‘Does anything rhyme with berserkers?’ I asked

[...]

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There were two sleeping mats in my tent.

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ my mum asked. ‘I thought it would be fun, the two of us together.’

‘What about Bjarni?’

‘Bjarni has got his own tent. It’s fine by him.’

We crept into the tent one by one. There was little room after my mother had moved in. I had quite a job undressing and squeezing into my sleeping bag. Things kept getting in the way. I had flicked on my torch, but it rolled to the side and shone the wrong way. When we had settled down at last, I snuggled up to my mum. It felt strange, as we were in separate sleeping bags. We touched and yet we didn’t touch.

‘It seems a long time ago,’ my mum said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

She gave me a kiss. ‘Goodnight,’

‘Goodnight.’

I switched off the torch. My head was fuzzy and heavy with sleep. I was glowing all over, my body was as hot as a stove. The brook had filled me up with warmth.

I woke up in darkness. Dawn was still far away. The tentcloth was flapping about. Something was creaking. I knew it was the wind, but I couldn't help thinking: Glámur. He was on top of the roof haunting the place and he was about to come in. I thought of his eyes. Too creepy for words. Either Dutch or Icelandic. Where had the torch gone? I felt for it beside the bed. The ground sheet of the tent was cold and damp. There was nothing there.

'Mum,' I said.

She didn't hear me. She was sleeping quietly.

I wanted to wake her up. When I reached out to nudge her I thought of Bjarni. If I told my mum I was afraid, she would see through me at once and know it had something to do with the story. I withdrew my hand. It was important to stay calm. 'It is the wind,' I said.

'It is the wind, it is the wind.'

There was a deep sigh. The tent-cloth had stopped moving. For a few seconds there was only silence. Then something tugged the back of the tent violently.

I moved forward like a shot and unzipped the front. I ran to Bjarni's tent barefoot.

'Open up!' I shouted.

Bjarni woke up. He unzipped his tent and stuck out his head. I shoved him aside and wriggled in.

'What's the matter?' He sounded sleepy.

'Glámur.'

Bjarni lit a lamp. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Glámur.'

Bjarni yawned. 'He doesn't really exist.'

'I know he doesn't exist,' I said. But there was a noise behind the tent and then I thought it was him.'

'It was the wind.'

Bjarni's sweater was lying on the ground. I picked it up and wrapped it around me. 'It didn't seem like the wind to me.'

‘But it was. The rest is only a story.’

‘I was scared,’ I said.

‘There’s no need for that,’ Bjarni said. ‘It’s nothing at all. Just the wind. Now hurry up, back to your bed.’

In Bjarni’s tent Glámur was only a story. In mine he was causing all sorts of trouble.

‘I want to sleep here with you,’ I said.

‘No,’ Bjarni said. ‘No, you can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘No way. You just can’t.’

Tears were lying in wait behind my eyes. I felt such a baby, crying for nothing.

‘Please,’ Bjarni said. He grabbed the sweater.

I clung on to it.

‘Come on. Weren’t you supposed to be such a tough cookie? And your mother is there, isn’t she?’

The tears escaped. There was no stopping them.

Bjarni’s hand brushed my cheek. ‘Meetje?’ he asked. ‘It wasn’t all that scary, was it?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘So what is making you cry?’

I shrugged, as I didn’t know why I was crying.

‘I saw that boy,’ Bjarni said. ‘When I went out to brush my teeth. He thought I was your dad. But I’m not your dad. Do you get that? I want...’ He looked me in the eye. ‘I just don’t want to complicate things.’

Somebody was walking by the tent. I heard my mother’s voice. ‘What’s up?’

‘Meta is in here,’ Bjarni said. ‘She had a bad dream.’

My mum knelt down at the entrance. She looked inside. ‘What dream?’

‘About the river,’ I hastened to say. ‘About me falling in.’

‘Why didn’t you wake me up then?’ my mother said.

‘Bjarni was already awake,’ I said.

‘Now I am awake, too,’ she said. ‘Come along.’

I crawled out and went with her. The wind was freezing.

‘You aren’t wearing shoes,’ my mother said. In your bare feet, Meetje! What on earth got into you? Can’t I ever let you out of my sight?’