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The Ice Lands

Written by Steinar Bragi

Translated by Lorenza Garcia

Published by Macmillan

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THE ICE LANDS

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Translated by Lorenza Garcia

MACMILLAN



First published 2016 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-9881-6

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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THE DESERT

1

ICELANDIC FLORA

Hrafn

Over the highlands all was still. The shadows on the horizon darkened, growing sharper against the sky, before dissolving into the night.

All four of them were silent. The only sound was a low murmur coming from the radio. On the back seat, Vigdís was reading a book, while Anna, awake after a brief nap, had just opened a beer. Between them lay Trigger, Anna's Icelandic sheepdog, which she had acquired a few months before.

'Let's play I Spy,' said Anna, breaking the silence. 'I think of a thing, inside or outside the jeep, on the road or the sands . . .'

'Yeah, I'd forgotten that one,' Egill broke in, his voice oozing a childlike eagerness after three beers and a dozen swigs from his hip flask.

'Interesting,' said Hrafn, ignoring Egill. He glanced at Anna in the rear-view mirror, her dark silhouette and the faint glimmer of her eyes. 'What do you mean by "thing"? Would it count if I thought of your boyfriend's integrity, or of blood?'

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‘Sicko,’ replied Anna mockingly.

Egill gazed out of the passenger window, and it occurred to Hrafn that he might be looking in the wing mirror, at Vigdís, who was sitting behind him.

‘No, blood doesn’t count. Only things you can see around you are allowed.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Vigdís, closing the book she had been immersed in: *Icelandic Flora*. Anna explained the rules of the game to her and announced that she would start.

‘Go for it!’ said Egill, and the game commenced.

Hrafn kept his eyes on the road, which was becoming increasingly difficult to see as darkness set in. The summer evenings were no longer as light, and the sky grew dim for a few hours now at night. Winter was starting to impinge on his thoughts, rising like a huge wave on the horizon, fuelling the anxiety he had been experiencing in recent days. Since noon, he had felt an overwhelming urge to drive back to town as fast as he could.

‘The driver’s eyes?’ asked Vigdís, as the jeep rolled between the marker posts that glowed in the dark.

Hrafn pressed the button to open his window, poked his head out and saw that the sky was filled with unusually low, thick clouds. But then they were in the *highlands*.

‘Do you think you’ll find the answer up in the clouds?’ Anna’s voice rang out behind him, laughing.

‘You’ve got to help me here, guys,’ said Vigdís. ‘I’ve run out of ideas.’

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‘Marker posts,’ Hrafn suggested, closing the window again. Anna said no. *Arctic winter*, he thought. Was that a thing? They could see signs of it all around them, at any rate. Rocks cleaved apart by ice, no greenery, no colours, no *flora*. Only sand and gravel in varying shades of black and grey.

Soon the clouds sank to the ground, and they drove straight into them. The jeep’s headlights cut two cones in the fog, which turned white but remained dark grey to the sides across the black sands. Visibility was only ten or twenty metres, and Hrafn’s eyes began to smart from staring into the fog. He wouldn’t have minded a rest from driving, but Egill was too drunk to take the wheel, and as for the girls, he scarcely trusted them in town let alone out there on the sands.

He stopped to take a piss outside and wake himself up, and stared into the thickening fog as its cold moistness settled on his face. None of them had any experience of travelling in the mountains, or the remotest idea what to do if the jeep broke down. Vigdís had pointed that out when they were planning the trip, but he and Egill had reassured her with some nonsense they couldn’t deliver on, and had installed a satnav, which went on the blink soon after they left Askja, although they couldn’t be sure as none of them really knew how it worked.

Hrafn imagined how long a person might survive out there on the sands. A few days in summer, providing they had access to water and shelter from the wind, but in winter at most a few hours, or even minutes. The fear of being

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lost would increase blood flow to the skin, cooling the body; they would become disoriented, the tension would be too much for their system and they would basically die of fright.

He climbed back into the driver's seat and set off again. The marker posts shone blankly through the fog like deep-sea fish eyes. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Egill light a cigarette then thrust the hip flask into his face yet again, and heard him laugh. They were still absorbed in their game, and it struck him how absurd this was, the four of them gliding across the sands north of Vatnajökull, through darkness and fog, as if nothing were more natural; swigging Mexican beer, dressed in summer clothes in the heat they controlled by turning a knob on the dashboard, to the sound of music; borne along, motionless, across the landscape, oblivious to the crunch and rasp of tyres rolling over gravel, without a care. Not about the *trip* at any rate, but rather about something completely different: their relationships, what someone said or did to them once, yesterday or twenty years ago, or about their bank balance, as they watched the landscape go by outside . . .

Emerging from his reverie, Hrafn tried to focus on the road, but sensed instantly that something had changed. He drove on for a few minutes, steering in one direction then the other, before slowing down and finally coming to a halt.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Egill.

‘Can you lot see any marker posts?’

Hrafn tried to remember when he last saw one, but

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couldn't. For a while now, they had started to become more spaced out as the fog thickened.

'Fuck,' said Egill, sitting up in his seat and staring through the window. Anna appeared between the front seats and asked if they were lost.

'I wouldn't mind if we were,' she added. 'Lost in the fog, like in an adventure story.'

'How long is it since we saw a post?' Hrafn asked, looking at Vigdís in the rear-view mirror. She raised an eyebrow.

'No idea,' she said. 'I was busy playing the game.'

Hrafn gazed ahead into the lights at the pale wisps of fog, stepped on the accelerator and moved off again slowly.

'How did you manage to lose the road?' asked Egill.

'I'm sure we'll find it again,' said Anna, leaning through the seats.

The smell of alcohol on her breath was pungent, overpowering. They couldn't have left the road that long ago. Hrafn had the vague impression that he had turned a bit too far to the left, which meant the road had to be on their right.

He swung the wheel to the right and tried to hold his course. Vigdís asked what he was doing and he explained.

'Then we'll just have to hope the *road* doesn't also bend to the right,' she said, and Anna giggled.

Hrafn kept driving until he was sure he had gone too far for the road to be on their right. What's more, he had doubtless turned the wheel so sharply that they had gone round in a circle, albeit a smallish one – possibly several. The others were too drunk to notice, or they didn't care.

He stopped the car again, switching off the radio so that

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he could concentrate better, and reached for the compass in the glove compartment.

‘That’s that, then,’ drawled Egill. ‘No mercy.’

Hrafn placed the compass in his lap and set off towards the east.

‘Why are you doing that?’ asked Anna.

‘So that we don’t drive round in circles,’ he said, looking alternately at the compass and at the sands ahead of them.

‘But are we driving in the right direction?’ asked Vigdís.

‘The road we were on was north–south,’ he said. ‘I know we didn’t veer off to the east. That means we are to the west of the road, and we’re heading east to find it again. Do you agree?’

Vigdís raised her eyebrows again, and Hrafn had the impression that she was irritated.

‘It sounds logical,’ she said. ‘Unless of course we drive back across the road between two marker posts without realizing it . . .’

‘Then we’d better keep our eyes peeled, hadn’t we? You two look to the right and we’ll look the other way.’

His old despair was starting to resurface, his claustrophobia. He wound his window down and saw the fog continuing to thicken, as the stench of alcohol congealed . . .

‘How did you manage to lose the fucking road?’

Aware of Egill whingeing beside him, Hrafn decided he was fed up with ignoring him.

‘Why did *you* lose it? Aren’t you sitting next to me staring out of the same fucking window?’

‘Yeah, but I’m not *driving*, am I?’

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‘Now, boys,’ said Vigdís, touching Hrafn’s shoulder, ‘let’s calm down, take a deep breath or something. It’ll all work out, and sooner than we think.’

They fell silent. The dog was sitting up on its haunches, and occasionally gave a low whimper as the hiss of sand beneath the tyres reached them through the open window. Hrafn scanned the darkness on his side, but saw nothing. After driving east for ten minutes, he no longer knew what to do for the best. Remembering his first instinct, it occurred to him that he hadn’t driven far enough west, and he glanced down at the compass to make sure they were heading in the right direction. Surely if they stayed on course they would end up finding the road again.

‘Are there any ravines or crevasses around here?’ said Anna. ‘Shouldn’t you put your seat belt on, Egill?’

‘Or quicksand,’ said Vigdís.

‘Ugh. You mean the ground might swallow us up?’

‘Yes. They dug up some horses around here dating back to the Middle Ages, perfectly preserved. And men too.’

‘A jeep would be a great haul. With four passengers, a dog, mobile phones, text messages and fillings. A specimen of twenty-first-century life preserved for later generations.’ They laughed.

There was no sign of the marker posts or the road. Rather than turn round and risk being questioned about whether he was doing the right thing, Hrafn decided to keep going east; they should probably stop and wait for a couple of hours until it got light, or until the fog lifted. On the other hand, that would be incredibly stupid if the road was only

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a few metres away. He drove on. He didn't want to give up too soon, or perhaps he had he lost all sense of time, was caught up in his thoughts – either that or he didn't care. Perhaps none of them did, he reflected, as they stared silently into the fog, which was grey at the edges and illuminated in the centre, giving Hrafn the impression that he was driving through a shiny white opening, an ever-deepening tunnel.

At some point he glimpsed a faint, golden light through the fog. Almost instinctively, he turned towards it, gripping the wheel tightly. The darkness began to swirl about them, and he murmured to himself, squinting at the light, which disappeared suddenly as something came hurtling out of the fog and crashed into the jeep.

2

ON ALL FOURS

Hrafn

The windscreen shattered, cracks spreading across its surface, as a white bubble expanded over the world, swallowing up his head. Inside the bubble were luminous fish – whole banks of tiny fish with piercing red eyes fixed on him. Ejected from the bubble, Hrafn saw Egill hit the passenger window; a red trickle ran down his cheek as he flew out of his seat, a grin on his face.

Now there is blood, Hrafn thought as the car listed to one side, and he felt the shock absorbers judder before everything went quiet. He took a deep breath, blinked and was aware of a pain in his chest where the seat belt was cutting into him. The air bubble had vanished. The jeep was filled with a grey vapour that tasted of petrol, and white specks floated in the air. Raising his hands to his face, he felt for any shards of glass, and found none. Then he undid his seat belt and all at once found himself outside the car, the fresh air flowing into his lungs.

The first thing he did was reach into the back seat and help Vigdís out. She assured him she was all right. Anna was

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screaming out Egill's name as he lay, now slumped over the driver's seat. The window on his side was also broken.

Beyond the car, the darkness had congealed, like a great rock stretching up to the sky, looming over them, sinister and silent. Hrafn wondered when the sun would come up, whether it would manage to scale this black colossus, as he dragged Egill from the jeep and laid him out flat on the sand. The dog ran yelping in circles around them.

Vigdís knelt beside Egill and shouted at Hrafn to fetch the first-aid kit from the boot. A light went on in the upper part of the rock, one light then two.

'He's only been knocked out,' he heard Vigdís say as he passed her a bottle of surgical spirit. Anna cradled Egill's head while Vigdís wound a piece of gauze around it and staunched the blood.

The headlights were smashed and had gone out. The grey vapour inside the car had dissolved and was now pouring out from under the crumpled bonnet. Hrafn crouched down beside the front tyre that wasn't plunged into darkness, and heard a faint, steady hiss, as though an animal had crawled beneath the car to hide.

The fog in his head began to clear, and he glimpsed the outline of a house, a black house on the black sands, into which they had driven. He heard the sound of soft, unsteady footsteps and saw a beam of light dart across the sand. The dog barked. Someone appeared from behind the corner of the house and shone a torch at them.

'Who's there?' a woman's voice enquired out of the darkness.

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Vigdís replied, saying they needed help. The beam alighted on Egill's bloody head, and then a second torch appeared out of the darkness. The woman's voice gave a groan, and Hrafn could make out her shape against the light – hunched back, wispy hair – and behind her a scrawny old man, smiling the way Egill had when he hit the window.

'Into the house,' a voice said.

'Into the house,' the crone repeated and told them to hurry, swinging her torch and scolding the old man. Anna was sobbing. Hrafn picked Egill up under the arms while Vigdís held his ankles. Between them they carried him round the corner, up a steep flight of stone steps and into the house.

The old woman beckoned them into the front room, where they laid Egill out on the floor. He started to come round, mumbling incoherently and smiling with his eyes closed. Anna called out his name.

Hrafn felt Vigdís loom close to his face, almost as if the world had become two-dimensional, and she asked him if he was all right.

'I think so, a bit dazed,' he said, and they clutched hold of one another. Over Vigdís's shoulder he could see the old woman tottering around what looked like a kitchen.

'How about you?'

Vigdís told him that she was fine as far as she knew, disentangled herself from his arms and said she was going out to the car to fetch the first-aid kit and the whisky to perk Egill up.

Soon afterwards, there was a commotion, and Hrafn

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went through to the hallway where he found Vigdís arguing with the old woman, who was standing in front of the door, barring her way.

‘I need to get some things from the car,’ said Vigdís.

‘Are you locking us in?’ asked Hrafn. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

The old woman didn’t reply. She shook her head and gazed at them with wide-open, pleading eyes.

‘Let’s keep calm,’ said Vigdís, clasping Hrafn’s hand. ‘I understand that you and your husband are upset. We drive into your house in the middle of the night, make an almighty din and scare you half to death . . .’

‘Will you open this door!’ said Hrafn, sounding to himself as if he were on the verge of laughter. A strange atmosphere of hostility hung in the house; where it came from, or why, he didn’t know.

‘We’re all perfectly calm,’ said Vigdís, and Hrafn was astonished to see that she was looking at *him* not at the old woman.

Then he found himself back in the front room. Anna was leaning over Egill, speaking to him in hushed tones and gazing down at him like a lovesick girl . . . *Sick, sick people*, thought Hrafn. Somewhere in the house he heard the sound of hammering.

Vigdís appeared in the front room, dragging the dog behind her; it clearly wanted to go back outside. She passed Anna a plastic bag containing a blanket and a bottle of whisky. Anna spread the blanket over Egill, who had opened

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his eyes, and poured some whisky into the lid, which she placed to his lips.

Hrafn felt the old craving wash over him, and heard Egill cry out, pointing a finger at him and yelling angrily:

‘You did this on purpose! But you forgot the air balloon!’

He carried on babbling – drivel to which Hrafn turned a deaf ear. Anna leaned across Egill, preventing him and Hrafn from looking each other in the eye.

Appearing once more, Vigdís asked: ‘Are you sure you’re all right? You look rather pale.’

Hrafn nodded.

‘I’m positive. It was an accident, an unfortunate accident.’

He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and watched Anna tip more whisky into Egill’s mouth, before lifting the lid to her own lips.

‘But clearly it’s crazy and *preposterous* that we should be in this house, in this room.’

He remembered his mobile phone, fished it out of his shirt pocket and checked the reception.

‘Do you have a signal?’ asked Vigdís.

He shook his head and something told him that the thing they called a signal no longer meant anything, not after this – that it belonged to his former life, concerns of a previous existence. He could make no sense of his thoughts, which seemed to fuse with the buzz from the nicotine, and he decided to sit down and rest. He slumped onto the sofa, and heard Trigger the dog whining somewhere in the house.

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Vigdís brought him a glass of water, which he gulped down. His eyes followed her into the kitchen where she started to chat with the old woman. He glanced about the room, at the brown lino and the red blanket they had spread over Egill. There was a shelf lined with books, and a framed photograph hung on the wall. On a table next to the sofa was a vase of red, green and blue glass, with a pattern that seemed familiar.

They weren't guests there, he reflected as the ash from his cigarette dropped onto the blanket. Despite her insistence on locking them in, the old woman wanted to be rid of them as soon as possible. They weren't welcome.

He needed an ashtray, and, walking out of the room to find one, he noticed that the front door had been bolted.

'They've said we can stay,' said Vigdís when he came to a halt in the kitchen doorway. She and the old woman were sitting at a table. 'We'll spend the night here so that Egill can rest. And anyway, we can't see about the jeep until it gets light.'

'That's kind of you,' said Hrafn, beaming at the woman.

He introduced himself and she mumbled something in turn which sounded like Ása. When he asked her if that was an abbreviation of a longer name, she didn't reply. The old man seemed to have vanished.

'I assure you we won't hang around, Ása,' he said. 'I understand that we have to leave here as soon as possible.'

'Make yourselves at home,' said Ása. Her voice sounded elderly and shrill, and yet Hrafn had difficulty guessing her age. Her face was wrinkled and leathery, and her dark hair,

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which hung in a ponytail down her back, was streaked with grey. She could have been sixty, although her eyes possessed a sly watchfulness more appropriate to someone younger. 'You'll spend the night here,' she went on, nodding as if to convince herself. 'It's best for all. There's no other choice. I'll show you to your rooms, and in the morning all will be well and you can move on.'

'It must be awkward for you to have unexpected guests like this,' Vigdís said. 'You must have had a shock.'

'Possibly,' said Ása, rising from the table. 'That was an almighty bang.'

The old woman had what looked like eczema in the corners of her eyes, a raised patch of redness that ran down the sides of her nose to the corners of her mouth.

The rooms they were allotted were on the top floor, facing each other at the end of a long corridor. As instructed by Ása, Hrafn and Vigdís fetched a mattress from the cupboard, and put it in their room, which was empty apart from a small table and an oil lamp. Anna and Egill's room contained a chair, a table and a double bed for the patient to sleep in.

While the girls helped Egill upstairs, Hrafn waited in the kitchen. Finally, his dizziness was beginning to wear off. Ása told him that if their jeep wouldn't start the next day, there was one at the farm they could use to drive to the nearest village. Hrafn perked up even more when he heard this. Everything was going to be all right.

Ása provided them with blankets and pillows, lit the

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lamp in Hrafn and Vigdís's room, and told Anna she could keep Trigger in the room overnight, adding that she would be down in the kitchen if they needed anything.

Hrafn lay on the mattress on the floor, lit a cigarette and stared up at the ceiling. The mattress had a musty smell, but the lamp cast a warm glow on the walls. Out in the corridor, Anna and Vigdís discussed how safe it was for Egill to sleep after being knocked out, and why the front door had so many locks and bolts.

'Four. As if she were expecting . . .' Anna started to say, then lowered her voice.

Hrafn closed his eyes and heard Vigdís enter the room. She walked across the creaky wooden floor and lay down beside him on the mattress, put her arms around him and nestled her head in the crook of his neck. He stubbed his cigarette out on a cork on the floor and turned towards her.

'I don't mind if you have a drink,' he said.

'I know, but I don't feel like it – I'm too sleepy,' she said, after a brief silence. 'Of course I know you don't mind. Do you want one?'

Hrafn shook his head. With hindsight, it seemed odd that the old woman hadn't asked them about events leading up to the accident, or offered them refreshments: coffee, biscuits, a sandwich, even. What had happened to the time-honoured hospitality of country folk? On the other hand she had agreed they could stay the night, and yet it was obvious she was up to something, he could see it in her eyes. The old woman was *hiding* something, obliged to shelter them against her will.

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He opened his mouth to discuss it with Vigdís, but thought better of it. She undressed, spread the blanket over them and snuggled up to him. They started kissing; he told her he loved her, but she didn't reply. She gave a sigh, and before he knew it, he had unzipped his trousers and pressed himself into her. After a moment, she turned over onto her stomach, and he raised himself to his knees, holding onto the windowsill to steady himself.

Glancing out of the window, he noticed that the fog had lifted. Every now and then, the moon broke through the clouds, casting its pale light onto the sands. Towards the horizon, the glacier rose up from the plain, heavy, motionless and white, like an unexposed photograph.

Their bodies were moving faster, and somewhere far below him Vigdís let out a wail. As he came, Hrafn glimpsed someone streak across the sands outside: the misshapen, hunched figure of a man running from the house, stumbling and then disappearing into the night, on all fours.

Hrafn lay on his back on the mattress; the room was spinning before his eyes and his heart was pounding. *On all fours*, he thought, and soon afterwards he fell asleep.