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Opening Extract from...

Rupture

Written by Ragnar Jonasson

Translated by Quentin Bates

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1

It had been an evening like any other, spent stretched out on the sofa.

They lived in a little apartment on the ground floor of an old house at the western end of Reykjavík, on Ljósvallagata. It was positioned in the middle of an old-fashioned terrace of three houses, built back in the 1930s. Róbert sat up, rubbed his eyes and looked out of the window at the little front garden. It was getting dark. It was March, when weather of any description could be expected; right now it was raining. There was something comforting about the patter of raindrops against the window while he was safely ensconced indoors.

His studies weren't going badly. A mature student at twenty-eight, he was in the first year of an engineering degree. Numbers had always been one of his pleasures. His parents were accountants, living uptown in Árbær, and while his relationship with them had always been difficult, it was now almost non-existent; his lifestyle seemed to have no place in their formula for success. They had done what they could to steer him towards bookkeeping, which was fair enough, but he had struck out on his own.

Now he was at university, at last, and he hadn't even bothered to let the old folks know. Instead, he tried to focus on his studies, although these days his mind tended to wander to the Westfjords. He owned a small boat there, together with a couple of friends, and he was already looking forward to summer. It was so easy to forget

everything – good and bad – when he was out at sea. The rocking of the boat was a tonic for any stress and his spirit soared when he was enveloped by the complete peace. At the end of the month he'd be heading west to get the boat ready. For his friends, the trip to the fjords was a good excuse to go on a drinking binge. But not for Róbert. He had been dry now for two years – an abstinence that had become necessary after the period of serious drinking that began with the events that had unfolded on that fateful day eight years earlier.

It was a beautiful day. There was scarcely a breath of wind on the pitch, it was warm in the summer sun and there was a respectable crowd. They were on their way to a convincing win against an unconvincing opposition. Ahead of him lay training with the national youth team, and later that summer the possibility of a trial with a top Norwegian side. His agent had even mentioned interest from some of the teams lower down in the English leagues. The old man was as proud as hell of him. He had been a decent football player himself but never had the chance to play professionally. Now times had changed, there were more opportunities out there.

Five minutes were remaining when Róbert was passed the ball. He pushed past the defenders, and saw the goal and the fear on the goalkeeper's face. This was becoming a familiar experience; a five–nil victory loomed.

He didn't see the tackle coming, just heard the crack as his leg broke in three places and felt the shattering pain. He looked down, paralysed by the searing agony, and saw the open fracture.

It was a sight that was etched into his memory. The days spent in hospital passed in a fog, although he wouldn't forget the doctor telling him that his chances of playing football again – at a professional level, at any rate – were slim. So he gave it all up, and sought solace in the bottle; each drink quickly followed by another. The worst part was that, while he made a better recovery than the doctor

expected, by the time he was fit, it was too late to turn the clock back on his football career.

Now, though, things were better. He had Sunna, and little Kjartan had a place in his heart as well. But despite this, his heart harboured some dark memories, which he hoped he could keep hidden in the shadows.

It was well into the evening when Sunna came home, tapping at the window to let him know that she had forgotten her keys. She was as beautiful as ever, in black jeans and a grey roll-neck sweater. Raven hair, long and glossy, framed her strong face. To begin with, it had been her eyes that had enchanted him, closely followed by her magnificent figure. She was a dancer, and sometimes it was as if she danced rather than walked around their little apartment, a confident grace imbuing every movement.

He knew he had been lucky with this one. He had first chatted to her at a friend's birthday party, and they'd clicked instantly. They'd been together for six months now, and three months ago they had moved in together.

Sunna turned up the heating as she came in; she felt the cold more than he did.

'Cold outside,' she said. Indeed, the chill was creeping into the room. The big living-room window wasn't as airtight as it could have been, and there was no getting used to the constant draughts.

Life wasn't easy for them, even though their relationship was becoming stronger. She had a child, little Kjartan, from a previous relationship and was engaged in a bitter custody battle with Breki, the boy's father. To begin with, Breki and Sunna had agreed on joint custody, and at the moment Kjartan was spending some time with his father.

Now, though, Sunna had engaged a lawyer and was pressing for full custody. She was also exploring the possibility of continuing her dance studies in Britain, although this was not something that she and Róbert had discussed in depth. But it was also a piece of news that Breki would be unlikely to accept without a fight, so it looked as

if the whole matter would end up in court. Sunna believed she had a strong enough case, though, and that they would finally see Kjartan returned to her full time.

'Sit down, sweetheart,' Róbert said. 'There's pasta.'

'Mmm, great,' she said, curling up on the sofa.

Róbert fetched the food from the kitchen, bringing plates and glasses and a jug of water.

'I hope it tastes good,' he said. 'I'm still finding my way.'

'I'm so hungry it won't matter what it tastes like.'

He put on some relaxing music and sat down next to her.

She told him about her day – the rehearsals and the pressure she was under. Sunna was set on perfection, and hated to get anything wrong.

Róbert was satisfied that his pasta had been a success; nothing outstanding, but good enough.

Sunna got to her feet and took his hand. 'Stand up, my love,' she said. 'Time to dance.'

He stood up and wrapped his arms around her and they moved in time to a languid South American ballad. He slid a hand under her sweater and his fingertips stroked her back, unclipping her bra strap in one seamless movement. He was an expert at this.

'Hey, young man,' she said with mock sharpness, her eyes warm. 'What do you think you're up to?'

'Making the most of Kjartan being with his dad,' Róbert answered, and they moved into a long, deep kiss. The temperature between them was rising, as was the temperature in the room, and before long they were making their way to the bedroom.

Out of habit, Róbert pushed the door to and drew the curtains across the bedroom window overlooking the garden. However, none of these precautions stopped the sounds of their lovemaking carrying across to the apartment next door.

When everything was quiet again, he heard the indistinct slamming of a door, muffled by the hammering rain. His first thought was that it was the back door to the porch behind the old house.

Sunna sat up in alarm and glanced at him, disquiet in her eyes. He tried to stifle his own fear behind a show of bravado and, getting to his feet, ventured naked into the living room. It was empty.

But the back door was open, banging to and fro in the wind. He glanced quickly into the porch, just long enough to say that he had taken a look, and hurriedly pulled the door closed. A whole regiment of men could have been out there for all he knew, but he could make out nothing in the darkness.

He then went from one room to another, his heart beating harder and faster, but there were no unwelcome guests to be seen. It was just as well that Kjartan was not at home.

And then he noticed something that would keep him awake for the rest of the night.

He hurried through the living room, frightened for Sunna, terrified that something had happened to her. Holding his breath, he made his way to the bedroom to find her seated on the edge of the bed, pulling on a shirt. She smiled weakly, unable to hide her concern.

'It was nothing, sweetheart,' he said, hoping she would not notice the tremor in his voice. 'I forgot to lock the door after I took the rubbish out; didn't shut it properly behind me,' he lied. 'You know what tricks the wind plays out back. Stay there and I'll get you a drink.'

He stepped quickly out of the bedroom and rapidly removed what he had seen.

He hoped it was the right thing to do – not to tell Sunna about the water on the floor, the wet footprints left by the uninvited guest who had come in out of the rain. The worst part was that they hadn't stopped just inside the back door. The trail had led all the way to the bedroom.

2

Siglufjördur police officer Ari Thór Arason couldn't explain, even to himself, why he was looking into an old case on behalf of a complete stranger, especially at a time when the little community was going through a period of such chaos.

The man, Hédinn, had called him just before Christmas, when the police station's regular inspector was on holiday in Reykjavík. His request was that Ari Thór should look into a matter that had long ago been shelved: the death of a young woman. Ari Thór had promised to get to it when he had a moment, but it wasn't until this evening that he had finally found the time.

Ari Thór had asked Hédinn to drop into the station that evening, having, of course, confirmed that he hadn't left the house for two days and was therefore not infectious. Hédinn himself sounded dubious about seeing Ari Thór face to face, given the current circumstances, but he eventually agreed to a meeting to discuss the old case.

The infection had hit the town two days earlier – in the wake of a visit from a wealthy traveller. He was an adventurer from France, who had flown from Africa to Greenland, and while there had decided to take a quick trip to Iceland, where his light aircraft had been given permission to land at the remote Siglufjördur airstrip so he could pay a visit to the town's Herring Era museum. He'd only planned to stay for twenty-four hours, but on the night of his arrival he'd been taken violently ill.

To begin with he'd been diagnosed with an unusually virulent

dose of flu, accompanied by a raging temperature. But his condition had rapidly deteriorated and the man had died the following night. A specialist in infectious diseases concluded that this was a case of a haemorrhagic fever, which the man must have picked up on his travels in Africa, and hadn't shown any symptoms of until now. The illness was considered to be highly contagious, and it was possible that any number of people could have been infected as his fever had developed.

The National Civil Defence Authority had been alerted to the situation, and tests carried out on samples from the deceased confirmed that this was the haemorrhagic fever that they'd feared. There was no practical way of dealing with it.

Not long after the man's death the drastic decision was taken to place the little town under quarantine. Efforts were made to trace anyone who had been in contact with the dead man, and everywhere he had been was painstakingly sterilised.

Soon there were rumours that the nurse who had been on duty that night had also been taken ill. She had been put under observation, and Ari Thór had heard that, earlier that day, when she began to experience mild symptoms, she had been placed in isolation.

Every effort was being made to establish where she'd been and with whom she had been in contact, and the process of sterilisation had begun all over again.

For the moment, though, everything was quiet. The nurse was still in isolation at the Siglufjördur hospital, and contingency plans were being made to transfer her to intensive care in Reykjavík should her condition become any worse. According to the information the police had been given, the town could expect to remain in quarantine for at least a few more days.

While there was little actually happening, Siglufjördur had been gripped by panic, stoked, of course, by the extensive media coverage. The townspeople were understandably terrified and the politicians and pundits laboured the point that no unnecessary risks should be taken.

The haemorrhagic fever had already been dubbed 'the French sickness', and the town was a shadow of its usual self. Most people chose to remain behind locked doors and to rely on their phones and email for any communication. Nobody had shown the slightest interest in climbing the town's invisible walls to get in. Workplaces were closed and school was suspended.

Ari Thór remained healthy, and he had every expectation that he would be untouched by the infection. He had been nowhere near the unfortunate traveller, or the nurse. The same was true of the Siglufjördur force's senior officer, Tómas, who was now back after his break, and on duty with Ari Thór.

Ari Thór hoped that Hédinn's visit would give him something other than the wretched infection to think about. And he had a chilling feeling that it would.

3

'I was born in Hédinsfjördur,' Ari Thór's guest, Hédinn, told him. 'Have you been there?'

They were sitting in the police station's coffee corner, keeping some distance between them; they hadn't even shaken hands when Hédinn had arrived.

'I've driven through, after the tunnel was opened,' Ari Thór replied, waiting for his tea to cool. Hédinn had opted for coffee.

'Yes, exactly,' he said, his voice deep.

He seemed to be a reserved, quiet man. He avoided eye contact with Ari and looked mostly at the table or his coffee.

'Exactly,' he repeated. 'Nobody stops there for long. It's still the same uninhabited fjord, even though people drive through it all day long, now. In the old days you'd never have imagined it could be possible to see so many passers-by.'

Hédinn looked to be close to sixty and it wasn't long before he confirmed Ari Thór's judgement.

'I was born there in 1956. My parents had moved there the year before, after the fjord had already been abandoned, because they wanted to keep it inhabited a little longer. They weren't alone. My mother's sister and her husband moved there with them; they wanted to try and farm there.'

He paused and sipped his coffee cautiously and nibbled a biscuit from the packet on the table. He seemed slightly nervous.

'Did they have a farmhouse or land there?' Ari Thór asked. 'It's a beautiful place.'

'Beautiful …' Hédinn echoed, his voice distant, seeming to become lost in memories. 'You could say that, but it's not what springs to my mind. It has been a terribly hard place to live throughout the centuries. The snow lies heavy and it's extremely isolated during the winter – no shortage of avalanches off the mountainsides. The fjord is entirely cut off during winter, with the ocean on one side and high mountains on the others; it was difficult enough to get to the next farm in an emergency, let alone to the next town, beyond the mountains.'

Hédinn underscored his words with a shake of the head and a frown. He was a big man, somewhat overweight; his thin, greasy hair was combed back from his face.

'But to answer your question – no, my parents didn't own a farmhouse there. They were offered the opportunity to rent one that had been left empty, but was still in good condition. My father was a hard worker and had always wanted to be a farmer. The house was easily big enough for the four of them – my parents and my mother's sister and her husband; he had actually been in some financial trouble at some point and he jumped at the chance to try something new. Then I came along a year later, so there were five of us there …' He paused and scowled. 'Well, that's not entirely certain, but I'll come to that,' he added.

Ari Thór said nothing, leaving Hédinn to continue his tale.

'You said you'd driven through there. In that case, you've hardly seen anything of the fjord further out. What you'll have seen from the new road is the Hédinsfjördur lagoon. There's a narrow spit of land, Víkursandur, that separates the lagoon from the fjord itself, and that's about as far as you can see from the road, not that it makes a difference to what I have to tell you. Our house was by the lagoon; it still is, what's left of it. It's the only house on the western side of the pool; there's very little lowland there, you see. It's in the shadow of a high mountain, right at its feet, so, of course, it was madness to try to live there, but my parents were determined to try their best. You know, it's always been my belief that the conditions – the mountain

and the isolation – played a part in what happened there. People can lose their easily minds, somewhere like that, can't they?'

It was a moment before Ari Thór realised that Hédinn was waiting for an answer to his question.

'Well, yes. I suppose so,' was the best he could manage. Although it could hardly be compared to the isolation of Hédinsfjördur, he had painful memories of his first winter in Siglufjördur. He'd hardly been able to sleep at night, feeling almost suffocated by the grip of the darkness and confinement, with the snow more or less closing Siglufjördur off from the rest of the world.

'You'd know more about it that I would,' he said, shivering at the memory. 'What was it like living there?'

'Me? Good grief, I don't remember a thing. We moved away after … after what happened. I was barely a year old, and my parents didn't say much about their time in Hédinsfjördur, which is understandable, I suppose. But it wasn't all bad, I think. My mother told me I was born on a beautiful day at the end of May. After I was born she walked down to the pool and looked out over the water – perfectly calm on that sunny day – and decided that I should be called Hédinn, the name of the Viking who settled in Hédinsfjördur around the year 900. They told me stories about beautiful winter days, too, although my father would sometimes talk of how those high mountains could loom over you during the dark winter months.'

Ari Thór was starting to feel uncomfortable again. He remembered vividly how the ring of mountains encircling Siglufjördur had affected him when he had first arrived there, two and a half years before. The claustrophobia was still inside him, although he did his best not to let it get the better of him.

'Getting from Hédinsfjördur over to Siglufjördur or Ólafsfjördur was a tall order back then,' Hédinn continued. 'The best way was by sea, but it's possible on foot – over the Hestsskard mountain pass and down into Siglufjördur. There's a story from the nineteenth century, about a woman from one of the Hvanndalur farms going to fetch

firewood; she went on foot, taking an extremely difficult route – under the scree on the east side of the fjord. She was pregnant at the time, and on top of that had another small child tucked inside her clothing – all that way. Anything's possible, if there's the will. That's a story that had a happy ending. But mine doesn't.' Hédinn looked up with a bitter smile, and paused before speaking again.

'Our old house isn't far from the track where you'd come down into Hédinsfjördur if you arrived by foot from Siglufjördur, over the Hestsskard pass. People walk this route for the fun of it, now. Times change, don't they? And so do people. My parents are both dead. Mother went first and father followed,' he said ruefully and fell silent again.

'The others are dead as well, are they?' Ari Thór asked, to break the silence more than anything. 'I mean, your aunt and her husband.'

Hédinn looked astonished. 'You've never heard about all this, then?' he asked at last.

'No, not that I remember.'

'I'm sorry. I just assumed you'd know the story. Back then everyone knew about it. But it fades away after a while, I suppose; it's more than half a century ago now. Even the most terrible things are forgotten as the years go by. Nobody ever found out for certain what happened, whether it was murder or suicide …'

'Really? Who died?' Ari Thór asked with interest.

'My aunt. She drank poison.'

'Poison?' Ari Thór shuddered at the thought.

'Something had been stirred into her coffee. It took a long time to get a doctor to her. Maybe her life could have been saved if she had received help sooner. Maybe she did it herself, knowing that there would be little chance of getting an ambulance or a doctor there in time.' Hédinn's voice was even deeper and slower now. 'The verdict was that it was an accident – that she had put rat poison in her coffee instead of sugar. That's a little far-fetched, to my mind.'

'You think someone may have murdered her?' Ari Thór asked straight out, having long ago given up packaging awkward questions

in tactful ways. He had never been particularly considerate in that regard, anyway.

'That's the most obvious conclusion, to my mind. There were only three possible suspects, of course: her husband and my parents. So the suspicion has always been looming over my family, like a shadow. Not that people mention it. The most common theory was that she had taken her own life. But people have little to say about it these days. We moved to Siglufjördur after she died, and her husband went back south to Reykjavík and spent the rest of his life there. My parents never discussed what happened with me and I didn't fish for information. Of course, you don't believe anything bad about your own parents, do you? But the doubt has always been at the back of my mind. I think she either committed suicide or she was murdered by her husband. It wouldn't have been the first time. Men have killed their wives before; and vice versa,' Hédinn said with a sigh.

'I imagine you can guess what my next question is?' Ari Thór said heavily.

'Yes,' Hédinn replied and was silent for a moment. 'You're wondering why I've come to you with this, after all these years, aren't you?'

Ari Thór nodded. He was about to sip the tea cooling in the mug on the table in front of him, but then the thought of the rat poison in the unfortunate woman's coffee made him stop.

'That's a tale in itself.' Hédinn squared his shoulders and thought for a moment, seeming to search for the right words. 'First of all, to be quite clear, I got in touch with you before Christmas because I knew you were taking over from Tómas. He knows the town and all the stories far too well; I thought you'd come to it with fresh eyes, even though I'm a bit surprised that you haven't heard the story before. But there's another reason. A friend of mine lives down south, and in the autumn he went to a meeting of the Siglufjördur Association, where people who moved away from Siglufjördur meet regularly. They had a picture night.'

Ari Thór raised an eyebrow.

'Yes, a picture night,' Hédinn repeated. 'They go through old pictures from Siglufjördur. Part of the fun of it is recognising people in the old photos and noting down their names. It's a way of maintaining a record of the people who've lived in Siglufjördur over the years.'

'And something happened there?'

'That's right. He rang me up that night – said he'd seen the photo.'

There was a sudden weight to Hédinn's voice, a darker undertone that prompted Ari Thór to listen more carefully.

'The picture was taken in Hédinsfjördur, right in front of where we lived.' He took a sip of coffee, his hand trembling. 'This was before my aunt's death, in the dead of winter; it was a bright day, but there was deep snow.'

The familiar feeling of unease gripped Ari Thór for a second; he pushed it to the back of his mind.

'There was nothing all that sunny about the picture, though. I must have been a few months old at the time, and it seems to show five of us there.'

'Well,' Ari Thór said. 'There's hardly anything strange about a family picture, is there?'

'That's just it,' Hédinn said in a low voice, and stared deep into his coffee mug before looking up sharply and straight into Ari Thór's eyes. 'The photo was of my mother, my father and me, and my aunt. Her husband, Maríus, must have taken the picture, or so I imagine.'

'So who's the fifth person?' Ari Thór asked, as a chill shot through him. His thoughts turned to old stories of ghosts appearing in photographs; was Hédinn about to imply something of that nature?

'A young man I've never seen before. He's there, in the centre of the picture, with me in his arms. The long and the short of it is that nobody at the picture night had any idea who this man was.' Hédinn sighed again. 'Who's this young man and what happened to him? Could he have been responsible for my aunt's death?'