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The petsamo journey

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The Petsamo journey

by

Gunnar Benediktsson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
Gunnar Benediktsson
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction. The accuracy of this document is something I do not vouch for; it would be a mistake to read the following notes as objective history. Although I have consulted the sources purported to be used to refer to the historical events mentioned, I cannot comment on the larger accuracy of the history reflected here. Indeed, upon reviewing the contents again, I find it likely that interwoven in the largely true narrative of the journey of Icelandic refugees home through Petsamo, is a more fictional tale.

For those readers familiar with my ongoing project in Iceland, most of this foreword will seem repetitious. Yet I feel it is necessary, in the event that a reader should pick this book up without prior knowledge of its author or the context of its publication, to provide a measure of background information, both about my project and the Petsamo-journey and also about the document which is presented here.

The Petsamo-journey is the name by which Icelanders refer to a series of events that occurred around Northern Europe in 1941. At the outbreak of the second world war, there was a sizable group of Icelanders living abroad, most of whom were residing in various parts of Northern Europe, although mostly in Copenhagen. Many of these Icelanders were students, completing a University degree or professional diploma in Copenhagen, but there were certainly others who had left Iceland for other reasons, either work-related, or having to do with personal affairs, but the particular details of people’s lives are not my business.

In any event, it was determined by the Icelandic government that some attempt should be made to bring these people home, especially after Britain’s invasion of Ice-
land put many of these people in a tenuous position; there was considerable fear that Icelanders might be construed as enemies of the Third Reich. Iceland's official neutrality was compromised, in the German government's opinion, by its inability (with no army) to resist the British invasion. The sea-route between Iceland and the mainland was long, and cut right through several areas of hot naval conflict; because of this, regular trade routes between Reykjavik and Copenhagen were nonexistent. The only possible points of egress from the mainland were in the very far North, and most of the Icelanders were living in Copenhagen, which unfortunately meant that a large group of people needed to be transported across land, a very tricky undertaking from a logistical standpoint. Fortunately, both the Axis and Allied military commands gave official sanction to this endeavor, although at times the lines of communication were not reliable enough to ensure that all military personnel allowed the ship to pass. Although the ship was granted passage by both sides in the conflict, both the British and the Germans grew suspicious as the trip began, wondering if the so-called Petsamo journey were nothing but an elaborate ruse, staged in order to transport spies across the Atlantic. One man I interviewed insists that the Germans succeeded in placing several spies on Icelandic soil, although precisely what military benefit the German army might have gleaned from this continues to elude me.

The Petsamo-travelers, so called because their point of egress from mainland Europe was the Northern Finnish harbor of Petsamo, travelled northward by ferry, train and bus, before arriving at the very peak of the Scandinavian Peninsula. The passenger-ship Esja brought all 250-odd passengers home via the North Atlantic, and the voyage was a resounding success except for a few unfortunate encounters with British military authorities. The British seized and held the ship in the Orkneys for several days, before allowing it to continue. When the Esja arrived in Iceland, the passengers were obliged to wait up to another three days as the British authorities who
by then had seized Iceland and established a significant naval outpost, decided whether
to allow them to come ashore. The travellers disembarked in groups of two and three
over a period of days, and ultimately seven Icelanders were held aboard the ship and
then taken to England, where they were held under suspicion of espionage. Whether
any of the passengers were actually passing information to the Germans has proven
remarkably difficult to confirm, and at this time, more than half a century later, seems
hardly relevant.

Due to the lack of cohesive information about this remarkable journey, my sur-
prise and initial delight was immense upon having discovered the following more or
less complete account. However, I do not recommend that the story related here be
understood as authoritatively depicting actual historical events, as there are certainly
many methodological problems with this document as it stands.

Many of the events that are related here seem unlikely, and I have been unable to
find corroborating accounts for much of the more narrative material. As for the “his-
torical” events, I have been able to confirm that many of them are taken from the pages
of *Morgunblaðið*, Reykjavík’s morning newspaper, from the years 1938 to 1944, and
are for the most part accurate. Many undated, unsigned entries into this document
appear to have been directly translated—and I can only surmise from this sloppiness
that our mysterious author had no intention of ever citing the correct sources in the
finished product, whatever that might have been. Be that as it may, our historian seems
to have done considerable archival research, and has reproduced some of it here—it
was only through laborious research that I was able to determine that his source was
back issues of *Morgunblaðið*, which our amateur historian presumably was able to find
in the microfiche archives of the national library. There are no direct references to this
source however, leading me to conclude that what has occurred here is a kind of laissez-
faire plagiarism. For a historian, this is at best lazy, and at worst ethically problematic.
Certainly this type of careless methodology would ultimately lead to a problematic historical account, if indeed our author was attempting to produce a historically accurate narrative. Which leads to an important question. Are we in fact dealing with the preliminary preparations of an amateur historical scholar? Or do these notes serve another purpose? I have been unable to decide.

As far as I can discern, in the two-column document which follows, the more or less continuous column on the right represents the typed transcript of a recorded interview with a survivor of the Petsamo journey. For my purposes, this narrative has provided much-needed material for my upcoming book, although I am still in the process of attempting to corroborate some of the particulars with my own research subjects. As many of my readers will know, I arrived in Iceland with the intention of uncovering the narrative of the Petsamo journey, of which a comprehensive historical account does not yet exist. Unfortunately, this document is the closest thing I have found to a narrative of the journey, which presents a problem for me as a historian, since there are times where its truth value is in question. I have, however, incorporated some of the details into my book, and made reference to this manuscript, which I now submit for your judgement.

The left column, less continuous and far less reliable in my opinion, seems to be the random commentary of our anonymous historian. The purpose of these scribblings is at times unclear. Sometimes, as I have noted, they are direct translations from the newspaper. At other times I wonder if they are interview questions, perhaps forming the missing part of the taped transcript. However, any attempt to schematize these passages quickly falls apart, since many of the entries have little or no relevance to the question of the Petsamo journey. It is possible that what we are dealing with is a kind of diary, a personal account of a research expedition—but this again is problematized by the highly personal events that are narrated by our histo-
rian, some of which I cannot imagine having any relationship to any research project. I confess that I am unable to come to a definite conclusion about the purpose of this document—however, I submit it in unaltered, wholly diplomatic form, that you may come to your own conclusions.

William Edgar Bead
Visiting Professor
North Germanic Studies
University of Iceland
If I were a writer I would tell you the details: how the ship looked as it came out of the fog at dawn, like the sun had gradually lifted it out of the ocean and brought it to us. Others will tell you the ship was there when we arrived at the harbour in Petsamo. I only tell what I remember.

Or how when the light dimmed in the late evening the ocean turned black like a giant pupil, and we all turned our collars up and pushed our chins into our chests, desperate for warmth.

that the left side of Stellas mouth was lifted by a twenty-centimeter scar that ran along the line of her cheekbone. It yanked her lip into a permanent grin; I shouldn’t tell you this but when she cried it was awful how she gasped out air in curt breaths between smiling teeth. At those times she was mysterious, tragicomic. I never laughed, and only asked about the scar once.

Can we talk about something else?
A narrator knows that his story cannot begin here. A story is linear, moves in a single direction. A true narrator knows this. Let's move on:

"So and so," they'll say "was missing both his thumbs." Or "Such and such had only one eye, poor thing." It is particular, romantic.

We were in bed, and I touched the stretched pink skin with the tip of my finger. She pulled away from me and sat on the edge of the bed. Her naked back curved away from me. "Don't ask that," she said, lighting a cigarette. She blew smoke into the room, and I watched it gather around her head. "Just because my skin remembers doesn't mean I have to." I had crossed a line without knowing it. After that she always turned the right side of her face toward me, hiding the scar behind the fluid line of her nose. It was then that I began to see her face as a diptych, unreadable.

There was a man in Reykjavik who was missing half of one thumb. He never tried to hide it in his palm or tuck it into his shirt; in fact, when he was thinking he would rub the shining end lightly against his lips. I was always curious, because when we were drinking at a friend's house, he told me it was from chopping wood. An accident. Someone else told me that his mother had cut it off for him one Sunday afternoon because he'd come to church in work-boots.

Since then, I have thought of memory in this way, like writing scarred across the body.
Please can we talk about something else now?

Anybody can tell you a story. This is not a story. It was on the trip that my arthritis began: it started like an ice age, so slow I didn’t feel any pain at first. It was just a cold feeling at first, which I didn’t notice because my whole body was cold the whole time. I suppose part of me knew: I started to pound my hands against my knees to warm them up, I borrowed gloves from the sailors, but nothing seemed to work. Later, in Reykjavík, my paints felt cold against my knuckles, and the cold started to penetrate deeper into my fingers until it seemed like they were always numb. I still thought nothing of it, even when I was running my fingers under hot water, desperate for warmth.

What I never told her was that I loved that scar, the way it stitched her face together like a seam on a rag-dolls head. In its center it was tinted with a beautiful faint purple. Even today, as my memory of her is fading I remember that purple, like a mountainside, like the very edge of the water when it meets black sand.

I’ll just record what you say. Exactly. Just like you would say it yourself.
The narrative of the fallen woman: a young girl is picked up by three British soldiers in Hafnarfjörður and they drive her around town, laughing, flirting with her, touching her arms and breasts with their ruddy hands. One young lad presses his fingers to the side of her head and clicks his tongue like the sound of a gun cocking. His eyes are wild, careless. He has seen the brain of a companion explode onto the lapels of his uniform. The girl asks them to take her home. Instead they take her out into the country and hold her in the back of their jeep, put their cold, chapped hands under her clothes. When she resists, one of them punches her twice in the mouth. As he climbs on top of her and forces his tongue between her lips, she spits her left front tooth into his mouth. The next day the event is reported in the newspaper. A small column about twenty centimeters long, located on the second to last page of *Morgunblaðið*, asks: What was she doing, in the country with British soldiers? The article does not include the woman’s name. After that, the event is not spoken of: it has been dismissed. When people pass her on the street, everyone knows but no-one will speak of it.

I remember that my uncle was beaten by British soldiers. He came to my mother’s house and his eyelid had swelled until it pushed his eye shut. “Jesus,” my mother said. “Get inside.” He sat on a stool in the kitchen while my mother washed his face with a damp towel. I walked in and my mother said sharply: “Get out. You aren’t needed.” My uncle said: “I’m pretty goddamn strong. Stronger than a bull.” he choked then, and my mother blotted at his left eye with the corner of her towel. “Get out,” my mother said, more gently now. “Please.” I sat in the living room and waited for them. Later my uncle came out and sat with me, mother’s towel now wrapped tightly around his chest. He sounded like he had a whistle in his throat. Mother came in and gave him a tumbler of whiskey. “Well,” he said. “I bet the Germans don’t seem so bad to you now, do they?” I didn’t say anything. I was thinking that his bulging eye reminded me of Stella in the afternoons, complaining about dust.
There are two rules of story-telling. The first rule is: always end on a funny note. The second rule: never talk for longer than your audience will listen. Lately I have caught myself relating too many details.

There is another way to tell this story of an uncle, who after being beaten (not very badly) by a group of thuggish British soldiers, sits and listens to music in your mother’s living room.

I would change the order of events, the cast of characters. Maybe it shouldn’t be an uncle—maybe just a man, somebody you knew in school, someone who was known for being belligerent in his cups. Tell us about how he started the fight, what he said about one of the soldiers’ mothers. Then have him laugh as the soldiers plow their fists into his softening face and say “Is that the best you English can do? I’ve had worse from a harbour sailor. I’ve had worse from my ten-year old son.”

Stella came to my door one evening with a suitcase full of clothes. She said: “since the Germans will be coming soon, and since I am not yet married, I just want you to know that I don’t want to die without ever living with a man.” I turned around and walked from the front hallway into the kitchen, put the kettle on for coffee. “You are very strange,” I said. “Shut up,” she said, and walked straight past the apartment, through the back hallway and into the bathroom that I shared with my neighbor.

She was in the bathroom for twenty minutes and when she came back out her eyes were puffy and swollen. “I’m allergic to dust,” she said. “Do you ever dust?” That night she placed carefully folded clothes into the mostly empty drawers of the chest beside my bed. She took the suitcase with her when she left the next morning.
Mass will be held in the dómskirkja with rev. Bjarni Jónsson at 11, and at 5 with rev. Ragnar Benediktsson.

Mass is canceled in the Laugarnes school due to the current situation and the specific circumstances at the school, but will resume next Sunday as scheduled.

German authorities report that two nights ago, 400 thousand kilograms of explosives were dropped over London.

Mass will be held in the free church in Hafnarfjörður at 2: the rev. Björn Magnusson.
(Morgunblaðið, Saturday, Sept. 28, 1940)

Are you reciting this from memory?

I will always remember the smell of the engine room as we slept, some of us with thin blankets spread over the humps of our bodies. We were cold in the night, and the floor stole heat from our bodies like ocean wind. The smell was a mixture of sweat and cigarettes, mixed with oil and the musty odour of damp wool. We talked through most of the night, but when we slept there was still the constant noise of the ocean lapping against the hull. I slept in my clothes, used my suitcase as a pillow. Each morning I woke up cold, stiff-necked and needing to urinate.

In my garden I have seen earthworms thick as thumbs, wriggling in soil. I know that if they are cut in two, they do not become two worms but dry up and die, the shining cut ends yearning for each other. They die like any other creature. They bleed red blood. When the cold fronts cover the ground with thin frost they burrow deeper into the soil, the network of vegetable roots. I have observed this, standing here, waving the luminous ash of my cigarette across my face. I feel warmth as I suck the flame closer to my lips, but it is a long time since this has made me flinch. Whole nerves are deadened in me, cold, broken. I only notice the taste.
The library is four blocks from my aunt’s house and as the microfiched newspaper slides past my eyes I think of her voice on the phone:

there was this man who was actually born in the north country but couldn’t stay in one place was always moving around so when he was still young he moved south to reykjavik and then when he started school he went to copenhagen i guess he must have thought he was looking for something you know back then there wasn’t much for an artist to do in this part of the world at that time we were still struggling just to get enough to eat and the war didn’t help there was hardly any fruit at all and when we wanted to eat there were potatoes and meat and that was about all this man and you know who i am talking about he left thinking he would get somewhere better and all i have to say about that is you never get anywhere better no matter how badly you want to yes i may have had a drink or two but that doesn’t matter you aren’t listening again the point is that he was painting advertising signs for hostels before long and if that’s a respectable profession don’t tell me how the story ends we all know how it ends there’s no point in talking to you you already know everything.

I left Iceland as a young man, but I only ever got as far as Copenhagen, I think because there I still could share an ocean, a single border between me and my home, although at the time I would never have said that. Even now I sense that it is an artificial word. I have always known that even if I ever returned to Copenhagen it would never be the same. In its place would be an identical city, but not the same at all. Its people would have closed in around the space I used to occupy and would speak as if they did not recognize me, as if I were the one who did not belong. This is the way of things. This is why you should never leave a place if you ever plan to return. This is rule three of telling stories. I have bedded in the very soil of a country, its earthblood, and mole-like I have been blinded by caked dirt, so filthy that my muck-covered hands could not clear the mud from my eyes.
Before we began to be together, there was a long time when Stella never spoke to me unless she was asking for a cigarette, and although I didn’t realize it then, I was yearning for her already, her broken face ached in my throat. I was thinking about the deepest purple-black of India ink, and rubbing the grain of my fingertips against cloth canvases. At night my fingers would sand each other down, until the tips were smooth, like I imagined that her scar would be. She never let me touch it, but when my skin remembers the texture of her instep, the backs of her knees, I let myself imagine that it would have been like that.

Whole nerves are deadened in me. Have I told you this already?

For weeks, I talked to Stella every time I had lunch at the Café. She always stared at me when I came in, but never smiled. I remember this, but when I try I cannot picture her face.
I remember thinking: he is shallow, like a character sketch. What am I going to do with this information? How much of this story can be true? I remember thinking, as I stepped out through the door of the jeep, that its door-frame would never look more deadly than it did at that moment. I was still jet-lagged, went to bed at 2:00 in the afternoon. When I woke, the sun was on my face, and I was sticky with sweat. I bathed, and watched the bathtub fill with the oil from the surface of my body, cloudy, like an unctious in the water.

I often remember the times on the boat best of all. I remember how we stood together on deck, shivering in the wind, knowing cold was better than seasickness, and knowing that the kindest deaths would be for the people standing on deck who would freeze in minutes if we sank. Some parts of the North Atlantic can be below freezing, sometimes by four or five degrees. There are times that the murky green algae give way to a shiny blackness, and the sailors say that is when the ocean offers the fastest, kindest death. To them the colour of the water offers them a clue to its temperature. The colder the better, they say: death before drowning. One man claimed to have survived falling into the ocean.

"It was sweet, but so sad," he said. "I was peaceful, ready to go when they pulled me out of the water and into the cold air. I lost my finger, but the doctor said I was lucky to still have my thumb. I felt no pain, just a tingle, like touching a hot mug of coffee with cold skin."

"We're just animals without our thumbs," this sailor told me.
Lately I have caught myself relating too many details: I can no longer simplify a story until it becomes a joke.

The interruptions of the invasion are disappearing:

May 12, 1940: Today the presence of British soldiers on the streets of Reykjavik was far less noticeable than it was just days ago. All signs indicate that the British authorities will make every effort to ensure that the day-to-day life of Icelanders does not change. The town is calm, quiet, subdued.

The authorities advise that an air raid is very unlikely. However, if this unlikely event were to occur, please extinguish all sources of light and stay inside away from windows and doors. It is thought that the safest place to be during an air raid is the basement, or the lowest floor. More instructions will follow if they are deemed necessary.

Please note that Prime Minister Churchill himself has said that we shall not let Iceland or the Faroes fall into German hands. Understand that we are protecting you from certain invasion.

The sharp taste of an American cigarette soothes me. I have noticed a tremor in my hands, and a cold ache through the knuckles that makes me want to run hot water over them until they hurt.

Then the pain begins like an ice age, unstoppable.

Jens, Karl, Kester, Hans, Gunnar, Johann, Juergen, Jens K., Felix (who wasn’t even Danish), Hans F.: Men I knew in Copenhagen who were beaten by German soldiers.

It started when I was in Copenhagen, still young. I couldn’t keep my hands warm, pressed them against the hot sides of a coffee cup every morning.

I knew nothing about the war then, I hadn’t bought a newspaper since I moved into my new flat. But I said: “We’d better use what time we have, then. Will you join me?”

“Christ, it’s taken you a month to ask me,” she said. “With you men, it’s always too short or too long.”

I cannot blame my hands for this story.
The air raid siren went off last night at approximately the 12th hour. The siren sounded for a full 4 minutes, causing consternation throughout the city. No explanation was given for this, although signs indicate that a mechanical malfunction may have occurred.

There is no news of the Icelanders fleeing from Copenhagen, except that they are presumed to be preparing to leave Stockholm for Petsamo soon. It is unclear whether they will travel by boat, train or automobile. The trains only run as far north as Rovaniemi, some 600 km south of Petsamo. We presume that arrangements have been made to transport the passengers the rest of the way, although it is uncertain whether they will arrive home by Sept. 29th as was initially anticipated. Today is the birthday of Kristjan X. The Prime Minister has sent an official greeting to the king, along with best wishes for these volatile times.

In Stockholm we were given a little money for food. Most people bought bread and meat at the deli near the hotel where we were billeted. I met another man, a watch-maker, and we walked across town to where we heard that there was a dance. The watch-maker had money left from his business in Copenhagen. He was one of the few people I had met who was not a student. “Come with me,” he said. “Let’s see what this town has to offer two young men such as ourselves.” We spent our money from the embassy in a pub and then wandered in the streets looking for a dance to go to. “Who would ever have thought this was such a big city,” he said. I smiled. The watchsmith leaned on me. “I’m glad we met,” he said. “It’s good to have friends.” Then he threw up onto the ground beside my shoes.

We were told by a policeman that it was time to go home. The next day I kept hoping that he would lend me some of his money to buy food with, but he didn’t offer. Instead he stood beside me in the hotel lobby and scraped his toe against the red carpet. He offered me snuff from a small metal tin, and that was the first time I ever tried the loose, oily leaves. The man from the embassy gave us more money the next night, but until then I sat in the hotel lobby and listened to the slow burning of my empty stomach, tasted sour air in the back of my mouth.

The night doctor will be Halldór Stefánsson Ránargötu 12. Telephone 2234.
The passengers from Copenhagen include:
From Bergen and Oslo: Páll Sigurðson, and Guðjón Guðjónsson. From Denmark: Miss Sigríður Asgeirsdóttir, Jónas Björnsson and his wife, Guðrún. From Stockholm: Miss Auður Guðmundsdóttir and Ingibergur Vilmundarson. From Helsinki: Two men who previously had volunteered for the Finnish army, but who, for unknown reasons wish to return home at this time.

etc.

12.00 — Noon Radio
19.30 — Musical Program: Choral Music
20.00 — News
20.30 — Reading: The wife of the outlaw in Hveradalar. III.
21.30 — Dance Songs
21.45 — News

Churchill has forgotten our protests.

I have given up snuff because I need my handkerchief for the tiny globules of phlegm that I have begun to cough up out of my throat. I have noticed this: The wine-red stain on my fingers has turned more amber lately, deep and dark. Each time I look at it, my mouth waters, I press my fingers together and crave not cigarettes but whiskey.

One of my clearest memories is this: Several months before the war started, my friend Kester and I went on a bicycle trip to the south of France. We packed a few changes of clothes and several packages of cigarettes. I brought a small pad of watercolor paper, but I never used it. Three weeks into the trip, I was lost in thought, I guess, and I must have been riding for twenty or thirty minutes before I realized that Kester was no longer behind me. My heart rose into my chest, and I turned and cycled back along the narrow cobblestone road as fast as I could. When I found Kester, his bike was lying bent on the side of the road, and he had his eyes half-shut with pain. There was a man in a dark blue sweater crouched beside him, asking him what was wrong, and Kester was trying to answer, but couldn’t remember the French word for leg.
Hunger. The feeling in airports and on buses, when the meal is small, and the chicken is limp and stiff at once. Also the feeling when I think about leaving Julia behind, the short ache in the hollow of my pelvis that spreads, becomes diffuse. Let’s talk about something else.

The night before I left, she came at 8:00. She had bought a Pinot Noir at the store and as she walked through the door she held it up so I could see the label. “To celebrate,” she said. She smiled too broadly, and instead of speaking I took her in my arms, folded her face into my chest where I could not see it. “It’s only a few weeks at most, right?”

I got down beside him and took his bare shin between my palms. A small shard of bone protruded from his skin, sharp and jagged. There was hardly any blood, just a needle-thin tip of bone about two centimeters long. It almost looked like it had been stuck into him, like a thorn or a tiny grey branch. I touched it with my finger. It had a beautiful matte color. Kester’s face was beautiful too, the sad pain in his eyes, brimming with tears, trying to explain, swearing instead. I touched his cheek with my palm like this, and the redness in his face was like a timid blush.

The man who was helping us stood and left, and for a while we thought he had abandoned us. I just sat and squeezed Kester’s hand and whispered to him. “It’s going to be okay. I’ll get a doctor. It’s going to be okay.”

Kester looked up at me and said “you just kept going. I tried to speak and my throat closed, and you just kept going.” Suddenly I felt as though I was seeing the scene through Kester’s eyes, and the sight of the backs of my own calves, pumping up and down was beautiful and sad. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I would have stopped if I had seen you.” Kester smiled, and closed his eyes. “Worse things can happen.” This turned out to be true.
"Right," I said. I took the bottle from her, and walked into the tiny kitchen of my apartment. "Glass of wine?"

She pushed her shoes into the back of the closet. "Look," she said. "Got anything stronger?" There was a dime-shaped hole in the back of her nylons, above the pit of her knee. "Fuck," she said, as she found the hole with her fingers, probed it. "Fucking damn. I got caught on that fucking nail outside your door. Are you going to fix that?"

Kester put his head back and screamed. His voice reached a high pitch, and I could see all of his teeth, the yellowed front ones and his molars, most of which were ruined. His tongue was blue, an odd color. The wound in his leg began to bleed now, and the doctor pressed his bare hand against it. He waved at his black briefcase. I opened it and looked inside. All I saw was a vial of smelling salts.

The Frenchman came back with a horse and cart, and a man in a suit who I assumed was an old country doctor. He looked as old as I am now, his head bald and liver-spotted. He had one of those black leather briefcases, and I noticed as he crouched beside Kester that the doctor had purple stains at the corners of his mouth, like he had been interrupted while drinking his afternoon glass of port. He touched Kester's leg with his fingers, and examined the shard of bone. Then he broke the tiny needle off with his forefinger and thumb.
April 9th, 1941: German forces invade Denmark. Nominal resistance. At 12.07
King Christian broadcasts the message
“God bless you all. God bless Denmark.”
Sale of liquor is forbidden.

I poured two glasses of wine, and sipped gently at one, drew air across my tongue. “I really like merlot better,” I said. “Sorry Julia.” She walked into the kitchen and opened the cabinet. “I’ll have rye,” she said. “Got ice?” She turned and leaned on the counter, stared carefully at my face. “Missed a spot”, she said, and ran her fingers over a small patch of stubble on my cheek. “Use a mirror next time, OK honey?”

I held up the bag and showed him. Kester was trying to push himself to his feet and the man in the blue sweater was leaning over him, muttering in French. The Frenchman grabbed Kester’s arms and forced him into a prone position. The doctor’s hand was now slipping away from the wound, and Kester’s leg was slick with blood. The doctor looked at the almost empty bag, and I felt sorry for him. His mouth worked up and down rapidly, and I think he said “merde” but I can’t be sure, it may have been something else.

I opened our rucksack and took out my other white shirt. I’d read about people tearing strips out of shirts to make bandages, but I just bunched the shirt together, leaned in and pressed it against the wound. The doctor looked at me gratefully and placed his wide hands on the shirt. The red stain spread rapidly across the wadded cloth, and the Frenchman in the sweater took his belt off, and he and the doctor used it to tie the shirt to the wound. Then we all lifted Kester into the cart. I patted Kester’s hand reassuringly, but he had either passed out or fallen asleep. I sat beside the doctor on the way to the Frenchman’s house and we said nothing to each other, but the sweet smell of port hung around him like butter, and I breathed through my mouth as politely as I could. The Frenchman lived about five miles east along the road.
I was hungry then, and I made pasta with
cream sauce. "It would go better with white
wine," I said, but by then she was into the
rye. I drank the Pinot Noir, its rich flavour
lingering on my tongue.

Julia didn't eat, but instead drank three more
ryes, now with ginger ale. Afterward, we sat
in the living room and watched Psycho, while
she smoked a joint. We made love in the
living room, and afterwards, as she threw up
into the kitchen sink, I held her chin firmly
between my palms, kissed the back of her
neck through her thick hair.

Here's the strange part. I remember all this,
but I can't recall the name of the village. It
bothers me. I've always had a head for
geography. I bet I can name every small
village between Reykjavik and Akureyri, and
quite a few of the ones to the east. But when
I think of this village, all I see is the French-
man's house. I don't even see the other
houses, or any shops. I imagine they must
have been there. It was a village. There was
probably a bakery, maybe a tobacconist. We
stayed there several weeks. I must have
bought cigarettes in that town seven times. I
can't remember any of it.

What I do remember is that the Frenchman
had a daughter, she must have been about
sixteen, and she had long black hair and
brown eyes. There was no mother, and I
never asked why. My conversational skills in
French have always been limited. The
Frenchman and I communicated mostly with
gestures. His daughter rarely wore dresses;
she usually seemed to wear clothes that
matched her father's: blue sweaters, dark
pants, black hats. In the house she would
wear a white silk nightgown that looked
more expensive than all of their silverware
and furniture together. She would sit beside
Kester as he lay in bed recuperating and read
to him from the Bible and French novels.
She tried to keep his wound as clean as she
could but it soon became infected. There
wasn't very much we could do about that.
The doctor called on us once or twice and
rubbed a brown liquid on the wound.
At three in the morning I microwaved the leftovers in a small tupperware container, and made her a cup of lemon tea. "I've never been so hungry," Julia said. "Jesus, it hurts." She pressed her palms against her stomach and doubled over, tears rolling down her cheeks. "God, I'm so hungry," she said.

The second time the doctor came, Kester's leg had begun to swell up, and the edges of the cut were puckered, corpulent. The doctor slid a knife into the bulge, and white pus mingled with blood sprayed all over his hands. He wiped his hands on his pant legs and continued until the cut was drained. Kester clenched his teeth on a piece of leather and laughed to show that he wasn't afraid of pain. He was afraid of infection and gangrene, though. So were we.

The cut didn't rot or get gangrenous, that was lucky. But two weeks into his recovery, Kester became feverish and pale, and the Frenchman's daughter and I sat up with him through the night, bathing his face with a warm cloth. While Kester slept, she taught me French words for things: Lamp. Cloth. Bread. Wine. Leg. Arm. Breast. She giggled and looked furtively at the door. Her father was sleeping in the other room. She smiled at me, and looked down at Kester. She touched his forehead and sucked her lips against her teeth. I felt his forehead. He was still very hot, and sleeping restlessly. She bathed his forehead in cool water, and asked me to check the dressing on the wound. Then she left.

The crux of who you are is what you remember. Becoming who you are is the crux of remembering who you were. Who you were is the crux of becoming memory. Memory is the crux of who you are becoming. Do you know what you remember?
On the airplane I thought about transubstantiation as I ate dry pretzels during the descent into Keflavik. I thought of the taste of Julia’s skin, the smell of her like flour, like fresh bread but sharper, more bibliographic.

As I slept that night, I imagined her coming into the room where Kester and I slept, leaning with her slim arms against the doorjamb, and then sliding toward the pallet and slipping under the covers beside me. I imagined holding her body beside mine, drifting off to sleep with her in my arms. I convinced myself that she was coming soon, she was just waiting for her father to be fast asleep. She never came.

In the morning I was awakened by her father tapping my shoulder with his foot. Kester was sitting up in bed, pale and weak. But he was smiling. “Tell them that his daughter has nursed me back to health,” he said to me in Danish. “With her beauty.”

“He says thank you,” I said to them in French. “He says thank you for everything.”

A week later we sold our bikes and paid the Frenchman to take us to the nearest place we could ride the train back to Denmark. When we left, Kester kissed the girl’s hand. On the train he said “I think I fell in love with her.”

What I mean is that the smell of her was like the slightly dry glue in the spine of a paperback. It was like leather. Like unfiltered Camels. For chrissake.
The airplane meal was not bad, pasta rolled around a ricotta cheese sauce. The edges of the pasta were curled and dry from the airplane heat rack. The damp face of the flight attendant seemed to apologize. She said “would you like a beverage?” and her eyes were widely spaced and sad. I asked for coffee and she poured it from a silver carafe. “Cream?”

“Nonsense.” I said. “You were asleep the whole time.” I will always remember that the French girl would put her bare foot on the edge of the bed as she tended to Kester, and the big toe was slightly crooked, it curved outward awkwardly. When she caught me staring, she tucked her foot under the chair and looked away. She thought it was ugly. Crooked toes, and her soles stained from the dusty floor of their house. It was the most beautiful foot I had ever seen. It was weeks later that I realized I had forgotten her name. Surely I must have known it at one time or another? I pictured her face, and tried to fit a name to it. Celeste. Marie. Joan. They all sounded wrong.

Whose voice is this? This is not what I remember.

I often thought of the French girl when I saw Stella’s feet, but Stella’s were too thin, too perfect. I longed for the dusty filth of a floor, the callused toes, but Stella soaked her feet in water every night, rubbed them clean with an emery board.
Well, I guess there was one time when Julia was riding in the car beside me and she pushed the car-lighter in and waited until it glowed red. She lit her cigarette with it and then pressed the hot end to the bare skin of her thigh. I was so surprised, I started laughing.

When the smell of her skin burning hit my nostrils, I stepped hard on the brakes. I grabbed the lighter from her hands. “Jesus!” I said to her. “What the hell are you doing?” As my hand closed around the round end of the cigarette lighter, I flinched. The metal was still hot. I dropped the lighter onto the floor. Across the insides of my fingers there was a brown stripe, and it stung, burned sharply. I looked over, and Julia’s leg had a perfect round burn, a rising pucker mark that was blistered, charred around the edges. That mark would later rise into a bulbous scar, with a shiny texture.

I’m always amazed when I think of it, because the whole time she held the lighter to her skin, she never made a sound. Not even a whimper.

Kester would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. In Copenhagen, when Kester and I were coming home from the pub about fifteen minutes before the curfew, some German soldiers confronted us. They spoke no Danish, but one of them walked toward us with an exaggerated limp, imitating Kester dragging his foot behind him. The soldier followed us, scraping his black boot loudly on the cobblestones. The other soldiers laughed, but politely, the way you laugh at a dinner party when someone tells a clever joke. They circled around him, and smiled, their teeth shining. One of them drove the butt of his rifle into Kester’s stomach, below his ribs. He exhaled sharply and fell to the ground. The soldiers kicked at his prone body with their boots and laughed, showing their perfect white teeth. They were beautiful young boys, and the violence in their eyes was bone-white. I stood by and watched. When Kester was bloodied and senseless they looked over at me. “Go home,” one of them said. “Or we’ll do it to you.”

I began to walk away. But they came for me anyway. One of them drove his fist into my kidneys and pushed me to the ground. I rolled over and brought my knees up to my chin, preparing for what was to come. I heard only the sound of their retreating footsteps, their boots pounding on the cobblestones in oddly rhythmic fashion.
“Milk,” I said. I folded my hands in my lap. “I’m sorry.” The flight attendant looked at me oddly. She poured milk from a small carton and handed me the cup.

Later that night, as I was bathing Kester’s bleeding chest with a wet cloth, he said: “Bring the French girl. I need her.”

I shook my head. “You’re in Copenhagen, Kester. The French girl is far away.”

He smiled at me, his eyes pale blue and glassy. “No,” he said. “She’s here.” And the way his mouth moved around sounds in desperation I knew he couldn’t remember her name any more than I could.

After Julia got sick, she let herself out while I slept, leaving only the memory of her, hanging around the house like a sharp, sour smell. Suddenly I couldn’t breathe.

Kester never remembered that conversation either, not the next day or ever after. Of course, two months later I was on a boat to Reykjavik, and I never saw him again. When I left, he was much better, although his chest was still strapped together with a triangular bandage, and he always wheezed a little when he laughed.
It was a feeling like my lungs were full of sawdust, dry, dirty. Suddenly the air around my face seemed to fill with dust, to cling like resin to my cuffs and shirt collar. “Jesus,” I croaked. I stumbled to the kitchen sink and drank water straight from the tap.

The national archives had shelves and shelves of newspapers on microfiche. For seven days I scrolled the pages of the morning paper across my eyes, and stumbled home to my aunts house at night, exhausted. The second night, I slept in my clothes again, and woke to find that the midnight sun had warmed me through the window of my bedroom. My clothes were damp with sweat. I drank cold orange juice from the downstairs fridge, but couldn’t stomach breakfast.

That was when the drowning dreams began. I dreamt that I was falling through air, and then the shock of cold water sucked the breath from my lungs, and I struggled against the wet folds of cloth wrapped around my arms but as my body sank the shimmering surface got farther away and the sound of the French girl’s voice sank with me until it was the language itself that filled my mouth with saliva and choked me. I woke gasping, to the moon shaped ring of Stella’s hair on the pillow next to me.

Later I would think of Kester’s eyes swollen shut, his ribs held together with tight cloth as my uncle held a cool sponge to his swollen eyelid in our living room. I stared at the rolling ice cubes in his tumbler of whiskey. “Bet the Germans dont seem so bad to you now, do they?” He shook his head, lifted his glass to his face. “Just children,” he said. I didn’t know who he meant. He looked at me, straining to keep his injured eye open. “Aren’t you drinking?”

I didn’t answer immediately, but I poured myself a glass and sat across from him, examined the bent lines of his face, the peaked hairline that runs in our family. The whiskey’s deep brown color seeped into the ice-cubes until the mixture was urine-yellow. We sat in silence until my mother came in and put Debussy on the gramophone.
Scarring lies between the sign and the not-sign. Can we see the diary now please? Careful not to close the book too gently. Press the scalpel to the spine, separate the page. Can we talk about something else? The fallen woman, the jeep, the silent faces in the town. Don’t cut that page. Surely you knew. Everyone has a history.

I lit a cigarette. “What were you doing?” I asked. My uncle looked at me, hurt.

“Don’t,” he said. “Just don’t.”

“I just want to know.” My mother came in and stared at me a long time. “Sometimes you have to be careful about what you say around soldiers. That’s all.”

My uncle snorted.

“Where were you walking?” I asked him. I offered him a cigarette. He waved it away, pulled out a tin of snuff instead. He piled the tobacco an inch high on the back of his hand and sucked it into his nose, his eyes fixed on me.

“Like this music,” he said. “It calms my heart.” He stared into his glass of whiskey and hummed, the ice cubes swirled in rhythm to the music.

This thing I have discovered: I can tell no-one.
The bath in the old farmhouse is still as it must have looked twenty years ago. I went there today, and a young man lives there now, he’s a writer, not a farmer. He sold the sheep to a larger farm down the road, and now he sits in the center room and drinks sherry while typing on an electric typewriter. There is a ring around the cast-iron bathtub, orange, like deep ochre. I try to see if he has left his imprint, any sign that this story may be true. I see nothing. It’s only a bathtub.

There were times when Stella would ask about the trip through France, why it ended early, where our bicycles were. I never talked about it much. I told her about Kester’s leg and the infection, and the country doctor, but I didn’t talk about the Frenchman who let us stay with him, his habit of shaving into a bowl of warm water at the kitchen table, how he lent us his underclothes and bought fresh bread every day for the first week, God knows how much that cost. How the bed that Kester recovered on leaned slightly in toward the wall, and how the French girl and I would lift his head and try to make him drink wine when he was sick, and it would pour down his chin and onto his undershirt like blood. The oval stain around his collar grew over time, and turned deep purple like a rich dark grape. After Kester woke up I tried to wash it out with a scrub board and soap, but the colour had sunk into the cloth like a powerful dye.

hi.
hi. is that you?
yeah. look, i’ve decided to stay another week.
why? it’s almost june.
look, i can’t tell you anything yet, but there are some things i need to find out.
jesus. you’re a historian, can’t it wait?
i know how you feel.
asshole. you have no idea.
look, just one more week, ok?
fuck you.
hello?

Instead I told Stella about the less important things. What I mean to say is that I told her the whole skeleton of the story: the bike ride, the fall, the sliver of bone. I left out the details.
There are a few gaps in this story. Can you fill me in, please?

There were times in the days after the embassy notified us of the trip home that I thought about staying in Copenhagen. My Danish was not bad, good enough to fool a German. As long as I stayed on the right streets and never broke curfew, I thought it might work. I even asked the landlady about renting the apartment for a few more weeks. She was never around anyway, and I think she would have been glad for the money. The embassy said that the money they had kept in trust for me was almost gone, but might last a while longer. There was no more school, anyway. I thought about getting a job during the day. By then I was already earning money painting signs for downtown businesses, and although it would not have been easy, I still sometimes think I could have done it.

Two days before we all left, Stella came up the stairs to my apartment with a small suitcase. Her jacket was torn at the left shoulder. She smiled as she came in the door. There was a thin line of red lipstick on the bottom edge of her front teeth.
I'm still trying to understand this. These things can't be considered in the absence of context. The context. Jesus.

It's just that there are a few gaps in your story. There are a few thing that don't add up, if you know what I mean. Like Jens. Why did the soldiers single him out like that? Was there something obviously different about him? I don't mean to pry.

If you're leaving, you're going to need a suitcase. You can have mine. I won't need it anymore.” She put it down beside the shoe-rack in the front hall. It had a pink and orange floral print.

I walked into the kitchen, filled the kettle with water from the tap and put it on the stove. “There's nothing for me in Iceland,” I said. I turned the gas on, and lit a match. The blue flame sucked itself loudly into life, brushed the tips of my fingers. Stella sat down at the table, slid her coat off her shoulders and onto the chair. The elbows of her white blouse were worn nearly through.

At curfew, we turned the lights off and sat in the windowless kitchen. We left only a single candle, burning in the center of the table. Stella drank her tea in wet swallows. I could see the line of her jaw, and her white cup reflected light onto her teeth and the tip of her nose as she tilted it into her face. Above that her features disappeared into darkness. The cuffs of her blouse were frayed, and a line of string hung limply over her left wrist.

I keep thinking about transubstantiation. How when we are old, our skin is dried, unleavened. Melts in the mouth like thinly cut bread.
12. Oct, 1940. Esja arrives in England. She is in a harbour in the Orkneys, overseen by British troops. It is unknown whether she will be allowed to continue her journey to Reykjavik. (MB, Oct. 12th, 1940—Microfiche)

10. June, 1941. British soldiers arrest seven people (four women and one man) in Ísafjörður. They are being held on charges of harbouring a German. Authorities warn people against the dangers of offering assistance to the enemies of Britain.

The sun was not down yet. We moved about the apartment, and mounted the black cardstock paper onto the windows, pressed them into place with white knuckles. We put all the candles and matches beside the bed, where they could be found easily in the dark. As the last window was papered over, darkness fell over the entire apartment. I lit a match, and the faint outlines of Stella, the living room chair, and my coat draped over the back of it, glowed orange. I groped my way to the bookshelf at the back of the room, found a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. Measuring the whiskey only by the sound of liquid gurgling through the neck of the bottle, I poured us each a glass. We sat together on the chair; I was in the seat, and Stella perched on the arm. I did not yet understand the small, dull ache in my knuckles, but for the first time I saw my hands as knobbed, ugly, useless. I cupped them around a match and lit a cigarette.

That night Stella lay beside me on the bed with her clothes on, and sang a popular song that she had heard on the radio. It was in English. She said it reminded her of me, but I had never heard it before. I don’t remember the tune or the words, it was too long ago, but I remember saying “I can see why you don’t sing very often.”
THREE GIRLS wanted for a summer hotel near Reykjavik. Information available at Skolavordustigur 30 between 8 and 10 in the evening.

She stopped then, and rested her head on my chest, and put her hand on my bare stomach. “Come to bed,” I said. “You’re making me nervous.”

She took her hand from my stomach and ran it through my hair. Then she kissed me. She stood, and in the darkness I could see the outline of her body, her arms flung out, elbows bent. “Good night,” she said.

She moved into the darkness at the edge of the room, and I could hear her opening her purse and putting a package of my cigarettes in. She closed her purse, and the snap of leather against leather resonated in the room. “I want you to know that I understand if you leave.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Come to bed, Stella.”

“That’s why I gave you the suitcase. Can’t you see that?”

“Where are you going? It’s after curfew.”

There was a long silence. She turned and walked out. I listened as she slipped her coat over her shoulders and walked out the front door. She closed it gently. That was the last time I saw her.

“I already have a suitcase,” I told the empty room.

The authorities advise that all Icelanders should alert appropriate persons immediately, should they become aware of foreign persons on Icelandic soil.
Engaged! Miss Maria Jónsdóttir from Hvítanes and Páll Stefánsson, Ránargotu 3A.

American warships have vowed to keep the supply routes between the U.S.A and Iceland open at all costs.

We are in Iceland with the full consent of the Icelandic people, Mr. Churchill said. He has forgotten our protests.

The countryside is full of interesting churches. Walls slanting into the ground like ramparts, fortifications, towers with modest bells that pierce the still air and stir the people, who go about their business, mobilized.

I designed a country church once, and an old man visited the construction site every evening at around six and sat with me on a mound, stared at the naked birch beams sticking out of the ground, and shared his evening magnum of whiskey with me. His hands were large and dry, and he had a rash on his neck that he would scratch while we talked.

"This church," he asked me once. "Will it be finished soon?"

"I hope so," I said. "I'm just the architect. I don't really know anything about building."

He thought about that for a while, and took a drink from his flask. "That's stupid," he said. "That's like saying 'I'm just a farmer, I raise the sheep, but I don't know anything about shearing.'" He slapped me on the back. "Have a drink," he said.

I swallowed deeply from his flask. "Jesus," I said. "I shouldn't drink so much when I'm working."
On the seventeenth day of this trip I finally drove to the north country. The sun is beautiful there, and on clear nights the sun sets for four hours and never quite disappears beneath the curve of the earth, but arcs its way back into the sky. It's a thing that should be observed alone. In the country. In a jeep.

"Don't sell yourself like a whore," the farmer said. His face was unshaven. He squinted into the sunset. "Life's shorter than you think it is. Learn a trade and don't do it halfway."

I said nothing. I looked at the rolls of blueprints in my jeep, the fishing rod in the back.

"Beautiful sunset," the old man said, and emptied his flask onto the ground. I heard his boots crunching against the gravel road as he walked away.

It was clear but cold, and the nearest phone was over seventeen kilometers away, or I would have called. Sometimes I wonder if that would have changed anything, but of course nothing can be changed by a single phone call.

Of course I knew that Stella had a history like any other person. I must have known.
7. May 1940. The Embassy in Copenhagen has advised that it may be possible to transport the Icelanders living abroad in the northern lands to Petsamo, on the north coast of Finland. The possibility of sending a ship to Petsamo to transport them home has been considered. It is unknown whether this venture will be attempted, but many sources say the vessel is likely to be the passenger ship Esja.

Stella hated the Germans even before they invaded, but afterwards, she would bare her teeth when she saw them, and I would hold her tight around the shoulders every time we passed one in the street in his drab uniform, to stop her from saying anything. I was afraid of what she might do, afraid that she might slap him, spit on him, that somehow she would attract attention to herself. But she always controlled herself. To tell the truth, I was just as worried about the attention that I might attract if we were confronted. I had foreign papers, and there were stories of Icelanders being singled out and beaten for not having the appropriate documents with them at all times. Stella was at least Danish. In the months before we left, Stella was spending nearly every night in my apartment. We spoke very little, but she would come in around the time that I finished painting, which was usually about two in the morning, and I would make her a cup of tea and give her a cigarette. Sometimes she took a pack of Camels with her when she left. She never asked, but I didn’t mind, I started leaving one on the night-table for her. Sometimes she would come before curfew, and then she would help me with the windows, and stay for the evening, drinking whiskey, talking and laughing.

At 3:00 Friday morning, witnesses report having seen a single aircraft circling overhead, an omen of what was to come. At just past 4:00, the British warships arrived in the harbour. In all there were 7 ships, 2 cruisers and 5 destroyers. One of the destroyers pulled into the harbour at around 5 AM, while the rest disappeared into the bay. A few witnesses stood at the harbour as the first soldiers set foot on land. The British ambassadors stood on the docks to meet the ship, ending speculation as to what nations invaders were on our horizons.

I wasn’t painting much except for storefront signs, but each night she would sit in the living room while I showed her what I was working on. We weren’t allowed lights, so I would hold up a candle to each part of the painting, starting at the top left hand corner and working my way down into the center. She would clap her hands when she liked one of them, but usually she would only nod, and say “very nice.”

Once I told her “you are the only person I know who ignores the curfew as much as you do.”

Stella shrugged. “I guess I like the night.”

“How do you avoid the soldiers?”

Stella smiled at me, the scarred side of her face twisted. “I don’t know. Maybe because it’s dark and they can’t see me?”

I blew smoke into the air. “You must be very brave,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I’m the opposite of brave.”
After the first few hundred soldiers disembarked, they began to move in small groups to various destinations around the city. It was clear to all onlookers that each squad had a specific duty to fulfill. In a very short time the soldiers had spread themselves around the middle of Reykjavik. One group commandeered the telephone company. When they found the door locked, they broke it down without hesitation. Others went to guesthouses and hotels and demanded to know if any Germans were staying there. Any Germans found in the city or in the guesthouses were apprehended and taken aboard the warship in the harbour for immediate deportation to England. It is not known who these people were.

I soon learned not to ask very many questions. After all, we had never made any promises to each other. We didn’t talk about the future. One morning when she was leaving, I made the mistake of asking if I would see her again that night. “Don’t act desperate,” she said and kissed me on the cheek. But soon I didn’t need to ask, because I knew she would come, and before long I was setting out tea and biscuits at around one-thirty.

“Jesus,” she would say, every night. “Don’t you have any jam?”

“Nobody has jam, Stella,” I would say.

She would snort. “Why can’t I hang around men who have more connections?” she would ask and then smile, so I knew she was joking.
I've always imagined that Julia must have been one of those girls in high school who hung around by the smoking doors, hooting at the male teachers, bumming cigarettes off the construction workers on their lunch breaks. She never talks very much about high school, but then, at our age that rarely comes up. I should say at my age. Julia is six years younger. She claims she has a shady past, that she lived away from home when she was very young. "Look what I taught myself," she will say sometimes before trimming her toenails with a pair of scissors.

Sometimes, around lunchtime, I would go to the Café where we first met, and usually she would be there, sitting with another woman, smoking and drinking coffee. She ate very little, and by the time she left for good, she was starting to get bruises in the pits of her elbows from scurvy. I would sit at another table where she could see me, and sometimes she would wait until her friend left, and come and sit with me. I would order some soup and bread and we would sit together in silence. Then she would look at the clock on the wall and say "I have to go." She would get up and walk out, and I would watch her back as she retreated down the street.

You will understand that I knew very little about her. I knew she was poor. She usually wore the same clothes, although I suspect she washed them during the day. She would use my bathtub in the mornings, and sometimes she would bathe at night before we went to bed. I would sit and listen as she drew a bath, and shut the door and latched it. She never left it open, but afterward she would sometimes come out, sit on the floor in front of me and spread her hair in a dark wet halo across my stomach. I would rub her scalp with the tips of my fingers, and usually she would fall asleep.
CHAPTER TWO

Introduction. A little history perhaps. I arrived in Iceland in early May of 1999, with the intention of doing research for a possible book-chapter that would deal with the so-called Petsamo journey. I found that it was a difficult bit of business to unearth so much as a scrap of verifiable information about this trip. I was, however, able to collect vast amounts of anecdotal accounts, many of which I intend to use, with the caveat that their sources were of varying ages and varying lucidity, and that there are crucial conflicts in their stories that leave me in doubt as to the exact events that transpired.

On the seventh day of my trip, I was scheduled to meet with several persons who were survivors of the Petsamo journey, most of whom had been students in Copenhagen in 1941, when these events all transpired. Most of them had sketchy memories of the journey, except for one lady, who had been recuperating from tuberculosis in Denmark, and who had in fact kept a journal detailing the expedition from start to finish. She was, however, unable to comment on the conditions aboard the Esja, since she and the other convalescents were all given cabins, in order that their recuperation might not be interrupted by the Arctic air. My last interview for the day lived in a small house in Hafnarfjörður, apparently alone. She had been referred to me by a friend who was a physiologist at the Reykjavik hospital, and I was told that although she herself had not been on the journey, she had been close to others who had, and might be able to fill in many of the gaps in the story. I did not approach this interview with high hopes. My friend the physiologist did not know this
interview subject personally, and had no idea of her connection to the story—the old woman had phoned him after seeing my ad in the newspaper. She unfortunately spoke no English, and my Icelandic is very poor indeed. I brought a tape recorder with me, in the hope that my friend might later translate her remarks for me.

When I arrived at her house, she ushered me into a sitting room, where she had laid out cakes of all kinds. I was already full, this being my third such visit of the day, but I will say that she made the best date-layer cake I have ever tasted. She brought me strong, dark coffee and then stood while I valiantly attempted to dispose of a goodly portion of the sweets in front of me. When I could stomach no more, I pushed my chair back and waved at the plates on the table in what I hoped she would understand as a motion of negation. She smiled. She spoke quickly in Icelandic, and then moved about the table, seeming not to realize that I had not understood. As I stood up, she took my elbow and led me into her backyard, where I could hear the hiss of the nearby ocean. She had arranged her garden so that a wooden bench sat opposite a large whale-vertebra that obviously served as a stool. I perched on it, and took out my tape-recorder. She came out after clearing the table and sat on the bench. She slipped her swollen feet out of her slippers and rested them in the cool grass, sighing. She began to speak. After I heard “Petsamo” I turned on my tape-recorder and affected to listen intently, although I understood none of what she was saying. She had a strange inflection, a way of saying words that made her very difficult for me to understand. I smiled bravely, however, and moved the tape recorder to a place beside her on the bench. At what I hoped were appropriate intervals I nodded, sometimes made sounds of assent in my throat.

We went on in this way for three hours, through two 90 minute tapes. She kept talking while I changed cassettes, either unconcerned, or unsure of what the purpose of the tape-recorder was. Some time after the second cassette stopped, she stopped
and stared at me, her hands folded in her lap. I smiled. She stood up and walked into the house. I scrambled to pack up my tape recorder and my notes, thinking that I was being told to leave. I followed her into the house, but instead of going to the door, she went into the kitchen where I heard the sound of wallpaper tearing.

I followed her into the kitchen, and found her there, pushing her arm through a ragged hole in the plaster. She pulled out a thin notebook and handed it to me. It looked as though it had survived a fire, at least the corners were singed. I opened it. It was college ruled, but someone had gone through and drawn a perfectly straight line down the center of every page. I looked up at the old woman, curiously. She waved at the notebook. I looked down at it, not noticing anything peculiar about it at first. I flipped through the first few pages, at first unable to tell what I was looking at. Suddenly it came to me.

“It’s in English,” I said.

She looked confused, but nodded. She motioned to me to keep reading.

I judged from the raggedness of the spine that the first seventy pages or so had been torn out. I have no way of knowing if they were a portion of the same document or if the missing pages even exist anywhere. I was able to surmise, on closer reading, that the account begins in medias res, suggesting that pages have been lost or torn out. In other places, it looks as if a ruler has been used to tear away a square piece of paper, presumably in order to conceal something from a future reader of this document. Again, I am only surmising.

I closed the notebook and held it to my chest. I shook the old woman’s hand and hoped that on the tape she would have mentioned the true purpose and source of this document. The woman smiled calmly, and this time ushered me out the door. She seemed panicked now, anxious to be rid of me. As I left, I looked back, and couldn’t help feeling that she looked sad and defeated.
The next afternoon, when I played the tapes back, my heart sank. My physiologist friend and I sat and listened to 180 minutes of nothing but the hiss of the ocean. The entire interview was lost.

I should explain that I was using a dictaphone microcassette recorder with an internal microphone. The microphone has two settings: a short-range one for dictation, and a long-range one, for recording meetings. I had tested the dictaphone in the dining room of my friend's house, where it seemed to work, but had failed to account for the possibility that my interview might take place outside, where there is considerably more ambient noise. The noise of the ocean is very loud, especially in Hafnarfjörður, and I am afraid that the volume of the ocean, in addition to the concordantly sibilant natures of the sound of the waves and the near-whisper of the old woman's voice conspired to conceal the content of our interview. When my friend and I listened very carefully, we could hear her voice in the background, a slight murmur, barely audible and certainly not comprehensible to a human ear.

"Who is this woman?" I asked. "Can we see her again?"

My friend promised he would try to contact her.

After about a week, my physiologist friend called me on the phone. "She's no longer here," he said.

"She died?" I was dismayed.

"I don't think so. I think she just left the country." There was a pause.

I was confused. "Left? Isn't she Icelandic?"

My friend laughed. "I thought you knew. She was Swedish. Or Danish, I'm not sure. She had one of those accents that's hard to place."

My friend was correct. When he and I drove back to the house in Hafnarfjörður, the woman was long gone. Apparently she had sold her house several weeks before and had been planning to move away for some time. She had left no
forwarding address with the new owners, which is unusual, even for people of her generation.

At first I was angry that the old woman hadn’t mentioned her intention to leave, but then I remembered the three hours of microcassette, with nothing but the hiss of the ocean. It’s entirely possible that she disclosed her entire plan to me, believing that I understood. She may well have told me why she was selling the house, where she was moving to, and most important, what her connection to the writer of this document might be. As for the house, it now belonged to a young couple that had just moved into town from Akureyri; a fisherman and a woman who worked in television, writing subtitles for shows in English or German. When we asked them for the name of the woman who sold them the house, they would only say that she had introduced herself as “Leni,” which is not helpful, except in that it is not an Icelandic name—although “Leni” is unlikely to be a Swedish name. It’s likelier that this woman was German, at least of German descent, whatever her declared ethnicity may have been. I suppose it’s of no consequence.

I was left with nothing, no concrete evidence to confirm or deny the bizarre events that you will find related in the document which follows. I had entertained some hope that the old woman might have answered some important questions, not least of which was: is any of this true? Can it be? While the events depicted are usually (with notable exceptions) consistent with current historical knowledge of this period, the personal interactions between people seem at times unreal and outlandish. If indeed this is an attempt to document a historical period, I can only shake my head at the absurd lack of empiricism; unfortunately, we lack other documentation that is as comprehensive. It is therefore tempting to approach this document as one would the writings of Longinus or Gibbon; in other words, to glean from them whatever information we may, taking care that it is corroborated elsewhere--and to dis-
card the rest, or relegate it to the category of literature. It may perhaps be seen as indicative, not of the exact historical events of the Petsamo-journey but of the socio-historical-cultural milieu of its composition.

In the absence of corroborative accounts, I had no choice but to attempt to analyse the document for myself. As I read the notebook, and attempted to piece together coherent narratives, I was thwarted by significant gaps in the story. I still feel, however, that in the blanks on the page, the silences, the spaces where pages have been carefully excised and presumably discarded, there lies a continuous narrative that might have value as a story, if not as history. As literature, the nuances of this piece remain invisible to this reader, due to the obliqueness of reference, and the fragmentation of the narrative. Whatever the purpose of this document was, it is safe to say that its primary aim was not to provide information on the Petsamo-journey, or even yet to provide a record of life in Europe during the Third Reich. However, I feel that there is some informative value to publishing this narrative now, if only because it attempts to tell the story that I have tried, and failed, to tell for years.
The old farmers in this part of the country cut their dogs’ nails with a sharp penknife. They splay the paw over their knee, and careful to avoid the quick, shave the nails away in thin flakes. One man tells me that sometimes you can miss, cut too deep. “It doesn’t hurt very much,” he said. “But they bleed so much, and the blood sinks into any surface and won’t wash out.” He showed me a deep brown stain on his pants and said “This stain is from Strútur. He was my dog for twelve years. Last year he was hit by a car, and this stain is all I have of him.” He looked away across the hills, hummed as he pushed tobacco into the space beneath his lower lip.

I never told Kester or Jens or the others about her, I think because I sensed that she wasn’t telling her friends about me, and also because I had reasons for keeping our relationship secret. My landlady had explicitly told me that there were not to be overnight visitors, especially of the opposite sex. Every morning, when I met the landlady on the stairs, my heart would leap into my throat as I wondered if she had heard us laughing and drinking the night before. But she only said “good morning,” and smiled. Sometimes she would ask me to hold her groceries as she fumbled for her keys.

“Good morning,” I would say. Sometimes I could smell the fresh fish in her grocery bag, and my mouth would water. After the Germans came, she rarely bought fish, but filled her bags with flour and dry biscuits. I was the only one who ever saw her come and go. When Stella came up the stairs at night, she was sleeping. When Jens and Kester came by in the afternoon, she had her door closed and the radio on.
One squad of soldiers marched on the German embassy and arrested the German ambassador Dr. Gerlach. Before the troops arrived, a man living close to the embassy on Tungata noticed smoke billowing from an upstairs window and attempted to call the fire department. However, his phone had been disconnected. Around 9 o'clock, Dr. Gerlach and his wife and children were moved onto the warship. The embassy and residence were both searched. Dr. Gerlach was permitted to bring many of his personal effects on board.

Jens once told me: "That isn't normal. It's not normal to hide in your apartment all day."

"She owns the building," I said. "I guess she can do whatever she wants."

Jens shook his head. He walked in through my front hall and into the kitchen. "That woman has something to hide. And didn't you say she's German anyway?"

"Swedish," I said. Jens shrugged. In truth, I had no idea where she was from. She had a slight accent that was hard to place, and her fingernails were carefully polished, the cuticles pushed back evenly, as if with a broad spoon.

Jens wagged his finger at me. "You wait and see. Nothing good will come of this foreign landlady. Nothing good." Jens seemed sometimes to forget that I was not a Dane.

Winning Numbers—2000 Kronur
9227

"She's harmless," I said. Coffee?
At 10:00 the Icelandic Government held a meeting to discuss recent events. The British ambassadors Mr. Howard Smith and Mr. Shephard arrived shortly thereafter and assured the representatives that the British force would not stay a moment longer than the war necessitates. The representatives announced their formal protest and their intention to present it to Mr. Churchill in written form.

Jens knew Kester when they were both very young. They went to the same school and were classmates until Jens family moved to the country. When Jens came back, it was to become a carpenter. I never found out who Jens' parents were, or why they moved away, but I know that Jens regretted the move very much. Sometimes he would take Kester and me for walks through the downtown, and point to the landmarks of the city and say "I remember that from when," or "that was here when I was a boy!" Kester would shake his head, and sometimes would say "Jens, that was years ago. You must be misremembering."

Jens would get angry then, and would walk beside us in stern silence until we found a pub and bought some beer for him. Then we would sit together into the night and Jens would tell us stories about his small school in the country, and how he joined the athletic club and was a soccer star.

I should say that Jens was the tallest man I had ever known, and the best dancer. Since then, I have met no-one with both of these characteristics.
Radio Address: Hermann Jóhannson

Icelanders! These events have occurred: in the early morning a small fleet of British warships has arrived and put soldiers on our land. These men have taken control of Reykjavik and a number of other locations. With the British army came the envoy Mr. Howard Smith, whom I have met with and who has recently been named ambassador to Iceland, formerly to Copenhagen.

The ambassador has described to me the circumstances that have rendered a British military takeover of certain locations in Iceland inevitable. Iceland has been determined to have strategic importance to the war in Europe. The British have assured us that their role here is to prevent the Germans from taking over these strategically significant locations. The invasion came as a complete surprise to the Icelandic government. British authorities had heretofore made it known to us that several coastal locations were strategically significant to them, and would be subject to a military takeover. However, we have opposed them at every diplomatic turn, denying the possibility that we would accept a military takeover of our nation. No resistance has been offered to this violation of our neutrality, but a formal protest has been lodged.

When the ship arrived at the harbour in Reykjavik, we were interviewed on board by a British soldier. He set up in the engine room. We were told to pack all of our things in the carryalls and trunks we had brought. In my case, everything I owned fit into a canvas bag and Stella’s small suitcase. For my friend the watchsmith, his baggage consisted of a large trunk, which he said contained everything he would need to take over his father’s business on Laugavegur.

“When the time comes,” he said. “Not yet, but soon.” He said this to me as we were standing in line outside the engine room, waiting to have our luggage inspected by the red-faced British fellow who had only just marched imperiously past the queue. Two soldiers walked behind him, carrying a large wooden desk, which I assumed had been taken from the captain’s quarters, although to this day I have never known exactly from where it came. The desk was too large to fit through the door, and the soldiers were forced to lay it on its side and turn it sharply to the left as they moved it into the room.

The red-faced man stood by, panting, watching carefully but saying nothing. I remember thinking that he must have been running a fever, because it was 3 degrees celsius, and everyone was cold except for him.
The British ambassador has acknowledged our protests and given assurances to me that the British have no intention of mixing themselves up in the domestic affairs of our government. These events have occurred due to the unprovoked invasions by the Germans of Denmark and Norway. The ambassador reminds us of British efforts to guard the neutrality and independence of Norway.

The red-faced British officer wiped sweat from his brow with a red handkerchief which had deep purple stains all over it that might have been from blood or chewing tobacco.

The watchsmith turned to me and said “I think he has the consumption.” I nodded, but I was thinking it was likelier to be tobacco, since the insides of his lips were deep maroon, like Pinot Noir. I say this now, but then I would not have known what Pinot Noir was, being mostly a whiskey drinker.

As the soldiers moved the desk into the engine room, the red-faced man nodded, apparently satisfied. He stepped inside, over the tall door-jamb, and shut the door softly behind him. We waited for the door to open, and people at the front of the line began to talk, to make jokes, to speculate about the questions the British man would ask.
The purpose of the British presence here is to protect us from the Germans. It is without a doubt that a German invasion of Iceland was imminent.

Because we had been in Copenhagen, we'd missed the British invasion. For this reason, the whole thing seemed strange to us, and a little wrong. We had heard, of course, that the British had set up a naval base in Iceland, but we did not know the full story, the details. We would later learn that the British had arrived almost without warning, that although they had indicated to Icelandic authorities their intention to construct a military base, that they had arrived in the night and marched into the towns without warning. My mother would tell the story for years. “I woke up, and there they were,” she would say. “Outside my house, marching in step, standing on street-corners.” The authorities filed an official complaint. A few boarded themselves into the parliament buildings, but there was little resistance. The British raided both the German and the Swedish embassies, both of which were in the frantic process of burning documents when the soldiers arrived. The ambassadors were detained. It was given out that to harbor any person of German origin was to be considered treasonous. Treasonous to whom?
British radio address — May 10, 1940:

Since the German conquest of Denmark, we have feared that the Germans might choose to land an army on Iceland. Fortunately, our forces took steps to prevent such an eventuality, by undertaking the defence of Iceland ourselves. The Icelanders were woefully unprepared to defend themselves from a hostile invasion, having no army and only a police force of about 70 men. Surely the Icelanders will heave a sigh of relief at the sight of armed soldiers in the streets to protect them.

At the same time, assurances were given by the British that disturbances to our accustomed lifestyle would be minimal. That we should relax, go about our business, pretend that nothing had happened.

A few days later, a man and a woman were picking berries out in the country. A group of soldiers drove up in a jeep, and confronted them, accusing them of spying for the Germans. The couple tried to walk away, but the soldiers knocked them onto the ground with the butts of their rifles. They were tied up with the wide leather straps from the soldiers rifles. As one soldier held the blade of his bayonet tight to the Adams apple of the young man, the rest of them raped his wife, tearing at her clothes and skin with their white-knuckled fingers.

As the young man watched, he fixed his eyes on the furrowed brow of one of the soldiers, whose eyes were filled with the kind of transformed fury that Icelanders knew by the word berserkur. The next day it was announced that soldiers were not to carry weapons in the presence of civilians unless necessary. My mother shook her head when she heard this. When will they learn, she wondered, that these men are themselves weapons?
Winning Numbers—100 Kronur

125 132 544 577
662 714 1065 1657
1880 1922 2034 2211
2294 2564 2769 2883
3162 3222 3267 3392
3361 3445 3465 3548
3740 3966 4084 4220
4291 4301 4467 4703
4775 4865 5147 5215
5423 5505 5553 5671
5690 5728 6028 6036
6115 6116 6126 6364
6941 7102 7466 7762
7762 7899 7955 8066
8130 8195 8317 8447
8519 8649 8780 8875
8962 8964 9032 9065
9231 9588 9605 9690
9849 10162 10205 10641
10768 10895 10196 11281
11305 11473 11577 11647
11796 11848 12379 12499
13062 13066 13230 13237
13895 14051 14181 14302
14367 14377 14442 14
14711 14800 14862 1
15129 15243 15376 15
15788 15825 15898 16
16180 16258 16263 16
16717 16901 16922 17
17172 17181 17197 17
17267 17487 17558 17
17983 18046 18054 18

My mother always told the story of when she was a young woman and visited England. She said the streets were loud and busy, and there was dirt in the air that clung to the rims of her cuffs and collars, and as she and my father travelled around London on foot, she noticed that there were hungry children in the street and nobody helped them. "We were poor then," she said. "Or I would have taken them all home." Most people remember Big Ben or the Thames, but my mother remembered a little girl whose trousers had worn out at the knee and her pink skin emerged from between ragged edges of cloth and was singed white by the cold air.

On the boat, waiting to be interviewed, we knew none of this. We saw the soldiers with their round hats emerge from the engine room, and point to the man at the front of the line. He dragged his trunk through the door. The two soldiers followed him into the engine room and shut the door behind them. The lineup was suddenly very silent. Finally the watchsmith spoke: Are we going to have to stay on the boat any longer? No-one answered. Do the British know how little food we have? Behind us, three soldiers were lowering a life-boat, and the sound of it hitting the water was round, resonant, but dull, like a poorly tuned timpani.
After a few minutes, the man emerged, white-faced. The soldiers who had just lowered the boat helped him stow his luggage underneath the bow of the small vessel. "He gets to go home," the watchsmith said, almost to himself. I nodded. And at the same time I wondered what had frightened the man so much.

The watchsmith was next. He needed help lifting his trunk into the room. He dragged it over the door-jamb and then one of the soldiers lifted the trunk over, grunting. When he emerged, he smiled at me. "They asked to see my movie-machine," he said. The soldiers helped him put his trunk in the boat, and he sat beside the other man, who was still pale and shivering, his arms tucked into his sleeves. The watchsmith spoke loudly and fast, but his companion in the lifeboat never spoke a single word.

When I was asked to step into the engine room, I tried to seem relaxed, even though I was very frightened indeed. I walked up to the wooden desk. The red-faced man looked up at me. "Papers?" he said, holding out his hand. I gave him my travel documents, swallowed heavily. He looked down at them, deep in thought. "Speak English?" he asked. "A little," I said. "Danish or French is better."
Julia and I drank a lot that night before I left, so it’s hard to remember exactly what we said to each other then. I think I said something about this project, but that wouldn’t matter. I’ve told her many times about Petsamo, about the journey. What I remember for sure is that after we ate, she walked over to the closet and reached into the pocket of her coat for a package of cigarettes. She brought it with her to the table. “I’d rather you smoked on the porch,” I told her.

He looked up, searched my face. “You seem to speak fine,” he said. “Sit down.”

I looked around. There was no chair. I cleared my throat.

He looked up, irritated. “Well?” he said.

“May I go?” I folded my hands behind my back and rocked on my heels nervously.

He waved his hand at me. “A few questions, that’s all. Do you know any German nationals?”

I paused, thinking. “I don’t think so,” I said.

The man smiled. “Either you do or you don’t, he said.”

“No.” I could feel sweat on my palms.

“You don’t seem very sure,” he said. “Are you very sure?”

I pushed my hair out of my face. “I am an artist,” I said. “I know many people.” I licked my lips, thought about smoking a cigarette.

“Shut up,” she said. “I’d rather you breathed out your asshole. She tapped the package of cigarettes against her palm. “Fuck,” she said. It was empty. “This is not my day,” she said, and I thought she would cry.
hi.
hi.
what time is it there? is that music?
ive just got a few people over.
what is it, about 3?
3:15.
whos laughing?
could you be quiet, please? ok, go ahead. hi.
hows research?
fine. just fine. i just wanted to call and hear your voice.
ok. im here.
look, julia.
yeah?
the other night. you were pretty sick. are you ok?
fine. when are you coming home?
dont know. soon. next week?
soon, ok?
ok.
ill let you go.
ok.
love you.
ok.

"Go on." The man was impatient.

"In Copenhagen, people do not always say where they are from. They are from many places."

The red-faced man scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to one of the soldiers. He pushed my papers toward me across the desk. I reached forward and caught them before they fell. He smiled at me. "You’re too stupid to be a spy," he said. "That much is obvious." He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. From where I stood, I could see that the stains were from tobacco. "Good day," he said. He waved at me like one waves at a fly.

As we sat in the boat, the watchsmith told me how the man had asked to see his luggage and had found his movie making machine. It was a small gadget with an eyehole that you could look through, and see a picture of a young woman dressed like you see in the burlesque. There was a lever you could turn, and if you did this, she would dance, turning about and bending at the waist. The watchsmith said that the British man had liked the movie machine so much that he had asked to keep it. "I let him have it," he said. He beamed at me and thrust his thumbs into his belt. "A small price to pay," he said. "A small price if you get to go home."
I have been wondering. Is the name Stella a stolen name? Haven't you been having a hard time remembering the names of other people anyway? Stella has the connotation of stars for you, doesn't she? Stella/stellar. I know. Like Sidney's Astrophil and Stella. It's a good name, very literary. But there are other names you could steal that would work just as well.

Another thing about Jens. He had the reddest lips I have ever seen. They were full, rounded, and the bottom one was thick, like he was always pouting. After a few drinks, Jens would run his fingers over his lips, and then he would let his arms hang from his broad shoulders like beams, and his laugh grew deep in his throat, resonant. He smoked, but Kester said it was only to show off to me. And I believed him, because Jens never had his own cigarettes. He never choked or coughed, but drew deeply on my Camels and held the smoke in his lungs for several seconds. The cigarettes were unfiltered, we called them the black death.

The other man, who still looked pale and cold, looked at me and said "I'm hungry." That was the first time anyone had said those words to me since Stockholm, even though we had all been hungry at various times.

What I am asking is this: what do you suppose her real name was? Stella could be Danish, but not very Danish. Maybe you're remembering it wrong. Maybe it was Astrid. Something like that. Do you think so?
The reason I ask this is that Stella is the wrong name for her. To me, Stella is not very much like the Stella in Sidney’s sonnet sequence. To me she’s more like Anna Karenina. Like Jezebel. Like Mme. Bovary. Lot’s wife. Aunt Jemima. A pillar of tears.

I remember once when we went out to the pub, Jens sat next to me and never spoke to Kester once, and Kester sat and stared at his folded hands in his lap. I have always loved to sit in silence, but Jens talked constantly, pausing only to gesture to the bartender or to glance quickly at Kester. Jens laughed, and his big square teeth shone in the dim light, reflected the orange tip of my lit cigarette. After a while Kester stood up and walked to the other end of the room. He stood and looked out through the small window at the street. It was raining, and the soft hiss of it reminds me to this day of the background noise of an old gramophone.

Jens winked at me. “Danes,” he said. “Moody like wet cats.” He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed through the fabric of my coat.

“Yes,” I said. “Very moody indeed.”

“You need more whiskey,” Jens said. “So do I.” He waved at the bartender, who nodded. “Today I will buy the whiskey,” he said, slapping me on the back. “Because today I have money. And I like whiskey.” He looked over at me, his eyes bloodshot from the drink. “And I like you, quiet Icelander. I also like you.”

I’m asking about her name. Am I speaking a foreign language?
hi.
hi.
are you still coming home tomorrow? i need the flight information.
im not coming yet.
why?
its hard to explain. this thing just keeps getting more complicated. every time i think i've hit bottom it goes deeper and deeper.
what are you talking about?
look i cant really explain it right now, ok?
well when will you be home?
its hard to say. another week, maybe two?
ok.
you ok?
yeah. miss you.
ill be home soon. promise.
ok. what time is it there?
around 2.
ok. can i call tomorrow?
sure. wait until around lunchtime, ok?
sure. hey.
yeah?
love you.
ok.

I always wondered where Jens got so much money that he could buy round after round of whiskey. I was not the sort of person who asks questions.

"Tell me," Jens said, placing his lips next to my ear. "Is Kester as terrible an artist as I think he is?" He giggled like a ten-year old and looked at Kester's back, dimly lit in the glow from the street.

"I think Kester is an interesting artist," I said.

Jens voice dropped to a whisper. "Everything he does looks like a child drew it. I'd like to see your work. Could I see something by you?"

I shrugged. "I suppose. You know where I live."

"Tomorrow," Jens said. "Tomorrow I will come."

Jens did not come the next day, but Kester did, around noon. I was working on a watercolor, and my kitchen table was cluttered with tubes of paint. Kester came in and sat on the chair in the living room. I put water on for tea. "I have no food," I said.
Offering:
Detergent in 50kg. sacks.
Table Salt in 50kg. sacks.
Only the very best Icelandic potatoes.
Eggert Kristjansson & Co h.f.

Kester shook his head. “Remember when my leg was broken?” he asked. “Remember the days when I was sleeping in the French girl’s house?”

I nodded. I leaned against the window sill and stared at him across the room. My hands were covered in small paint-spots.

He looked up at me. “Lately I have tried to remember things about that. Like what kind of bedsheets I slept in. Linen? Were they white? Did they have stains?”

I shrugged, and lit a cigarette. “Why does any of that matter?”

Kester frowned. “The doctor. Was his hair dark? Yellow? Did he need to shave? Was it sherry or cognac on his breath? He put his hand over his eyes. I would have remembered this three weeks ago. All this memory has been stolen from me.”
The government has reported that the monthly ration of wheat products and sugar has been lowered, due to national shortages. The ration for wheat products has been lowered from 7200 grams to 5500 grams. The ration for sugar has been lowered from 2000 grams to 1700 grams.

Additionally, authorities wish to note that persons may distribute their wheat ration as they see fit, and individuals may choose, for instance, if they wish to spend their ration on flour or flour-bread, rye or rye-bread, oatmeal or other related products.

In the past, the ration was divided into 3000 grams of Rye meal, 2400 grams of flour, and 1800 grams of oatmeal, for a total of 7200 grams. This requirement has been lifted, and the ration now extends to other wheat-related foods. For these purposes, the following products are considered wheat products: All breads. Rye. Flour. Oats. Oatmeal. Rye meal. From this point forward, the rations will be distributed for two months at a time. For instance, the June and July rations will be distributed at once, and the next distribution time will be in August.

“You remember the French girl,” I said. I blew smoke into the room, inspected the paint under my fingernails.

Kester shook his head. “Sometimes,” he said. “Sometimes I can build a perfect image of her in my mind. And then I start to ask myself: is this really how she was? Or were her eyes a little farther apart? Was there a slope to her nose, just a small one? And then I can’t remember. When I forget one thing, the whole image disappears.” He rubbed his eyes. “If only I could remember her name.”

Kester sat in silence in the living room while I made tea, and when I brought the steaming cup to him he was humming under his breath. “Jens and I are friends again,” he said.

I said nothing.

“He can be impossible sometimes. You knew that.”

My mouth began to water at the thought of whiskey. I wiped my lips on my sleeve, disgusted.
On the twenty-second day I went down to the harbor. I ate a hot dog by the docks, watched the ships push themselves slowly through the oil-slicked water. Fishing boats, oil tankers, a cruise ship from France and the large grey coast guard ships with their big cannons. No passenger vessels, though. Not a single one.

"Too bad," he said. He let himself out and shut the door softly. I heard his feet on the carpeted stairs outside.

Kester walked over to the canvas I was working on. It was a boat, lying by the dock in the harbour. You make things look very real, he said. I admire that. He put his coat on and started to move toward the door. As he pushed his feet into his shoes, he asked "do you do portraits?"

I shook my head.

"He says he wants to see your art. Will you let him?" Kester stood up, picked his coat up off the chair.

"Yes," I said. "Whenever he wants."
As I sat on the dock, I saw a seal poke its head up through the rainbow-colored oil. Its head was a small, round thing, unbelievable. It came to within a hundred meters of the pier and dove, its tail sucking air underwater with a wet slurp. It surfaced another two hundred meters or so away and swam toward a group of skerries, its head weaving an arrow-shaped wake into the surface of the water. The broad V rippled outward from the seal’s head and was absorbed into the churning wakes of the tankers and coast guard vessels. I thought I saw the seal’s stubby cigar-body worm its way onto an outcropping, but its wet black color blended into the rock, and I could see nothing.

I was told later that it couldn’t have been a seal, that they’ve stopped coming so close to the docks since the harbors have started to fill with motor oil.

It was a lie. I had done many portraits. A few times, when Stella had been to see me, I had closed my eyes and tried to quickly pencil her outline in my drawing book.

I would start with the curve of her chin, and then move to the gentle slope of her cheekbone. Then I would place her nose slightly off-center, and her eyes and eyebrows. Then the scar, its tortuous path across her left cheek. Each aspect looked right, but there was always something about the way they fit together that was wrong.

If the cheekbones were right, the scar was in the wrong place. The eyes were too low or too high. I would erase and try again, but the details always got in the way of each other. Once I looked at what I had drawn and it was the French girl. With a scar.
hello? this is the fourth message julia. what's going on?

I'm trying to remember what Julia and I said to each other. Is she still angry at me? Why won't she answer the phone? I go to the store to buy more cassettes for my tape-recorder. "Are 90 minute tapes your longest?" I ask the store clerk. She looks at me overtop of her glasses. She has a red and purple bruise over her eye. "Are you all right?" I ask.

"90 minutes is the longest we have in a cassette," she says. "Will there be anything else?"

Later, as I dial Julia's number again, I remember the store clerk's face, her accented English. Who did I think I was, asking her questions about her life? But as I remember her face I remember a time that Julia was bruised, except it wasn't her eye, it was lower, a purple half-moon over her cheek.

I kept these failed portraits in my sketchbook for months, but never showed them to anybody, not even Stella or Kester. When I left for Iceland, I left them in the apartment. My landlady must have thrown them away by now.

I did one other portrait while I was in Copenhagen. Late one night there was a knock at my door. When I opened it, Jens was standing outside, his eyelids swollen shut, clutching his ribs with both hands. The corners of his lips were cracked and bleeding. I stepped back, and he stumbled inside. I didn't know where else to go, he said. I said nothing, but turned and walked into the kitchen. When I came out with a damp cloth, Jens was sitting on the floor in the hallway. I tried to pick him up under his armpits, but he cried out, and I saw that his shirt was full of blood. Stand up, I said, and helped him to his feet. I moved him through the kitchen and into the bathtub, where I undid his belt, and slid his pants down over his hips. He was not wearing underpants. Jesus, I said to him. It's February. Don't you get cold? He managed to smile as I lowered him into the warm water.
The thing is, I never meant to hit her. We were on a picnic, this was about three days before her twenty-first birthday. We were sitting together in the sun, and I was feeding her a peanut butter sandwich. At that time we fed each other everything, it was that stage in a relationship where we regress to childhood again. I held the sandwich between my fingers gently, trying not to crush the bread, and pressed it softly to her lips. She took small bites and chewed them slowly, enjoying the sunlight. When her teeth started getting closer to my fingers, she started to snap at them mischievously, you know, I think she was trying to be sexy.

As she was taking the last bite, her front teeth sank deeply into my forefinger. I yanked my hand away, and stared at the blood welling up in the broad cut across the whorls of my fingertip.

It was more of a swing, really. I kind of threw my hand into the air, you know, like I was waving at a swarm of mosquitos. I don’t really know what I was doing. But my knuckles hit her right on the cheekbone, and her head snapped back on her neck like a tetherball.

After I helped him bathe, I gave him some clothes to wear, which were too wide around the hips and chest, but not long enough in the arms and legs. He looked ridiculous, and I couldn’t help smiling.

He sat in the living room and shivered. I brought a blanket and poured him some whiskey, which he took carefully in his pale, trembling hands like it was precious, delicate.
I knelt over her. She looked up at me, and blood from my finger was smeared on her cheek, which was starting to swell already. It would later grow into a purple and yellow blossom that would cover half her face. Her eyes were full and sad, and I waited for something, a tear, a noise from her throat, but her face was blank and dead. I called her name, shook her shoulders, but she gave no sign that she felt anything at all.

She said nothing that whole day. In the car on the way home from the park, she didn’t speak, but lit a cigarette and then let it burn down to her fingertips, staring out the window. When we got back to my apartment I gave her a bag of frozen peas and asked “would you like some tea or something?” and she still didn’t speak. As I cleaned the bruise I could see that our bloods had mingled, that the square top of my high school ring had laid her cheek open, made a curved cut like a scythe.

Four days after we arrived home they lowered the food ration again. It’s hard to believe, my mother said. There’s no way this much rye meal can last two months. We’ll have to eat flour-bread with dinner. Later, as we sat around the table and ate thin white bread with white sauce, I thought of Jens’ bruised ribs. His chest was like a cod fillet, beaten bloody as it came off the bone. The kind of fillets we bought when the good ones were gone.

As I ran the sponge over Jens’ body, I said nothing. I moved gently over the deep purple bruises on his arms and back, and knew that they would hurt him even more the next day. After a few glasses of whiskey, Jens began to nod his head deeply into his chest, and I helped him into the bedroom. It occurred to me that he might bleed in the night, so I eased his shoulder out of the shirt I had lent him, and folded it, placed it by the side of the bed. Instead I wrapped him in my painting smock. I remember, as I put out the last candle, the bruises on his chest that seemed to spiral into his nipples. His chest was thin, almost shrunken, and covered in a thin down of blond hair. I lay beside him in the darkness and listened to the air whistling in and out of his lungs.
Julia reached onto the coffee table for the remote control, turned the television on. I brought her a cup of chamomile tea with honey but she didn’t touch it. I made dinner, chicken sandwiches, but she didn’t eat, only sat and watched television into the night. Eventually I went to bed, after bringing her a blanket, leaving her curled up on the sofa. In the morning she was gone.

The next few times we made love she never closed her eyes but watched my face carefully. I stared back at her, and we did not speak.

my aunt’s voice again: you cannot write this story. how dare you. you cannot write this story until you have immersed your body in pain. do you hear me?

julia? why don’t you pick up?

The next morning we sat together in the kitchen, and his face was pale with pain. It hurt his legs to sit, and it hurt his back to lie down. He smiled bravely. Time to go, he said finally. At the door he turned, and grabbed roughly at the back of my head. He kissed me on the ear, hard enough that I could feel his teeth against my earlobe, and a hot breath across my scalp from his nose. I patted his shoulder gently. He looked at me and nodded, before walking away down the stairs.

After he left, I flipped my sketchbook to a new page and tried to draw him as he appeared in that last moment, turning to look back at me. The look in his eyes as he reached forward and grabbed my head, the line of his jaw, the vein that stuck out a little in his temple. I drew it all and it was perfect, the swelling in his eyelids, the cuts on his lip, exactly as I remembered them. This portrait I kept, folded in my canvas bag on the trip to Iceland, although I have since lost it, possibly out in the country, salmon-fishing. I don’t need it anyway, I can remember the exact way his face looked, and more than that I will always remember his lips against my ear, the tips of his teeth as they crashed against my plump lower earlobe. The way his hips moved toward mine, and the sound of the breath from his nose, like a winded horse.
This farm that you walked to. I mean after the business with the jeep. Where the farmer took you in. Please look at this map. Is it here? The farm? Perhaps here? I visited one of these places, but it's abandoned now. They say that everyone is giving up on farming and moving into the city. Is this true? Why?

Julia is the kind of person who shouts at movies, who screams loudly enough that she herself becomes part of the show, and people look back during the exciting parts, just to see how she will react. When we first watched Psycho, she grabbed my arm and squeezed, her nails digging into my biceps. She opened a cut over my round, puckered polio vaccination scar and it bled until my white shirt was stained on the arm. "Oh god I'm sorry," she said, but she couldn't stop laughing. We soaked my shirt in the bathroom sink, which just made it turn pink. I smiled. "I always wanted more color in my wardrobe," I said.

"Shut up," she said. "I'm buying you a new one."

"Don't be stupid," I snapped. I stopped, surprised at the sound of my voice. "I'm sorry," I said. "Jesus, what's happening to me?"

I have tried to remember his face how it looked before the beating, but the swelling in the eyes, the cuts on the lip all superimpose themselves onto my mental image. One thing I forgot to tell you. One of his front teeth was chipped by the butt of a rifle, and after that he whistled a little every time he spoke. After that day, I only saw him once. Have I told you?
Out in the rocky tundra near Reykjavik, I am wondering: is this the place? Or this? I imagine the faint tire-tracks of a small military vehicle, buried under the frost-humps and rocky hills. I came here because there is a house, a small, abandoned mobile home that stands out by the ocean. Across the water I can see the city, and the house squats against the tide like a crab. I am told that this is where people who were suspected of spying for the Germans were taken; that they were tortured here, that hot irons were applied to the bottoms of their feet and to their palms and they say that one old man had a finger cut off of his right hand because he was playing with a short-wave radio. Beside the house is a concrete platform of the sort that once housed cannons and bunkers to protect us from invasion. The house is locked; and through the smeared dirt on the window I can make out a stove, a single chair. I wonder: how much of this can be true? Surely this is just an abandoned mobile home. Perhaps a fisherman lived here, or kept this place to hide himself when he was drunk. But there is a sound to the house, somewhere below the register that humans can hear clearly. It is the sound of pain creaking in the prefabricated walls, a kind of keening that mimes the sound of the ocean on the beach.

We stayed in Stockholm for a few days, it must have been three or four. We didn’t know why we were kept waiting, until someone asked the people at the embassy to tell us what was going on.

“The ship isn’t there yet,” we were told, finally, by the ambassador. “She hasn’t arrived in Petsamo.” He would tell us nothing else.

Each passenger, when asked, had three or four theories as to why this might be, but the truth was that none of us knew. There was a rumor that the Esja was being held in a Norwegian port by the Germans. There was another rumor that she had been sunk by a German U-boat, and that we would be stuck in Stockholm for a very long time indeed. I didn’t mind. Stockholm was a beautiful city then, and I presume it still is. On clear days I could see thin stretches of land reaching out from the harbor like hands.

I spent the days wandering around the seaside, looking at the boats. Sometimes my friend the watchsmith would come with me and sometimes he would stay at the hotel. I think he had a magnum of something or other in his room, because I could smell it on his breath. He wasn’t a drunk, it’s just that those were hard times for us all. That watchsmith. What was his name?
I look around me at the landscape and wonder about the story I have heard. Is this the place? I think about breaking the lock, but then I imagine that there may still be people living here, lying in silence in the dark room, and that I might startle them awake. Instead I trudge back through the lava and tundra and step into the seat of my rented Cherokee. The sound of the motor drowns out the noise of the house, the noise which I probably imagined anyway.

Eventually, after a few days of waiting, the embassy people put us on a train. The watchsmith asked a person at the station to tell him what the story of the Esja was. He was told only that the ship would be there on time, that it would be waiting for us when we arrived. The watchsmith, who was still complaining of a headache, went to sit in the shade and shut his eyes while we waited for the train to come.

I have started smoking again. There is a small shop next to the house where I stay that sells the old unfiltered Camels, the black death. In the mornings I walk there, and pay with damp 1000kr bills wadded in my palms. This shop also sells chocolate and dipped ice cream. If it’s sunny I buy a chocolate dip before getting into the jeep, driving to the country again. I have been doing this every day now. Where the old man cannot give me answers any more, I look for them in the shapes of frost-mounds, in the locations of cairns, which it is said may be used to navigate a trip to Akureyri on horseback. This landscape is an aid to memory; I begin to remember more clearly than he ever did.

I walked over to the side of the platform and saw an old man sweeping dust into a dustpan. His overalls were straining against his backside, and I could see the outline of a hip flask against the thinly stretched cloth. I walked up to him. He stood and looked at me. He had a beard growth of about two days, and his eyes were bloodshot. I tapped two fingers against my lips in a smoking motion. He smiled. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my package of cigarettes. I took two out, stuck one between my lips and lit it with a match. I handed the other man the lit cigarette and he held it still between his fingers as I lit mine from the orange end of his. I smiled again. He said something in Swedish and I shrugged, to show that I couldn’t understand. He walked over to a bench and sat down, gesturing for me to sit beside him. When I did, he pulled out his hip flask and sipped deeply.
For instance: I can remember the day that Jens' body was dragged from the ocean, how the police pulled his limp frame from the fishnet and called for a doctor. How the doctor examined the bruises over Jens’ eyes and ribs, and combed his fingers through the dead man’s matted hair. How I must have stood and watched from around the corner, heart racing, knowing that I must do everything possible to avoid detection. How I/he hid myself in the alley while the police moved about the dockside, asking people if they had seen any confrontations the night before. How as the doctor and the police officer walked by his hiding spot, he heard one say to the other that Jens “had been pushed from behind by a smaller man, or perhaps a strong woman.”

It was Schnapps—I could smell its sharp caraway-seed flavor from where I sat. He handed me the flask and I took a small sip. It was a fair trade, but I had hoped for whiskey. The old man and I sat together on the bench until the train came. Once in a while he stood and pretended to be sweeping when other men in overalls were around. As soon as they were out of sight he would grin at me and sit, sipping from his flask, sometimes smoking. I will never forget that man, the way he would smile when his bosses were out of sight and how his shoulders would shake with silent, exaggerated laughter. I smiled back, of course and I would even tap him on the shoulder when I saw one of his bosses coming. He would leap up and sweep the ground in front of us in wide, dramatic motions.

I can't picture that old train anymore, but do you know what I see when I try? When I shut my eyes and concentrate, I see the letters CP on the sides of the boxcars. Canadian Pacific. Isn't that crazy?

hello? pick up, please. hello?
All of this I read in the hills, and sometimes I park the jeep and listen to the tapes of his voice, and if I shut my eyes I can feel the sway of the boat, the bus, the train, and I can feel the buttocks of the next man pressing into my hips, and his breath in my ear. The noise of the engine room pulses in our spines as the room rises and falls with the motion of the sea. The first few nights I remember one of the men who threw up, and his orange vomit spread across the floor toward the sleeping frames of the others. I/he smiled and spread his blanket on the floor to stop the flow, soaked up as much as he could and threw the soiled sheet into the ocean. He was cold each night after that, and the rattle in his lungs that he developed on that trip was still clearly audible in our interview.

After the old man and I had sat together for an hour, he looked at me and beckoned for me to lean in closer. He winked. He patted me on the knee and began to unbutton the front of his overalls. What he showed me was a broad pink scar that extended from his belly button to just under his left nipple. It was three centimeters at its widest, and tapered to a point. He looked at me sadly and made a motion like a hook tearing at his skin. He made the same motion again, this time accompanied by a tearing noise in his teeth. I clucked sympathetically. Since then, I have often wondered how he got that scar. I have invented scenarios, but none of them seem quite right. As he was buttoning his overalls, the train came, and whistled on its way into the station, kicking up dust on the platform. Thinking back, it reminds me of a Western. The old man got up and tipped his cap to me, and walked away, whistling. I stood up and walked over to where the watchsmith was sleeping, using my suitcase as a pillow.
Of course I cannot have remembered all these things: and the feeling I have is that I did not remember them, that they came to me as new information. The rasp in his voice. Jesus. After all this time he’s still smoking. I remember meeting him for the first time, the way he looked, short and broad, standing in the doorway to his house overlooking the bay. “You are the interviewer,” he said to me. “The Canadian.”

I nodded and walked in through the door, careful not to get a sliver from the banister on the inside hallway. I can remember it all. His shirt. His suspenders. His pants. His face.

When I met him the first time I remembered him immediately from the photograph—he was in the front row, thick in the waist even then, but ruggedly handsome. The photograph was taken after the group finally arrived home in Reykjavik, and he looked tired but happy. At least then I saw his smile as happy, although now when I look at the picture again I see a subtext of fear, of a wish to forget.

On the train from Sweden, the watchsmith and I sang songs, held ourselves erect by the windowframes and swayed back and forth with the movement of our car. The watchsmith was feeling better now, having been sick once at the train station and twice since the train left Stockholm. He threw his arms around me several times and said “It’s good to have friends in these terrible times.” I smiled, and pushed his arms off my shoulders. Others were staring at us now. “Everything will be fine,” I said. The watchsmith looked at me curiously. Then he shrugged and drank deeply from a bottle of wine that he had produced from his valise. “Friends,” he said. “That’s what you need.” I smiled, but I was thinking of the old man and his scar that reached, like a scythe, upward across his chest. My mouth watered again, and I wiped my chin. “Goddamn,” I said. “Give me some of that.” The watchsmith looked carefully at the label of his bottle for a moment, and I thought that he was going to say no, to keep it for himself I shrugged and grabbed for the bottle, pressed it to my lips. The watchsmith said nothing. “Friends, right?” He nodded. When nightfall came he slept behind me, the weight of his shoulders pressing heavily on my back. He was snoring. I tried to lean his body against the side of the train-car, but his chest was too round, and the rocking motion of the train always drove him into me, again and again.
I remember the same expression from a photograph of Julia that I found in a drawer in her apartment. She was lying on a couch, and there was a book folded in her lap. She looked about fourteen. She was wearing a poodle skirt, which was not very becoming, and long knee socks pushed down around her ankles. Her legs were crossed, and there was a muddy handprint on the front of her white shirt. She was smiling, the way children smile, but there was something else, something in the way she looked at the camera. I couldn't help thinking that a smile was the defence against the menace of the photographer. I wondered about that photo often. I even asked her who took the picture. Her father? She couldn't seem to remember, but then she was high half of the time I spent with her. "I think it was a friend, our neighbor or something," she said once, but she looked away, as if she knew it was a lie.

As I slept that night, and felt the watchsmith's sharp shoulder digging into the space between my shoulder blades, I thought again of the man at the train station, and the long, purple scar.

The train lines only went as far North as Rovaniemi. You probably knew this already. We could feel the train start to slow down, and hear the slight change in the engines, the lower pitch to the hiss. Rovaniemi was the end of the line, and seemed like it must have been the end of the world. We all knew better. There was water, but it was to the south, not the north. To the north there was nothing but more land. That was the first day that I felt very tired. We took our luggage and loaded it under the seats of the old green buses that were waiting outside the station. We later learned that there were 600 kilometers still between us and the harbor in Petsamo, where the passenger-ship Esja was to meet us. The watchsmith and I sat in the back of our bus, and he leaned over the seat and stared ahead of him into the distance.

In the North country, all the rivers are flooding, and as I drive across them in the Cherokee, water flows over the tires and into the car, across the carpet and under the seats. It drains away as I pull back onto shore, but I remember the feel of it on my feet, cold and menacing.
Julia drinks chamomile tea; I have memorized this. Julia drinks chamomile tea with one half-teaspoon of honey and a little bit of milk. In the mug that I save for her, there is a line that marks the level I should pour the tea to, about a quarter of an inch down from the lip of the cup, a thin ring. When she is drinking tea, she normally puts out her cigarette, bends it into the ashtray. If there is no honey, she takes sugar. When Julia spills sugar onto the table, she takes a pinch of it and throws it over her left shoulder. I have tried to explain that this is normally done with salt, but she persists. Julia has several irritating habits, which I have also memorized: when brushing her teeth, she spits toothpaste into the sink, and sometimes forgets to rinse it down the drain, leaving a white, crusty teardrop on the porcelain. She leaves the radio on when she is not in the room. She listens to her headphones while vacuuming. She cries at movies. She spells “a lot” as one word. She argues with me because she knows it makes me angry. She kisses with tongue in public. She turns everything into a discussion about our relationship. She arrives forty-seven minutes late for dinner. She hums in the shower. She leaves pubic hair on the soap. She denies it’s hers.

It was morning when the buses left, and at first we slept, lulled by the sound of the engine. I was actually thankful to be sitting, since I didn’t have the shoulder of the watchsmith in my back. When I think of the bus ride, my eyes still start to close, and I think of sleeping with my head bouncing on the window. I don’t know how long the trip was, but I know that it seemed longer than it was. In my memory we spent days on the bus, but it can’t have been more than 15 hours.

When the watchsmith slept he let his head snap back onto his shoulders, and his snoring made the people in the front of the bus laugh. I woke him up then, and he stared at me angrily. “You’re snoring,” I said.

“There are worse things,” the watchsmith replied, and turned to his side, closing his eyes again. I sat in silence as his breathing slowed again. I think that was the wisest thing I heard him say.
Sometimes she writes long notes that tell me everything about how she feels. She calls me on the telephone and tells me she has written them. Then she burns the notes and leaves the ashes, the dry black flakes in the ashtray.

Let me try to explain about Jens. There were many people who did not like him. There was, for instance, the bartender at our bar, who found him irritating, and who never let him run a tab because of a time when Jens was 19 and he ran out without paying. There was also Kester, who tried very hard to like Jens, and even loved him in a way. Those two would fight sometimes, and it was all I could do not to get caught in the middle. Jens would laugh and tease, and Kester would become very quiet, and would visit me in the evening and talk about how his painting was going, and how Jens never gave him a moment’s peace to work. There was also me, and I should tell you that I liked Jens very much, but that I found him to talk too much, I found that he did not respect the natural silences between people. Do you know what I mean? I wonder if it was because he grew up in the country, but I think it was just Jens, just the way he bared his square teeth when he laughed, and how he would throw his head back, and every vein in his neck would stick out, and your eye would be drawn to the place where his chest would curve away under his collar and into his shirt. He was so tall that everyone was always staring at his neck, and he would compensate by putting his face next to you, his breath, his teeth, his lips.

Kester and Jens lived together. In the same apartment. I may not have mentioned that part.
It was the day after he left me in my apartment, the day after he was beaten up. I only found out when Kester came to my apartment. His face was red. “Christ,” he said. “You have to come with me.”

Down at the docks, they were pulling Jens’ body out of the ocean. I saw his body, white and heavy with water. The bruises on his face looked worse now, swollen and distended. His mouth hung limply open. “My god,” I said. Kester and I walked toward the policemen who were hauling the net onto the dock. Kester let out a strange cry from deep in his throat, ran toward them. I sat on the dock a few meters away. Kester began to cry as he was talking to the policemen. One of them slapped him. “Be smart,” the policeman told Kester. “Don’t attract any more attention to yourself. You’re disgusting.”

I remember two things. The sound, like a fish hitting the inside of a barrel, the wet smack of Jens’ body being cut loose from the net, and falling to the dock. I saw his face then, and his eyes were open, but bleary, like they were full of water. His fists were clenched tight, and his clothes stuck to every contour of his legs and arms.

he/it wakes up and doesn’t know if he is in Copenhagen or Reykjavik, but then he/it realizes that he/it is still on the boat, that the water in his dream came from the noise of the ocean in his ears, and the drowning feeling was because the watchsmith had rolled over in his sleep and he/it had wound up with his face buried in the watchsmith’s armpit. he/it stands, walks out into the night air, and throws up over the gunwhale and into the ocean, the pink vomit spreads across the surface of the ocean like an oil-slick, like blood in a bathtub or the Exxon Valdez. except that he/it is on a boat in 1941, and has never even heard of an oil tanker, let alone the Exxon Valdez and he/it hasn’t come home yet and has never been chased by police in Reykjavik, and never admitted that he had done anything wrong in the first place. also he/it remembers clearly that the drowning dreams began before the death of Jens, and that they were not like that at all, they had nothing to do with water or the ocean, they were more like having your lungs filled with sand, and trying to draw breath through their terrible dryness.
julia? pick up. i need to speak with you. its about the research. you see, i am still not coming home yet. why do i think you already knew that? if you were here you would understand. every day i get more material for my book, just from being here, being in the landscape. i think i should find work here, maybe stay for 6 months or something. maybe you could visit? anyway, i would like to speak with you. could you call?

I/he am walking down the highway in the country. I/he am looking at my feet. My feet are red with blood. There were shoes, I/he must have taken them off. I/he am feeling the rough volcanic gravel digging into the bottoms of my feet, cutting deeply through the soft skin, sometimes hitting the bone. I/he am falling to my knees. As I/he am lying in the road, the noise of wheels is approaching, except it isn’t a car, it’s a horse and cart, and I/he can feel the gait of the horse pounding the ground next to me.

The other thing i remember is being confused. The police said that an old man had reported seeing Jens’ body floating in the water about half a kilometer from shore. Then the coast guard had gone out and towed Jens back with a fish-net. Actually pulling Jens out of the water couldn’t have taken more than a few minutes. Kester had come to get me a half hour before. How did Kester know that they were searching for a body? How did Kester know that the body belonged to Jens?

After that, I only spoke to Kester three times. He came with me back to my apartment, and when he cried I held his face to my chest. He tapped his knuckles against my breastbone, and on his left hand there were tiny cuts, criss-crossed over the backs of his fingers. His ear looked like it had been bitten. “Were you in a fight?” I asked.

Kester sat up straight, and asked for tea. “It was the Germans again,” he said. “I am absolutely certain of that.”
Strong arms are wrapping themselves around my/his chest like a tourniquet. I/he am being lifted into the back of the cart, and my/his head is resting on a bag of feed. A dog snuffles around my/his ears and then it is licking my/his feet, its tongue sliding into the deep cuts, cleaning them.

I/he am lying in the bathtub, and the man who picked me/him up is filling the tub with warm water from big pots that he is warming on his oven. The bathtub is in the middle of the kitchen, and it is deep, and cast-iron. As the farmer dumps more pots over me, the blood is lifted off the surface of my body and lies like a film on top of the water.

I made some tea for us, and I added a little whiskey to Kester’s cup. We spoke very little that night, and he left at around seven. Afterwards the smell of him, of sweat and whiskey, hung around the walls and I drank it deeply into my lungs.

Stella came to me that night. She arrived at two in the morning and went straight to the bathtub. I painted a picture of the harbor, how it looked as the coast-guard ship sidled up, with Jens in tow, water-heavy.

I didn’t understand how Jens had died. If he was beaten, how did he drift so far from shore? Did the Germans come and put him on a boat, and dump him into the water? Why? I painted the net behind the boat, riding deeply under the surface.

Kester met me by the docks the next day. When I came up to him, he was standing by the pier, staring out at the ocean. A group of German soldiers walked along behind him, and he closed his eyes tightly, and I could hear him breathing fast. “There are things you should know about Jens,” he said.
I lit a cigarette. "Do you mean about the two of you?" I held the package of Camels out to him, but he waved it away. "I already know."

"No," he said. "Jens was a different kind of man. We never told you because we didn't know if you would understand."

I spat phlegm into the ocean. I had developed a bad cough, and the cold air burned my lungs.

"Jens was a night-person," Kester said.

I shrugged.

"What I mean to say is that he made his money at night. There are men who used to pay him."

My eyes widened. I drew heavily on my cigarette, tried not to appear surprised.

"Yesterday a group of them took me and him on a boat." Kester was pale. He turned his collar up and shivered. "They took us in a boat and they told us they were going to kill both of us, and dump us in the ocean."
My/his head is heavy, and I/he roll it around, trying to show the farmer that I can hear, but there is a ringing in my ears, and I/he will understand later that I/he have lost most of the hearing in my left ear, and that the cut that runs from my chin to my nose, across both lips will turn into a scar. I try to open my eyes, and the farmer puts more food in my mouth. I try to chew it, but it falls out onto my chest.

Kester coughed. “Then they said they wanted to see me beat him. They put a gun in my mouth, and they pushed me at him and they said ‘beat him like you beat him at home.’”

We stood in silence. I could hear a rattle in Kester’s lungs. “I’ll take a cigarette now,” he said.

I handed him the package, lit a match, and held the flame to his face. Kester took the match from he and lit the cigarette himself. He coughed.

Don’t want any more? Okay, the farmer says. But the next time we eat will be tomorrow. Get out of the tub now, let’s put you in a bed.

It sounds like he is talking through a pillow, or through sand.

“You see, Jens already looked beaten up. He had bruises over his eyes, and they thought it was me that did it.”

I pictured Jens’ face as it was when he had left my apartment, his eyes almost swollen shut, his lip split open.
The end of the story is that I/he was driven in the neighbor’s new truck into the city, and that I/he forgot the name of the farmer who took me/him in and that I/he tried finding him later but I/he couldn’t remember where it was exactly, and couldn’t even remember what the man looked like, whether he had blond hair or brown, or even if he was old or middle aged, although I/he had a feeling he was a very old man, old enough that by now he is almost certainly dead, and I/he am thinking about other things now, the whole incident is behind me.

Instead, I/he am working at painting signs for a living again, and I have begun sitting by the docks in Reykjavik and sketching the men who stand around waiting for temporary work when the trawlers come in. They pull their hats down over their eyes and they sit on the moorings, usually in pairs or groups of three. I/he have tried to listen to them, to see if there is a pattern to the way that they talk, but they are discussing all sorts of subjects. The British. Chess. The war. The chance of one or both of us being hired today. The ocean. The weather. The fishing. I/he have done a few drawings of them in India ink, but the lines are so close together that their facial features are blurred, marred by an overabundance of detail. I/he have learned not to let them see that I/he am drawing their portrait; many of them are tired of the British presence here, and tired of the feeling of drowning, of being watched.

“So I beat him. I hit him as hard as I could. What else could I do?” Kester’s hands shook as he brought the cigarette to his lips. “I needed to tell you,” he said.

“Jesus,” I said. “I’m not a priest.”

“His face started bleeding so quickly, and soon it was all blood, and it was splashing on me, on my clothes and the sound of it was dull, like hitting meat.”

Kester threw his cigarette on the ground. “The worst part is how much I liked it. I wanted to hit that bastard for months.” He started to walk away. He turned and looked back at me, buttoning up his trench coat.

“When they thought it was enough, they put a bullet through his head and dumped him in the water. Then they took me home. That’s where the story ends. There can’t be a story after that.” Kester walked away, and I watched the backs of his heels clicking on the docks. I never saw him again.
hello?
who is this?
who’s speaking, please?
can i speak with julia please?
oh. are you the boyfriend?
who is this?
im sorry. i need to know who you are.
do i have the right number?
this is julia’s father. are you the boyfriend?
what? why are you there?
you are the boyfriend, right?
yes, but what is going on, please?
 julia swallowed some pills about two weeks ago.
what?
i would have tried to reach you. where are you? norway, right?
where is julia? can i speak to her?
we took her to the foothills when we found her. she hung on for a few hours.
jesus.
where are you? is it norway?
iceland. jesus christ.
did you know if she was depressed?
what? no. i dont think so. julia was always a little depressed.
if there was any warning, we--i need to know.
ok.
are you alone there?
yes. i mean no. not really.
are you sure?
yes. jesus christ.
ok.

I remember being angry then, thinking that if it had been me I would have refused, would have told the men to shoot me instead. I later learned that there are times when you will do anything just to survive.

I have always assumed that the “they” of Kester’s story were German soldiers. But he never specifically said they were. For all I knew, “they” could have meant a group of men, any group. Like Stella said, the night is dangerous.

Everything about Jens made more sense then. The money, all the people who didn’t like him, and so on. And I understand now why Kester was always so angry, why he was always looking at Jens like he’d been betrayed.
Jesus. The sound of Jens on the dock, how it was like a giant flounder, wet and dull. The sound of a waterlogged towel falling to the floor of a wooden sauna as you lean over to pour water on the coals. For Christ’s sake. The sound of him was like a thumb bracing against the flat side of a paper match, or the sound a candle-wick makes as its flame drowns in too much paraffin. In slow-motion: first his body, with the wide, slow thud and then his arms, snapping like magnets to the old boards. His face, swollen like a broken limb, looking as though it might burst. He is all full of water. I can imagine the feel of fists against his damp flesh, sinking in, and as I strike him harder and harder it is amazing how little sound it makes.

The old man claims he did not watch Jens die. The landscape tells me otherwise. The jeep has a memory of Jens’ body sliding beneath the surface of the ocean, and being enveloped by waves that penetrated his skin and filled his sallow coin-sack of a body with water.

I dreamt of drowning on the bus from Rovaniemi. The watchsmith snored beside me, leaned his heavy frame against mine, but I pushed him away, tried hard to breathe. It was only when we stopped in the tiny little village where the people lined up with lunch for us, little sandwiches in bags and small bowls of stew that I realized that I was hungry. I took a bag of food from an old woman who smiled at me and touched my cheek with the backs of her fingers. She said something in Finnish to me, and I smiled, tried to bow, but my neck was stiff from sleeping on the with my head resting on my shoulder.

When I looked around I saw that other people had tears in their eyes, they were hugging the villagers, and everybody was laughing under their breaths, the kind of laughing that comes from deep sadness. My shoulders ached, and I stamped my feet. “It’s cold,” I said. “Jesus, it’s very cold.”

The old woman must have thought I was talking to her because she smiled, said something else and put her arms around me. I stood stiffly, patted her back. “Thank you,” I said slowly. Her eyes widened. I smiled, and we shook hands. As I sat in the bus seat, looking out the window, the old woman made eye contact, waved as we drove away. I think I waved back.
It all reminds me of the way Julia would come to my house, smoke pot and throw up, and in the morning would have no recollection, would deny the whole thing. Or she would change it in her mind. “I threw up on the porch,” she would insist, “before I undressed for bed.” She would change around the memory, so as to forget that moment when I laid her on my bed and slid her jeans down over her hips, kissing her on her bony hips once before leaving to sleep on the couch. She never wanted me to see her naked when she was stoned, I never understood quite why. Sometimes I feel that I know what it must have been like to kiss Kester on the lips, how his left front tooth slightly overlapped the right, and how he would get anxious and ram his tongue into your mouth like a piston. Or he would do it too gently, like he was afraid of breaking someone’s teeth.

Good things happen in my life too. I don’t want you to think it is all glumness and sorrow. I had a wife, for example. We had two children, one boy and one girl. You don’t care about any of that. You only care about this one story. My life has other stories also.

I have told you about the woman on the boat, haven’t I? She reminded me of Stella because the first time I saw her she was wearing a man’s overcoat, and she had the lapels wrapped tight around her shrunken chest. She was too sick to be beautiful, the consumption had made her thin and shrewish, and her skin was drawn tight over her face. All her clothes were too big; she looked funny, the way clowns in a circus do, when she came up on deck, and tried to swim through the yards and yards of cloth in her wool dresses, sweaters and blouses. She would tell me what it was like to sleep in the cabins, how the cots were narrow but comfortable, at least for her. She giggled when I said that a man of my girth would need more room. She said that the blankets were a deep green, and they were made from wool that looked like it had been woven on one of those English machines. She brought her own wool blankets from home, she said, which kept her warm, kept the cold air out of her lungs. We stood together on deck often, staring out at the ocean. I asked her if she was frightened that we would be mistaken for a destroyer and sunk by a U-boat.
Kester was of course clumsy in other ways too. Don’t ask me how I can suddenly remember this. He was the sort of man who cannot sit comfortably in most chairs, the kind of man who gets taken advantage of by a beautiful lover.

This sort of clumsy man is prone to wait and wait while he is mocked and pushed around for years. He is blessed with a certain charm, the kind that makes him attractive to the opposite sex only because women feel sorry for him, want to mother him, to soothe his many nicks and bruises. However, they cannot stay with him for long; he must be replaced, upon recuperation, with a more suitable lover. He copes with this situation many times, at first he is even good-humored, although he starts to become furious with himself when he drops a glass, or spills coffee into his own lap, until he suddenly is wound as tight as piano wire. He becomes bitter, and he gathers his friends closely around him. He sometimes becomes a political activist. He prints pamphlets in the basement of an old friend’s house and distributes them in the street, pushing people who refuse to accept them, who do not make eye contact. When this sort of man is betrayed, he is very unpredictable indeed.

“It was a lie of course. What I knew was not what drowning feels like, but what it looks like. The bloated flesh. The open eyes. The mouth, gaping and inside it a deep, crimson-purple darkness.

“I don’t be stupid,” she said. “We have express permission from both governments, that’s what the captain himself told me.”

I told her that I often stared out at the sea, looking for the terrible black crucifix to ramrod its way to the surface of the ocean and turn its glass toward us. “I know,” I said to her then, “A thing or two about drowning.”
I/he is a version. Can we please try to edit this story down to a reasonable size? I need you to get to the part about the jeep, the trip, and everything. Do you have no notion of what is important? Jesus. Even that farmer who told me the story of how he ran over his own dog in a wagon, and how the dog’s stomach spilled out over his hands like a bag of money, and how he tried to push the slippery stomach back into the abdomen, but the diaphragm (he said “diaphragm”) was burst, and his dog couldn’t draw a proper breath but instead rasped air over its throat. How the old man wrapped an old towel around the dog’s eyes and buried a slug deep in the back of its head just to end the pain, and how he blotted the sprayed brains into his towel before burning it, but left the spreading brown bloodstain in the grass, refused to touch it, still holds his breath as he walks over the spot.

I know that I must have been suspected in Jens’ death. Of course I had nothing to do with it. I have told you about the portrait, the one that I drew of him after he left. After Jens’ body was pulled out of the ocean, I was acutely aware of the presence of policemen and soldiers. Kester and I did not speak. Silently we had agreed that neither of us would admit to having known Jens. I would never tell anyone the story that Kester told me, because I knew that the police would not understand. They would not understand the importance of the history between them. The gun in the mouth. They would only see that Kester had beaten Jens into unconsciousness. What I suspect is this: that when Jens passed out from the beating, it was probably Kester who lifted him by the belt and heaved him over the gunwhale. And yet I do not believe Kester to be a murderer. I believe it was out of kindness, to protect Jens from whatever it was that the soldiers were planning to do to him. If indeed there were soldiers present. In the eyes of the police, Kester would be guilty of capital murder—and I could never believe that to be true.

Let me also say this. I only believe half of what Kester told me. There are things that do not make good sense. How is it that Kester escaped with only bruises on his knuckles? Wouldn’t the men have beaten and killed him too?
CHAPTER THREE

Introduction. I find it necessary to interject at this point to provide what I see as crucial information to help the reader sort through what is swiftly becoming a morass of factual data, hyperbole, and outlandish accusations. This juncture is appropriate for many reasons, not least of which is that at this point in the notebook there is evidence that at least seventeen pages have been excised. They appear to have been cut out with a very sharp knife, perhaps a precision drafting knife, although a paring knife would serve as well. I have been unable to determine what might have been on those missing pages, despite the kindness of the couple now in possession of the house in Hafnarfjordur, who were generous enough to allow me to search their house, even allowing me to remove the painting they had placed over the hole in the kitchen wall, and examine the space behind. The hole is ragged, and seems to have been made by a combination of hitting the plaster with a hammer, and tearing pieces out to fashion a nook just large enough to fit my arm up to the shoulder. This secret cache contained an ounce of mouse droppings, an HB pencil, a paring knife (perhaps the one used to perform the surgery) and a crumpled shopping list which reads: 4L milk. 24 eggs. Flour. Salt. Otherwise, the hole in the wall was found to be empty.

Through further research I have determined that the notebook in which these events are recorded could not have been purchased before 1972, and I suspect the date of this record is a good deal later than that. The specific type of coil binding was not mass-produced by stationery companies until the late 1970s and it remains common to this day. The book is, as I have mentioned, college ruled, with a stand-
ard space between lines, although in many instances the last two or three lines are missing, due to incidental damage to the paper, presumably incurred while it was hidden in the wall. No text appears to have been lost in this manner, although it is difficult to be sure. The yellow colour of the paper (which is not acid-free) and the level of wear on the book leads me to suspect that this document was compiled no earlier than about 1985. This does not preclude the possibility that the subject of the interview was still alive and able to be interviewed; based on textual evidence, I would place him in his early to mid-sixties. In terms of discovering the identity of the man being interviewed, this is not especially helpful. It does, however limit the list of possible subjects to those who were living at that time, and research is ongoing to determine which of the 270-odd passengers on the Esja could have been the subject of this interview.

It is likely that many readers will have begun to discern the logic for placing text in one column or the other, and surely some will have adopted a schematic understanding that places the interviewee on the right and the interviewer on the left. The narrative related in the pages which follow problematizes any such scheme, and I can only speculate that our historian (I am beginning to think of him the way we imagine the Beowulf author) abandoned the form of organization that he earlier adhered to rigidly. Perhaps as he delved into his research he discovered that the type of project he had initially envisioned was not possible, and the change in goals led to a significant change in methodology. I cannot help thinking that this is an unsatisfactory explanation, however.

My physiologist friend and I have been able to unearth very little information about the mysterious "Leni," if indeed that is her name, the old woman who provided us with this document. We learned from her neighbors that she was reclusive, that she had few friends, especially in the last year, since two of the ladies who
visited her frequently to play bridge passed away inside the space of a few months. No one seemed to know what the factors might have been that brought her to Iceland, although one man seemed to remember that she had been married to a fisherman. The same man later insisted that she was a seamstress, and that she had worked for the Swedish embassy during the war. He also purported to have been arrested on suspicion of espionage by the British, a claim which I found unlikely. I was informed that his accounts of events were not to be trusted, not because he was dishonest, but because he apparently suffers from frequent episodes of dementia, probably due to Alzheimer's disease. I have been unable to obtain medical records to verify this, as his doctor was unwilling to breach doctor-patient confidentiality merely for historical purposes. For now I am forced to treat the man as an unreliable source on the basis of hearsay and the internal inconsistencies in his own story. The truly puzzling thing is that no-one in the neighborhood can remember her name, which is striking in a community as close-knit as this one clearly is. I can only surmise that she was something of an outsider, perhaps due to her not being Icelandic.

There are depictions of criminal acts in the text which follows, and I apologize if the sensibilities of my readers are offended by my decision to print them as they appeared. My role here is merely as editor, not as censor, and I should certainly note that in no way do I approve or condone the actions of persons that are here described, many of which I suspect to be fictional anyway.

Although much of this historical account is technically accurate, I wish to call attention to many of the points which either do not conform to appropriate methodology, or are contradicted by current historical knowledge. To begin with, it is certain that the Esja had arrived in Petsamo when the passengers came; the ship had been waiting for two days in harbour there. The survivor's account of having seen
the ship "come over the horizon" must therefore be false, or at the very least misremembered. There is also a problem with timelines. The survivor informs us that his trip to France took place only months before the Germans invaded Denmark. This is not impossible, but it is highly unlikely. At the time that he describes, the south of France would have been overrun with German soldiers, and the presence of the Third Reich would surely have been keenly felt by any persons on a cycling tour through Europe. I suspect that the subject of the interview intended to place the trip at least several months before the start of the war itself, a much more plausible explanation. Similarly, the events leading to his departure to Petsamo cannot have been related in strict chronological order. At one point he describes the interval as a matter of mere days, and then goes on to relate the visits of several of his friends on different nights. The matter of time continuity does not get any simpler from this point forward in the text. Since this appears to be a more or less accurate transcript of a cassette tape (based on textual evidence) it is possible to explain this discontinuity by reference to the discontinuity of memory, something which problematizes the historical use of personal accounts in any case. This is a problem that seems to be particularly acute in this document, however.

As regards the death of one of the survivor’s friends, I have learned that there were no fewer than six persons with the name "Jens" who were murdered in Denmark in 1941. Although none of them seem to have drowned, at least according to official records, this does not necessarily negate the horrific account given by our survivor. Jens is a very common name in Denmark, like "Jonathan" or "Michael" in Canada. There are at least three possibilities: one is that the name "Jens" was chosen by the teller of this story to conceal the identity of his friend. Another is that "Jens" was a middle-name or a nick-name. Yet a third explanation is that the death of this man was never officially recorded, or that the record has been destroyed.
This is a strong possibility, given the likelihood of the complicity of the German military in the affair. Let it suffice to say that I can neither confirm nor deny many of the events that are related; and although I feel a tremendous anxiety over this as a historian, there is yet another part of me that says to press on with the text. I therefore implore you to keep reading, and either to come to your own judgement as regards the veracity of these accounts, or to let the matter be in silence, as I do.
Whenever I dreamt of drowning, I would wake up, and it was like I was paralyzed, my legs and arms stiff, my lungs ossified. When I tried to draw breath, my body refused to obey my commands.

Once as I lay with my eyes closed, in my little house on Hjalteyri, I felt my dog breathing next to my face, his whiskers tickling my nose, and my only thought was “he is breathing my air” and I believed that his sweet dog-breath, his bristly snout was sucking the air from in front of my face, leaving none for me. I sat up suddenly, panting. My dog was at the foot of my bed, in his usual place.

It was much later, around 1957, I think, that I started to understand the dreams a little better. After the war, my uncle went back into carpentry. He lived in Reykjavik during my years on Hjalteyri, so I saw very little of him. When I came into town for Christmas or my mother’s birthday, he would slap me on the back, just like we were old friends. “When are you going to move to the city and learn a trade,” he asked me once. I laughed politely. He had grown a moustache that summer, and it was bright red, even though the hair on his head was almost white-blonde. It looked very strange. “I’ll teach you the woodworking trade,” he told me. “You can be my apprentice.”
I/he remember walking home, head floating above his body, detached. Throwing up when I/he came home, vomiting into the sink in the kitchen, the feeling, like strong hands squeezing the diaphragm.

The thing is, Julia never remembered that others around her were hurting too. She was always selfish, always the victim. Like when I was driving to school, and saw her sitting in a coffeeshop with an older man, laughing, touching his knee, looking at him slyly from under the brim of her hat. Acting like it never happened. I hated all of her hats, the wide Sophia Loren brims. They cost more than any of her other clothes, but they looked stupid, out of place. “Like you’re pretending to be somebody you’re not,” I said to her once.

My uncle had been married twice, and his new wife, an ample and slightly older woman had just left him a few months before. It was rumored that she had caught him in bed with a girl they had hired to do some cleaning around the house.

His wife, what was her name? She was still friends with my mother, and she was sitting at the table with us when my uncle asked me to become his apprentice. I didn’t know if he was showing off, or if he really thought I would ever work in carpentry. “I make a living,” I said. “I design churches, small buildings.”

“That’s right,” my uncle said. “You design them and I can build them.”

I nodded, smiled thinly. “Try the plum-cake,” my mother said. “It’s better this time. Not so chewy.” She stood, and picked up the almost empty cake-platter. “You look hungry,” she said to me. She brushed a crumb off the collar of my shirt. “This is what napkins are for,” she whispered in my ear and walked with the tray into the kitchen.
I/he remember the following things about Stella. The scar, how each day it was a little different. Sometimes it was in the shape of a long, newly cut fillet. Other times it was more like a hook that pulled the soft, thin skin of her cheeks into a grimace. Stella drank tea with some honey and no milk. Whenever Stella bathed, she wiped the bathtub out carefully with her towel, remembered to wipe the mirror and the sink. “You never clean that place,” she would tell me as I/he served dry biscuits to her.

Later, when he understood about her, he kept his shoulders tight as he looked at her across his kitchen table. He rinsed a cup for tea in the sink, and listened to her talk about the Germans, how they are dirty, how they never bathe, and how they swear and curse at old women. “I suppose they beat small children,” he/I said to her. “I suppose they do that too.”

Stella is quiet now—she lowers her eyes, inspects the damp ring of water her teacup has left on the stained beech table. She opens her mouth to speak, but instead runs her fingers over her scar. “I suppose they would,” she says finally. “Don’t you?”

That evening we had boiled Atlantic Salmon, a sizable fish that I had filleted and deboned. It was dry and flaky. “Not enough fat on this one,” my uncle explained. “They need that fat to lock the moisture in.” He began talking about salmon-fishing, how he had a secret place, how he fished every summer. I had heard this story a million times from a thousand different men, and although I had never fished myself, I was not interested at all. I suppose I didn’t really listen, and I must have replied “Yes,” or “I suppose,” or “Isn’t it so?” to something he said, because the next morning he had packed the car full of fishing gear, rods, lures, two pairs of hip-waders, and was pushing on my shoulder to wake me.

Moments before I woke up I dreamt he had his hands over my mouth.
It is the hurt of knowledge, lukewarm in the stomach, like tea drunk cold and over-strong. “Don’t you?” she said her eyes still fixed on the table. He/I wasn’t sure if she meant “don’t you beat children” or “don’t you suppose the Germans beat children.” Instead of answering, he/it walks to the door and closes it, careful this time to avoid pinching his fingers in the space between the door and the doorframe. The webbed space between his forefinger and his thumb is still sore from when Julia slammed her front door against his hand, when he came to try to apologize for striking her on their picnic, that’s how he said it, “to apologize for striking you,” and she slammed the door over the soft flesh of his palm, saying “fuckyoufuckyoufuckyou” and he wondered where the sullen woman in the car was, the one who would express no emotion, not anger or sadness. It would make him remember when his uncle was sitting in the living room listening to Debussy and drinking whiskey so that he could avoid the inconvenience of feeling humiliated by the soldiers who held him fast by the elbows while one of them urinated on his shoes and poured liquor into the pockets of his pants. I want to say that Julia would remember that later too, except of course that isn’t possible, because he and Julia are from different stories. I must be confused. I suppose it must be Stella who remembered this later, who told him that the hunger of knowledge was like tea drunk cold and over-strong.

On the way there, he told me “Salmon fishing is an art like no other. It’s not like in the ocean, where you just scoop the fish up with a net. Fishing for salmon is more artistic. Much more artistic.” He stretched his arm out. “Hold the wheel, I need to get out of this coat,” he said. I held the steering wheel as steadily as I could, but even though I was almost thirty, I had never driven a car. The car started to veer toward the ditch before he grabbed the wheel, pushed my arm away. “Jesus,” he said. “You really aren’t good at much of anything, are you.”

As I sat beside him the rest of the way I said nothing. Once in a while he would speak, in a gentle tone, as if to apologize. What he didn’t understand is that I wasn’t angry. I was thinking of Kester and Jens, imagining Kester standing on the boat, watching Jens’ limp body sliding beneath the surface of the water. I try to imagine the group of soldiers behind him, laughing, pushing at his shoulders, pressing the barrel of a gun to his temple. But I can’t see them. For some reason I always imagine Kester standing alone.
All of this lies in the stomach, stagnant. I cannot remember if I am thinking of Julia or the woman on the boat. Could you tell me more about her? You seem to remember her only sometimes. I wonder sometimes if you had a relationship with her, if there was some sort of connection that you aren’t telling me about. Sometimes I am curious if on one of the nights when you stayed awake on deck all night because the engine room air was stale and close, and the smell of men sweating, and urine and farts and old underwear drove you out. I wonder sometimes if she might have told you that you could join her in her cabin, if you didn’t mind that she was convalescing. Her room would have been a smaller one, perhaps a midshipman’s or a bosun’s but not a larger room with a vanity, if the ship had one like that it would have been for the captain only. You claimed once to have seen the inside of the captain’s private chambers, but by the way you described it I have concluded that you must have meant the bridge. The woman’s room would have had little clothing, most of it white, and only a single bed. The porthole would have shown the green of the ocean against the sky, and sometimes a land mass to the south. She would have told you to lie on the floor, and to turn around as she slipped off her man’s overcoat and into a nightgown, and pulled heaps of blankets to her shrunken chest. In the night you would have been awakened by her coughing, and you would hold her head and wipe blood from her chin with your cuff.

It took seven hours to get to the river, and after that it was another forty-five minutes before we found my uncle’s secret spot. It wasn’t very secret, actually. It was a small dip that was hidden from the road by a cliff about seven meters high, and under it was a sandbank. “This is where we stand,” my uncle said. He sat on a mound while he pulled his hip waders up over his knees.

When the buses arrived in Petsamo, they took us all the way to the harbor. They say the boat was already there, that she had been sitting in harbor for two days waiting for us. That isn’t how I remember it. I will always remember standing on the pier, the cold arctic air biting at the exposed skin on my chin and neck, and Stella’s floral suitcase next to my foot. The fog was thick, soupy, and for a moment I thought I could see shadows in it, but they were too dark, too full of detail. I remember that I first saw the top of the boat’s mast as it came over the horizon, and then I watched as it came closer. I suppose I must be remembering wrong. If they all say the boat was there already, then it must have been.
The next day everyone would misunderstand. Women and men would look upon the convalescent with disapproval, but in private the men would wink at you, even as they covered their mouths to avoid contagion. Or maybe you waited until the rattle in her chest was still and crept back out into the night, let the brisk air keep you awake all night. Perhaps in the wee hours you crept back into the fulsome engine room and found a bare space of floor, closed your eyes were too exhausted to notice the discomfort. Perhaps you drew your knees up to your chest and slept outside, woke to find that the metal of the deck had leached the heat away from your body, and you spent the next day coughing, causing everyone to wonder if you had spent the night in the convalescent’s room, caught the consumption, and the men would wink at you as they covered their mouths to avoid contagion. You met the watchsmith, whose friend was a crewman with a private cabin. After waking for most of the night, the watchsmith got to lie down in a crewman’s cot and sleep during the day, and at supper he could not understand why he was the happiest one, the least grumpy. On the surface of the water once you saw a pink, foamy mass. You saw a group of birds, diving and circling over it, plunging their heads beneath the roiling ocean and catching fish that slid easily down their gullets, bones and all. As the boat passed by, you could smell the deadness of the sea, its violence.

The thing is, I know my memory of the event is not perfect. One thing I can tell you for sure is that it was dark, and the white of the fog was laid over the deep black of the starry sky, and the sun was just a glow on the horizon. I don’t know what time it was, but I suppose it was the middle of the night. I remember the whole trip as having taken place in darkness. The problem is that the trip was in the middle of May. It couldn’t have been dark in Petsamo then. Even at three in the morning, places that far north are brightly lit, and the sunset is six hours of faded pink that bleeds unnoticed into sunrise.

My uncle wasted no time in hooking up his rod with an appropriate lure and marching into the center of the river. I called after him. “Aren’t you worried about the current?” He smiled at me and waved, but I could see him stumbling as he lost his footing, then regained it.
But as I/he passed by the pink mass on the ocean, that he presumed was the site of a marine kill, perhaps the place where a shark had sunk its teeth into the flank of a kill, he/it was not thinking of the sanctity of life, or even of the sound of the sea, relentless, unforgivable. He was thinking of Jens, his head bobbing in the water and his water-logged body suspended beneath the surface like a lure. The group of men who laughed and slapped each other on the back, and Kester who stood apart from them, the fury in his eyes only now diminishing. The men, picking up Jens’ shoes from the deck of the boat and throwing them into the water, the distant splash echoing into the darkness. Kester, quiet and pale, looked as though he might cry, and one man punched him in the stomach. “Don’t be weak,” the man told Kester.

I/he can remember Kester pounding his fists into Jens’ cheeks until blood poured from his eyes. He remembers that by then Jens was not crying out or flinching, and that the reason that he was still upright was only that two of the men held him fast by his elbows.

The next day, Kester crying, saying “I had no choice, they would have killed me,” lifting his cup with bruised and bandaged knuckles. I/ he was trying to help, kissing his forehead, patting him on the back, but there was not a mark on Kester’s body, not apart from his knuckles.

“The trick is to brace yourself,” my uncle said. “Like this.” He leaned forward into the current, pushed against the water. He was hip-deep. I took the other rod and walked in up to my knees.

“This is far enough for me,” I said. I would later learn to fly-fish, but today I was using a regular rod with a spinning lure.

My uncle looked at me overtop of his glasses. “Don’t be weak,” he said. “Get over here.”

I felt the current pulling at my legs, and my lungs felt full and heavy, like sacks of coins. “No,” I said. “I can cast just as far from here.” My uncle shook his head, and turned away. He was perpendicular to the current now, and I could see his torso bobbing slightly, like a buoy. He cast out a line and reeled it in, quickly. I wondered for a moment if he knew what he was doing.

“You’ve fished before?” I asked him.

He didn’t look back, but there was an edge to his voice. “Of course. What makes you ask that?”

I shook my head. My left foot slipped on a rock, and I nearly fell to my knees. I gasped.
It's important to know these things about Jens. He was the type of man who stands too close, talks too loud. He almost always had a stain on his shirt; once he spilled coffee and beer on the same shirt, which he had borrowed from Kester earlier that day. He once tried to get into a fight with a group of six Norwegians, but they only picked him up by his belt and threw him into the street. He was 213 cm, and only 67 kilos. He wore brown pants with black shoes. He ruined one of Kester’s ties by leaving an oxford knot tied in it for seven weeks. He added four tablespoons of sugar to every cup of coffee. He stayed out all night while Kester was painting and came home in the morning, drunk and exhausted. He would bathe in the afternoon and leave the water in the tub to cool, and the sweat and oil from his body would sit like a film on the surface. His hair would clog the drains. He lived for eighteen months with Kester but never held down a job or contributed to the rent. He made Kester buy him meals but always had enough for liquor. He went to the burlesque often, and after the show ended he would hang around in front of the theatre and talk to strangers, invite them home. He would borrow Kester’s clothes, which fit him poorly. He spat at German soldiers and was surprised when they beat him. He never sewed his pink triangle onto his coat, pretended he didn’t know how. He laughed when Kester was angry with him for being seen with other men, refused to apologize.

Now my uncle did look back. “What is wrong with you?” He pivoted on one foot, and tried to take a step toward me. “Can’t you even stand in a river like a normal human being?” As he said this, he took a step forward, and from where I stood it looked as though the river grabbed him by the ankles and pulled him underwater.

I dropped my fishing rod. I waded toward the spot where he had disappeared, but he surfaced again several meters downstream. I plunged into the water after him, and I could feel the current carrying me like two strong arms about my hips.

My uncle was very lucky. The left heel of his rubber hip-waders got wedged between two rocks, preventing him from being pulled downstream. The current kept dragging him, pulling his face underwater, and when I reached him and pulled his head up, he gasped hoarsely, tried to draw breath. “Jesus,” he said. “I’m stuck.”

I was wet from head to toe now, so I fumbled with my hands under the water until I could feel where he was caught. The heel of the boot was wedged tightly between two rocks, one jagged and one smooth. The jagged one had pierced the rubber around his ankle, and there was a tiny, coin sized hole through which I could touch his flesh with my fingers.
I will never forget Kester on the last day he saw him, the way his eyes were red and swollen. "Christ," he said as he came into the apartment. "Don't you ever dust in here?" The way he sat, his knuckles bandaged, and how he trembled when he spoke, how there was a tremor in his hands when he told me about the work he had done, the pictures he had painted that day. "I discovered the most vivid red, a wine-red, almost a purple," he told me and I had a feeling like Kester was really talking about something else, talking about a darker purple, a bruise color that lurked deep beneath Jens' skin when they pulled him out of the water.

Kester talked about everything except for the time when he killed Jens, even told you about a time when his father took him pheasant hunting, how they shot at a bush and killed Kester's dog instead, how he held the dying dog's head in his lap and cried, while his father paced around in a circle and swore, asked why did they bring the dog if Kester couldn't even control where the damn thing went and did it just think it could go into any bush, go anywhere it pleased just like a free spirit? Kester's father told him that he needed to learn about control, needed to learn how to train an animal. Did Kester realize that although his father had pulled the trigger, that it was Kester who had killed the dog by not keeping track of the bushes it was running through, chasing rabbits and who knows what else?

"Take off the hip waders," I said. I had my left arm around his chest, and my right was pulling vainly at his stuck leg.

"You're crazy," my uncle said. "I'll be soaked." He bared his teeth in pain.

"We're soaked already," I said. "Take them off now." I didn't wait, but slid the suspenders off his shoulders, pushed hard on the stiff rubber of the belt.

His body came out of the hip waders easily, like it had been lubricated. Surprised at my own strength, I towed him onto the sandbank. His lips were blue, and he wrapped his arms around his own chest as he shivered. For some reason I was not cold, even though I also was soaked, my hip-waders full to the brim of water.

I sat, and water sloshed out the back of the broad pants. I pulled them off and emptied them out, put them over a rock to dry. My uncle had still not said anything. He was just staring downstream, shivering, his shirt clinging to his back and arms.

"The rods," he said. "You didn't save the fishing rods."
There are three reasons not to trust Kester’s version of the story.

Reason one: Kester has the kind of eyes that are always calm but have hidden beneath the surface a certain volcanic violence that builds slowly, geothermally and then erupts into being like gunfire. Kester keeps a diary of his own emotions, and sometimes writes “I was angry today. So angry I wanted to hit something, kill something.”

Reason two: Kester fell in love with a French girl once, even though he did not speak her language, and was not awake enough that he can even remember her name. Sometimes he is angry with himself and sometimes he is a dreamer, planning on returning, sweeping her off her feet, and won’t even imagine that she might have a husband by now, or children.

Reason three: When Kester beat Jens in the boat, he struck the bones in Jens’ face with enough force to break most of his own fingers.

I looked down at his ankle, where a circle of blood was spreading through the wool of his socks. “You’re cut,” I said. I knelt beside him, rolled his sock down his ankle. The cut was deep, a broad gash in the flesh behind his achilles tendon.

“Oh Christ,” he said.

“It’s all right,” I said. “Let’s just go to the jeep.” I tried to remember what the French doctor did for Kester, but I just sat and stared at the bleeding cut. It didn’t look serious, but we were both wet, and needed to get inside. “Can you stand?” I asked my uncle.

“My fishing rods,” he said. “Those were my only fishing rods.”

We sat in his car and waited for someone to come. Eventually a young couple took us to an old farm, where a woman who lived by herself cleaned his cut, gave us warm clothes and food. She stood and watched us eat, saying “When are you city people going to learn? You’re dumber than sheep. Half-wits.”
The story becomes more complicated when Stella is added to the mix. I want to go back to the story of the night she left for the last time, because that story seems to change with each telling. Did she arrive with the floral suitcase? What bags did she leave with you from the first time she came, the time she charged in and asked if you ever dusted. Did she really say “I don’t want to die without ever living with a man?” That seems wrong. I imagine her saying something less direct, more biting like “Surely this isn’t the first time someone has moved in with you.” I also suspect, due to the nature of your relationship, that she didn’t just show up one day, hoping you would let her in. Surely it would have been more gradual, perhaps beginning with casual lunchtime meetings and then growing into more complicated evening meetings at your apartment, which might have extended beyond a time when it would have been appropriate for her to make her way down the stairs past the Swedish landlady. Then she might have been forced to spend the night, and the first time or two you would both have pretended to a kind of modesty, where she began the night sleeping on the chair in the living room, but would be driven by the chalky smell of your watercolors to join you in your bed. From that point on what you have is a romance, but nearly by accident. Have you wondered if the misunderstanding was partly hers also, that perhaps she never intended it to happen this way?

My uncle never asked me to go fishing again. Later he would have a hook-shaped scar behind his ankle, and he told his children it was from the bayonet of a British soldier who had accused him of being a spy. He would glare at me when I told them the truth, and be relieved when they did not believe me.

I still haven’t told the story of when my uncle stole my cigarettes during the war, and how that was the reason for so many other things.
I/he painted her portrait many times, although in some ways never painted it at all. Whenever the portrait was finished, although I/he had sketched each detail with meticulous care, the final product would be a sham, a fake. I would see that I had given her face the features of another person. I had given her Kester’s nose, or Jens’ ears, or my mother’s eyes. The line of her chin was never right, always too high or too low, and once I complained to her that “the lines of your face are too much like the other faces I know.” She was hurt by that, and wouldn’t pose for me again, even when I said that the taper of her ribs to her hips was unique, how I wanted to reproduce that line so badly. I looked for the same slope in the landscapes, sometimes began with a line that looked like the side of her body when lying supine on a chair. I would add the details one by one; birds, light, trees, a boat in the foreground, until the details obscured the original line, and her profile became invisible, receded into the background.

In this sense every painting was a portrait of her. I never told her this, but sometimes I would run my fingers along her stomach and close my eyes, picture rolling hills.

Again, you need to understand how little I really knew about her. I suppose I knew she had a past, a story. I must have known. But she never shared it with me, and odd as it may seem, I never asked. We had one of those relationships where you don’t really know very much about each other. Well, that’s not strictly true: I did tell her many things about myself. Sometimes I would talk about my art, my sign-painting jobs, how much food was costing, or even about my mother back home in Iceland, and how her last letter said that my uncle was moving in for good, and it didn’t look like he was ever going to get a job, or his own house. I told her about my ambitions, how I wanted to reinvent art, reinvent myself, reinvent her. I told her about the lines of her body, how they would make a fabulous portrait, an amazing nude. She smiled, nodded sometimes, but more often fixed her eyes on some distant spot over my shoulder and murmured softly in assent.

Once she came to visit when I had no food at all, not even bread or dry biscuits. “Jesus,” she said. “I’m so hungry. Can’t you understand that?” She put her face in her hands. “I need bread,” she said, her voice cracking. “Bread with jam.”
he/it am trying to understand. I/he am understanding to try. The remember of the understand is that I. He is like jeep remembers. Does the understand correspond? The remember? Look for the rememb in the corrective. Try not to tear the page, try no corrections first. He is like correct responds. He is like corremember. The scalp cannot holed the hair like so. Can you lift the head again and listen to the sound, thunk? Try to remember this about the jeep. The rail, was it patterned with a grid for gripping boots?

That was the only time I ever saw her cry. I touched her shoulder, but she brushed my hand away angrily. "Damn you," she said. "Bread with jam."

That was the first clue I had that she was counting on me for food. Many people were hungry that year, because of the war, but I never thought of Stella as someone without means, without money. She was angry with me all that night, not because I had no food, but because I allowed myself to react with pity. I looked more closely at her, and now I understood the drawn, sunken lines of her face, the deep darkness under her eyes.

I noticed then that deep bruises had appeared on her elbow, and when she leaned on the table, a small amount of blood burst from her skin and pooled on the tabletop. She seemed not to notice. A drop of blood collected on her elbow, trickled down her arm. "You're bleeding," I said.

"Jesus," she said. She brushed at the sore with her fingers. "Do you at least have a cigarette?" She sat perfectly still while I lit a cigarette between my lips and handed it to her. She smoked in silence, and between us we drank a flask of whiskey, mixed it with tea because I had no coffee. As she slept that night, she cried out, clutching her stomach on her hands. I stared at her naked body, how thin and drawn she was, her hips narrow and pointed, like daggers.
Julia makes me think of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. How she hates being in the light. How she kisses with her eyes closed. How she has a history, a past. I could never have been her Mitch, could never confront her and say "I thought you were straight!"

I rarely saw her during the day. We met once in a while at the lunch counter, but mostly she came to my apartment at night, and we sat in dimly lit rooms, and peered through the darkness at each other's silhouettes. It was not very much like a normal romance. We never went out together, to the cinema, or for walks along the harbor. In part this was because of the presence of the Germans, which made it difficult for us to be out, and Stella would always react with such vehement fear and anger when soldiers passed by that she could only avert her eyes and bite her lower lip until it bled. There were reasons for this, which I would come to understand later.

You must have known about malnutrition then, known how scurvy can cause the bruising, the bleeding in the gums, the loss of teeth. When you found the drops of blood on your pillow, when you confronted her, you must have known some of this at least. Everyone knows that Denmark was not as bad as other places, there was enough food to go around. All she needed was lime. Couldn't you see that?

We went out very rarely. Usually she would leave in the morning before I woke up, and sometimes would leave a note saying "see you tonight," but not always. I kept those notes by the easel while I worked, sometimes imitated her wavery script in the shapes of objects, the surface of a man's pant-leg or the side of a mountain.
Julia never ate fruits or vegetables, and there are pictures of her from when she was a teenager that show the mottled bruises all the way up her arms, the sunken eyes and once she confessed to me that one of her front teeth is false, that it had to be replaced when it fell out, stuck to a lollipop. She had scurvy, that was what the doctor said, and she had to chew vitamin C tablets every day.

She grimaced when she had them in her mouth, complained about the taste for hours afterward.

"Can't you just eat an apple?" I asked her this, hardly believing what she said.

"I can't eat that stuff," she said. "It makes me throw up." She looked down. "That isn't the only thing that makes me throw up."

I didn't believe her, and so I tried to feed her all kinds of fruit, pressing wedges of apple drenched in caramel sauce against her lips, but she pressed them shut and pushed me away.

"Jesus," she said. "I can't even eat jam, you idiot." She wiped sauce off her chin. "Not even jam."

It was almost by accident that all of this happened. I have told you that sometimes I would go to the cafe where we met and drink coffee, wait for her to arrive with her girlfriend. I did this, a few days before the trip to Petsamo left. I needed to talk to her. I didn't know if I should leave or if I should stay. I knew that both Iceland and Denmark were crawling with soldiers, so I didn't think Iceland would be any better. But I wanted to go home. Did you ever feel that you were drawn to a landscape for some reason that you could not explain? In fact, I found the sparseness of Iceland, the dim rainy light of Reykjavik unpleasant. And yet I had begun to think I would get on the ferry to Stockholm when the time came, but I needed to talk to Stella first.

She was sitting with her friend when I arrived. Her eyes rested on me for no more than an instant, and then she looked back at her companion, drew calmly on her cigarette. I went and sat at the other end of the cafe, ordered a coffee when the waiter walked over. I waited, and after a few minutes, Stella's friend left. Stella sat at the table across the room, finished her cigarette before walking over to join me.
I am trying to remember about the jeep. The rage that is known in Iceland by the name of berserkur. In stories they talk about seeing red, but that isn’t how it happens, really your vision is just blurred, and you can see everything but you notice nothing, as if you have stepped away from your body, and you are watching it do unspeakable things.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. I shrugged. She looked away, annoyed. “Give me a cigarette,” she said.

“I need to speak with you,” I said, handing her a cigarette, then lighting a match for her.

“All right. Talk.” She looked at her wrist, as though to check the time. She wasn’t wearing a watch.

“It’s about the trip back home,” I said. “Some people have arranged a trip home to Iceland.”

“You already told me this,” Stella said.

“I didn’t want to go before talking to you,” I said. “I wondered if maybe I should stay here, with you.”

Stella said nothing. She put her cigarette down on the edge of the table, still burning. It rolled sideways a centimeter and stopped. “Why would you want to?” she asked finally.

“I don’t know,” I said. “That’s what I’m asking you.” I paused for a moment. “I’m asking if there is a reason I should stay.”

Stella shrugged. “I can’t control what you do,” she said. At least I think that’s what she said.
At some point every story here comes down to violence. Isn’t that true? The soldiers, how they move their tightly coiled bodies around the cities, their uniforms barely containing the malicious energy beneath the surface of their skin. They are always young, their hair blond and their teeth unbelievably white.

“That isn’t what I’m asking,” I said. “That’s not what I’m asking at all.”

Stella looked at me. Her scar looked droopy today, sad and a little bit damp. “What are you asking me?”

I sighed, frustrated. “It’s all very strange. You know that, don’t you?” I remember exactly what I wanted to tell her but somehow I never said it. “I mean how you come in the night and leave.”

“What are you asking me?” Stella asked again. She sounded afraid now.

“What will this ever change? Will I ever see more of you?”

“Everything changes,” Stella said. “Nothing stays the same. You of all people know that.”

For a long time we said nothing. “Kester has not visited for weeks,” I said. “Not since Jens died.”

Stella said nothing.

“Was Jens so important to Kester as all that? So much that he could just leave, just disappear forever?”

I don’t remember if Stella answered.
He is trying to tell the story about the jeep. In some ways every story he tells is the same story, and it always ends in the country, with the rail along the underside of the General Purpose vehicle. The shirt, soaked, and the face stinging from many cuts. It always ends with the mouthful of bile, the walk along the country road and the strong arms that grasp the chest and toss the body easily into the back of the wagon.

What I do remember is that we said nothing else while we sat together at the table, and I had a feeling that the two of us were making decisions about our lives without speaking at all, our silent bodies were communicating in a language only they knew, and which they had learned while crouched in dark rooms, while holding a candle up to a painting one detail at a time.

Eventually, Stella uncrossed her legs and stood. “I have to go,” she said. She walked across the cafe and out the door.

I did something then that I had never done before, even though I had always wanted to. I stood up and followed her.

I walked along the street beside her. “Stella,” I said.

She walked faster. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I think what I wanted to say is that I could stay in Copenhagen.”

“Why would you?”

“Stella, please stop walking.” I reached for her arm, but she pulled it away.
These connections can be made, if you want them to be. Any story can have any number of connections between people. This kind of information is an aid to memory. We never remember people, only relationships. What we forget is that the name of a person is not the same as the person named. Can you understand this?

I need answers to specific questions. What was the mode of transport between Copenhagen and Stockholm. You've mentioned that it was a ferry, but that is hard to believe. Can you be remembering this wrong? Don't forget, there was a war on.

"If you could just stop walking," I said again.

"Please go home," Stella said. A group of German soldiers was walking toward us. Stella looked at me desperately. "Please don't follow me." She put her palm in front of her mouth.

The soldiers were closer now. There were four of them, their grey uniforms rumpled, their faces unshaven. They were laughing and pushing one another. They pushed their way past us, the first three of them shoulder-ing Stella and me out of the way.

The fourth man grabbed Stella by the shoulders, looked closely into her face. "Leni?"

Stella looked down at the ground, shook her head. But the soldier smiled, repeated his question. "Leni," he said. He said something in German which I did not understand.

He called out to his friends, who stopped and walked back toward us. They spoke quickly and laughed, and I understood little except for the fact that they all seemed to know her. One of them placed his broad hand on Stella's breast and tried to kiss her. She pushed him away and they all laughed. She put her head down and kept walking, her shoulders shaking.
I am now remembering about Kester, about the time when we were traveling through France, months before any of this happened, and we stopped to eat some cheese that we had bought at a little shop. “We need wine,” Kester said. “To go with the cheese.”

I didn’t tell him that I was mostly a whiskey drinker.

“Merlot, I think.” Kester seemed to be tasting an imaginary flavor in his mouth. “Definitely a merlot.”

What I remember about this is that we stopped for the night, and as we lay under our blankets listening to the cows in the nearby pasture, Kester kept talking about wine, and which ones went with what kind of cheese. The only way to stop his talking was to kiss him on the mouth.

I stood there, in the middle of the group of four soldiers who were laughing, whistling and pointing at Stella as she walked away. One of them pushed me aside, and the four of them walked away down the street.

I stood alone on the sidewalk. I looked for Stella and she was gone. I stared instead at the retreating backs of the four soldiers, the wrinkles in their shirts like a spidery handwriting.

I went home, and instead of a still life, I painted a portrait of the German soldier who had recognized Stella, the one who called her “Leni.” I painted his mouth in the half-open innocent smile, his teeth white and shining, the inside of his mouth a pale pink. I closed my eyes and pictured every detail of his face, the faint crow’s feet next to his eyes, the dimple in his upper lip. He looked perhaps eighteen years old.
Later, I/he denied that this happened, and Kester looked uncomfortably at his shoes. “I understand,” he said. “The first time is difficult.” I/he tried to explain that it was just so he would stop talking about wine, so he would let me sleep, but then it seemed like he was talking all the time about it, he wouldn’t forget about it like I asked him to. When he told me again about how it felt, we were drinking beer together, and I hit him. My own impression was not that I hit him, but that I let my fist slide gently into his face, but I/he must have hit him harder than that, because the impression of his teeth is still in my knuckles, branded in purple.

Stella came to see me that night, and brought her small floral suitcase. She stayed a while with me, and left in the night. I never saw her again, but I packed my paints and sketch pads into the suitcase, which still smelled faintly of rosewater.

The suitcase fit squarely into the bottom of my rucksack. I left it there until I arrived in Reykjavik, and when I pulled it out the bottom half was damp and stained with water, and the mark that it left couldn’t be laundered out, in spite of all the tricks and advice that my mother and uncle offered as I sat in the yard and scrubbed, the noise of the ocean hissing in my ears.
I cannot leave yet. I must hear the end of this story, about the jeep, about Stella. Does it end in the same way? It seems like it is different with every telling.

After I got back to Iceland, I got to know about a dozen of the British soldiers who hung around the town. I introduced them to a few of the young girls that I knew and they kept me supplied with cigarettes and liquor. I know that this knowledge will cause you to see me in a different light. But I should tell you also that one of the soldiers regularly brought small bags of flour that he lifted from the kitchen on the base, and I always gave those to my mother, or to our neighbors. I want you to understand that these were relationships that we developed out of necessity, not because I wanted to be the sort of person that I became. The soldiers would come with me into the town, and I would help them avoid getting into fights with young Icelandic men, and they would choose a girl and drive her out into the country in a jeep, and what happened then I've never really known. The jeep was signed out to one of the soldiers, whose name was Anthony, and he and I gradually developed a kind of relationship, where he would drive with me to a spot near the encampment and then we would be met by a group of his comrades, and they would be carrying cartons of cigarettes and a few bottles of whiskey. We would load these under the seats of the jeep and drive back into town. Anthony would drive me to my mother's house, and we would sit in the dark and talk about the war.
I/he am remembering now how the story relates to my uncle, how when we sat together in the living room, I wondered if I should tell him about the connection between the cigarettes and what happened to him. I knew that he would blame me, but still I almost told him everything about it. Sometimes I wonder if it was a coincidence, if Anthony was bluffing that one time, but the fact that everything happened within two nights, that was suspicious.

We actually didn’t talk about the war, really. Anthony talked about it and I listened. I nodded when he got angry and murmured my assent when he said that the Icelanders were lucky that the Brits had saved us from certain invasion. The truth is that my English was still not very good, and although I could easily understand nearly everything he said, I often found that I could not express my own thoughts to him, couldn’t make my own sentences. The inside of the jeep was not padded, the seats looked like metal skeletons with the flesh stripped away, and the smell that emanated from the floor and doors was of motor oil, or a dense, greasy lubricant. There were four seats, and a small boot which Anthony told me could be fitted for a machine gun, but I never understood how. We would sit in the jeep in front of my mother’s house and he would say “Well that’s that,” when he was finished talking.

“Yes,” I would say, staring at my folded hands in my lap. At night my hands were starting to get very stiff, so I would rub my knuckles vigorously. I would open the door then, and stand in the street while Anthony handed me the requisite four cartons of cigarettes and three bottles of whiskey.

Anthony would lay his finger alongside his nose then, and say “remember what it is that we all do for you.” Then he would drive away.

I didn’t tell my uncle that I had seen men beaten far worse in Copenhagen, or that I had been beaten far worse the night before.
He never asked me/him about the incident, not directly. The soldiers just came up as he was leaving the house and put him in their jeep. "They probably thought I was a German spy," my uncle said. He was always looking at everything that way, always pretending that he was involved in some sort of intrigue.

"One thing I don't understand," my uncle said. "They kept asking if I had any cigarettes now."

I should explain that I never asked Stella about the incident, not directly. I imagined ways to ask her. "Who's Leni?" I might have asked. Maybe everything had been misunderstood. But I never asked. It was easier just to get on the ferry, and watch Denmark get farther and farther away. Other people were waving at friends and relatives, and I just watched the harbour grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared over the hump of the ocean.

One thing I remember about Petsamo: in the window of one of the houses I saw a little girl, who drew the grey curtain back and her face, a white oval, peeked out from behind the watery glass. She reminded me of Stella and Jens at once. A crack in the glass divided her face in two and the windowpane rippled over her mouth, making it look like she was a few centimeters underwater. I would dream about her on the boat. When we were told to change course by the British, and we docked for the weekend in the Orkneys, with dour red-faced soldiers standing watch on deck, I stood by the bow and stared down over the gunwhale. I thought I saw that little girl, floating, her dress spread out like wings from her body, but it was only a newspaper that someone had dropped into the water. I wrung my hands, tried to pound heat into the knuckles.

It could have been a coincidence. Any number of connections can be made between people, if a reader is stubborn.
I sat for several hours in the room, with my uncle. When my mother came in and saw my face closely for the first time she clucked. “Two in one night,” she said.

“No,” I replied. “This was yesterday.”

My uncle told me about the questions he was asked, but I’m certain he was making most of it up. In truth, I expect he was knocked out by one of the first blows that they gave to his temple. “They asked me,” he said. “If I knew about the smugglers, the ones who drop off supplies to the resistance offshore, and let it drift in with the tide.”

I squinted at him through the dimly lit room. “There isn’t any resistance,” I said. “Nobody is smuggling any supplies.”

My uncle smiled and winked at me. “That’s what I told them,” he said.

Anthony was one of the first British soldiers I saw when the small boat transported the watchsmith and me to the harbour in Reykjavik. We didn’t know each other then, but as I passed the watchsmith’s large trunk up to him, and the veins in his neck strained, his eyes met mine, and I remember thinking that this was a dangerous man, the kind who makes strangers stare at the ground, hoping he will go away.

I later met him on Laugavegur, when he and some of his friends stopped me. “Don’t worry,” he said, when I almost bolted. “We just want someone who speaks English.” He smiled then, and I began to wonder: how old is he? He looked maybe twenty-four. He had a wedding band, so I assumed he had a family. I tried to imagine what sort of father he might be, how he would smile at his children, whether he was the kind of man who is exuberantly affectionate but mercurial, or if he would cruelly shut his children out of his life, greet them in the evening with icy silence. Anthony took my hand in his, and as our skins touched, I began to like him, even though his palms trilled with the noise of submerged violence.

I was reassured by the ring, the wedding band, although Anthony later told me that he had taken it from the body of an Italian in North Africa.
I/he am remembering more about the jeep now. Its colour, painted in thick green, and the fingermarks on the steering wheel, and the dents from someone’s hand on the upper side of the door, where Anthony told me that he had gripped the vehicle as it turned over into a ditch. “These things turtile like you wouldn’t believe,” he said, and bared his teeth at the mirror. “Have I got any crud between my teeth?” he asked me as I looked away over the rolling hills. “Well? Have I?”

I won’t forget what Anthony said to me next. He said “There’s a reason why you and I met on this street today. When two people meet, they always want something from each other. I’ll tell you what I want, and you can tell me what you want. Then we can make an arrangement.” He grinned, squeezed my bicep with strong fingers. “It’s called communication,” he said. “It’s simple, but nobody knows how to do it anymore.” He let go of my arm and slapped me on the back. All of his friends laughed, but I had the sense that none of them understood any more than I did. I will never forget what he said, because it sounded so much like something from a movie. Whenever I watch gangster movies now, I picture Anthony, his olive drabs, his sleeves rolled up and buttoned tight over his thin but wiry upper arms.

Anthony always made me think of Jens, with the way he spoke to people, too close and too loud, and how he expected that you would laugh at his jokes. Anthony was far more dangerous than Jens; once when we were standing together on Laugavegur at 2:00 AM, a young man pushed him and said “Go home, English” with a thick accent. Anthony never hesitated before grabbing the boy’s arm and twisting it around his back until his arm broke. The boy screamed, and his teeth were straight, perfect. Most people would have stopped then, but Anthony knelt over the boy, grabbed his hands and broke all of his fingers, one by one.
29.6.40: the boat Skallagrimur rescued 350 British sailors yesterday, when their ship fell to an enemy mine. The British ship was about to sink when Skallagrimur came along, and all 350 sailors were brought onboard the Icelandic fishing vessel. There was little room for the extra passengers, as well can be imagined, but thankfully an English destroyer arrived within 33 hours and took the sailors on board.

On more than one occasion, Icelandic fishing vessels have been mistaken for members of Allied military convoys, and fired upon by German Uboats.

It was hard for me. I had no friends in Iceland when I arrived, and it was impossible to meet new people when there was always an entourage of soldiers around me. There was a big difference between these soldiers and the ones in Copenhagen. The Germans in Copenhagen were openly violent. They would seek out any excuse to beat any person they confronted. Some people were beaten more than once by them, sometimes just because of the way they looked, or something they said. The British soldiers always had a veneer of niceness, and they performed their violence in private, out in the country and in small, square white houses on the beach with a bright light and a single chair. People always spoke politely to them, but stared with open distrust when groups of soldiers marched together in time. The soldiers here would go to the streets and drink with the youth, leer at the women and then they would get into fights, singing soccer songs as they swung the butts of their rifles into the heads of their former drinking partners. They were like Hekla, like the ocean in November; silent one moment, then erupting. My job was to translate for Anthony when he was out during the night. When he met someone who spoke no English, he would speak louder, until he was shouting into their ears, and would throw his arms up in frustration at not being understood. I was there to keep him level, to keep his violence beneath the surface.
There is another way to tell the story of the fishing trip. A man is fishing for salmon during the spawning season. He hopes to catch a male with a salmon egg, and he can see the large torpedo-bodies zipping around under the pink, churning water. He has heard that it is difficult to catch salmon when they are spawning, because they are not interested in eating. He puts his hip waders on, and as he stands in the middle of the stream he can feel the motion of fish around his legs. He dangles the lure in the water, but the fish aren’t interested. They skitter away, trying to mate with each other, looking for the place where their eggs were laid the year before. Migrating.

All of this began several months after I arrived in Iceland again. When I think back, I wonder how it is that my mother never asked me where I kept getting cigarettes and liquor, since I had not held down a job. No-one was very interested in a sign-painter, since no-one had any money to spend on a new storefront sign. Still, there were a few projects that I worked on during the day, but for the most part my uncle and I sat together in the living room, and I shared my whiskey with him. He was only fourteen years older than me, and he wasn’t able to find a job either. The entire country was waiting for the war to end, for the British to leave.

At around nine-thirty, I would walk downtown, and Anthony would pick me up in his jeep. The soldiers with him sometimes changed, but he was always there, always the leader. There were always three of them, and I would have to perch on the boot, dangling my feet in between the two men in the back seat. Each time I would look for the mechanism that you could hook a machine gun to, but couldn’t see or feel it. I wondered if Anthony had made that part up, if in fact this vehicle had an altogether different military purpose. There were two soldiers once who drove their jeep off the pier and into the ocean, and they were pulled out of the water, drunk and sheepish, by an Icelandic fisherman in a small boat. That was a few years later, as the war was ending.
The important difference between these two stories is the old man, a man who had to kill his own dog after it was run over by a tractor, its stomach spilling out into his hands. This same man once met an architect who was building a church and said “Don’t sell yourself like a whore.” The architect stuck his chin out, and looked for a moment like he might take offense, but instead his shoulders slumped, and he looked at the ground, the volcanic rock crunching beneath his feet.

The truth is that I don’t remember the next part very well at all. I haven’t ever told anyone about this, not because I am ashamed, but because whenever I try to tell it it comes out wrong. I leave something out, or I tell something that didn’t happen.

It was early in June, a few months after Anthony and I had made our arrangement. He picked me up as usual, but this time we didn’t drive downtown, but went out into the country, directly to our meeting place near the base. He was alone this time, and I remember noticing for the first time that his eyes were a flat grey. He had a cigarette in his mouth when he picked me up, but as we drove, he never inhaled any smoke, just let it burn down to an orange ash, and tossed it out the window. He smiled at me, but I knew something was wrong. “No girls tonight,” he said. “No drinking. I had the boys bring something out for you, and then I’ll just take you home.”

I had a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. My mouth was dry, and I licked my lips, craving whiskey.
Another way to tell the story of Stella is this:
a man walks past a certain woman every day,
on his way to buy a coffee from a shop a
short way from the apartment he rents in Copenhagen. He knows very few people,
except for the ones he meets at the art school. He imagines that he and she are
involved in a romance, one that is shrouded in mystery. At night, she comes to him,
moves around in the dark room and he
listens, lying still with the chalky smell of
watercolors clinging to his fingers and
clothes. He smokes a cigarette, and enjoys
how the ash lights his hand with an orange
glow when he sucks on the unfiltered end. A
Danish girl. An unfiltered cigarette.

Our meeting place was essentially a hollow, a
small depression behind a hill, and beyond
that hill were the rows of temporary barracks
that the soldiers used, and the cannons that
pointed out to sea like giant scales. When
we arrived, Anthony stopped the engine and
got out, walked around to the front of the
jeep and lit another cigarette. The midnight
sun was out, but the sky was beginning to
turn pink and dim. “I’ll never get used to
these white nights,” Anthony said. “I don’t
know how you manage to sleep.”

I joined him in front of the jeep. “Could I
have a cigarette?”

He looked at me suddenly, out of the corner
of his eye. “What happened to the six cartons
from the beginning of the month?”

I looked down. “I smoked them,” I said.

Anthony slammed his open palm against the
hood of the car. The noise echoed over the
landscape. “You didn’t smoke six cartons,
you bastard,” he said. He said it quietly, but
he might as well have shouted. It rung in my
ears. “You didn’t smoke six cartons of
cigarettes by yourself, did you?”

I said nothing.
He paints portraits of her from memory, and hangs them from his walls, pierces the canvas with a single nail, sometimes even tapes the thick-rag paper to his windows during blackouts.

When he passes her on the street she always smiles, friendly, as if she would like to get to know him. He imagines that she would meet him for coffee. He sits in the cafe as she is drinking coffee with her friend, watches from across the room. Once she comes over and asks him for a cigarette.

“You’ve been selling them, right?” He laughed harshly. He threw his cigarette into the dirt, half smoked. He ground it out with the toe of his boot. “Buy your own,” he said. “Buy your own if that’s the way you treat them.”

“I did not sell them,” I said quietly.

“Shut up,” Anthony said. “I hate your accent. You sound stupid. You sound worse than a bloody German.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I smoked them. Most of them.”

Anthony grabbed my chin roughly. “Most? What about the rest?”

I sighed. “My uncle. My uncle found them in my room. I even hid them under the bed.”

Anthony let go of my chin. “Uncle.”

I nodded.

“Does he live in the same house?”

I nodded again. I felt relieved.

“We’ll take care of him,” Anthony said. “We’ll take good care of him, just like his own mother.”
He is courageous enough to ask for her name, and she tells him it’s “Stella.”

“Like stars,” he says, and she sneers at him.

He has a scar, a purple gash that stretches from his lip to the corner of his eye. She touches it in the street, feels its smoothness. “Soft,” she says. “Rabbit fur.”

She comes home with him and spends the night. He feeds her biscuits with his fingers and she bites the soft flesh of his thumb, laughs when she draws blood.

I should say that I was certainly worried about my uncle, but I was more worried about me, because even though Anthony was acting like the incident was all over, he just looked like he was getting madder and madder. By the time his friends came over the hill, three lanky shapes with whiskey and flour in their arms, his face was a livid pink, and the vein in his forehead was pulsing. “Jesus,” he said. “You boys are late.”

One of them muttered something under his breath, put the whiskey bottles into the car, slid the bag of flour under the seat. As I saw the squat bottles with the brown liquid lapping at their necks, my mouth began to water.

“He’s uncle’s been taking cigarettes,” Anthony said to the three soldiers. “The cigarettes are only for him, right?”

One of the three men muttered something. They were all facing away, their arms held close against their chests. I could feel the anger in them, they were like tightly wound coils, ready to spring open.

Anthony smiled. “Go find this uncle,” he said.
He asks if he can paint her nude, but she will not show him her body, instead she turns out the lights and covers herself with the bedsheet. He paints the texture of the sheet against her skin, draping and wrinkling like the side of a mountain.

When she leaves in the morning, she takes seven packs of his cigarettes and a bottle of his whiskey. “I haven’t got any money,” he says to her and she smiles, lighting a cigarette.

“This will be fine,” she says. “This is more than fine.”

The three men left, and a few minutes later I heard the sound of a jeep leaving the base. “There they go,” Anthony said. “Now no-one will steal your cigarettes again.”

My head was spinning, and I leaned heavily on the jeep. I felt like my head was underwater, like there was a centimeters-thick layer of water over my nose and mouth and I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breach the surface. I wiped my chin. “Jesus,” I said. “Why are you doing this?”

Anthony smiled darkly. “You need to learn not to blame others for your own misdeeds,” he said. I’ll never forget that he said “misdeeds.”

We both stood in silence and stared at one another. I could hear Anthony’s breathing, shallow and ragged. “I want some whiskey,” I said.

“I’ll bet you do,” he said. “You want it badly, I expect.”

I swallowed hard. Anthony grabbed my arm and spun me around. He punched me hard in the back of the head, and my chin hit the car on the way down. My stomach churned as I lay in the dirt, and my mouth was filled with the taste of copper. When Anthony stood over me again, he was holding two of the three bottles of whiskey.
After she leaves, the smell of her is in the apartment, not a perfume, just the faint muskiness of her body. He paints her portrait, draws the lines of her face with meticulous care and gives her his scar.

The next day he sees her on the street talking to a group of German soldiers. She is speaking fluent German, a language he does not understand a word of. He calls out “Stella,” and she looks at him from across the street. She has one of his cigarettes in her mouth.

One of the soldiers looks confused. “Stella?” he says, scratching his head.

One of them he opened and poured over my head. The sound of the liquid hitting the ground made my bladder pulse, I realized I needed to urinate. When Anthony broke the second bottle over my head, my body relaxed for an instant, and I lost control, my pants filled with warm urine. The smell was pungent, like a dairy or a sheep-barn.

Anthony laughed. “Jesus,” he said. “You pissed.” His voice sounded far away, and I wondered if the blow had damaged my hearing. I had heard once of a man who was in a fight with a sailor, and who was hit so hard that he became deaf in one ear.

The next part is hard to remember. I remember that Anthony broke the third bottle over my head, and that my hair was filled with broken glass and whiskey, and that he rubbed his hands on my face, and the ground glass cut my skin. I remember thinking it must have done the same thing to his hands. Our blood is mingling, I thought, crazily.
When she lay in bed beside him, the man noticed that Stella had bruises on her arms and legs, broad and purple, deep in the pits of her elbows and knees. He wondered the next day if she had been beaten, but years later he learned that bruising was a sign of scurvy. He wondered about her then: how could she have been malnourished? Food was scarce, but not like it was in Iceland. She could have eaten food if she had wanted to.

I also remember that he broke my forefingers, and that this was what hurt the most, that the pain in my ribs and my face was bearable, but the sharp pain of broken fingers shot all the way up my arm, and I screamed, remembering the sound of the boy’s voice on Laugavegur.

He kicked my ribs hard, until I couldn’t breathe, and twice drove the toe of his boot into my mouth saying “smoke this you son of a bitch.”

After a while he stopped, and walked away, panting. The night was cold, and when I wiped my eyes I could see steam rising from his body.

He said nothing as I tried to stand, and stumbled to my feet, supporting myself on the jeep. When I walked around to the side, he came over again, and stood next to me. “You got your whiskey,” he said finally. “Can you drink it through your skin?”
The difference between the stories is that when he saw Stella with the soldiers, he knew from the way they were speaking that she was negotiating with them. "When two people meet," he told me later, "they always want something from one another." Stella still came to see him during the night, but always bathed for at least an hour before she would let him touch her skin, and she left the water in the tub with the oil of her body floating on the surface.

She was missing one of her teeth, and when he kissed her he tasted blood.

I said nothing. I stared at the ground, thirsty. My whole body hurt. I could hear the distant sound of Anthony’s laughter. "I don’t believe you," he said. "I bet I could piss on your shoes and you’d just stand there."

I said nothing, just stared at my hands, at the ground. I was still feeling dizzy.

At first there was just a noise, and then I could feel the drops slapping my pants, the sides of my boots. I looked up and saw Anthony's pants open, the arc of urine hitting my legs. He was giggling like a little boy.

I stepped back. "Are you drunk?"

Anthony jumped toward me, urine spilling now onto his own pants, which were sliding down his leg. He lurched forward, and then, when his pants slid down to mid-thigh, he fell, unable to catch himself. He hit his head on the metal rail that ran along the underside of the jeep, and rolled over onto his back.

He pointed at me, and his teeth shone in the grey light. It must have been 3:40. The sun would be coming up soon. "You didn’t do anything," he said. "You just stood there, like an idiot." He rolled over and started to get up. For a moment, his head lined up perfectly with the stark forest green metal of his jeep.
This is the part I/he don’t remember very well. I fell on top of him. My legs caught the buckles of his military pants, and they were pulled down around his knees. I straddled his buttocks, squeezed my thighs together to immobilize him. Later I remember looking at the insides of my legs and seeing the angry impressions of his buckles in my skin, square, almost purple. I grabbed the back of his head and slammed it into the side of the jeep. The foot rail caught his forehead, and he bellowed, from deep in his lungs. He tried to get up, but I hit his head against the jeep again, and I could feel the muscles in his legs and buttocks going slack.

I remember thinking that I should stop, that he was unconscious, that I should get up and walk away. I wove my fingers tightly into his hair and pulled his head back again and slammed it against the jeep as hard as I could. And again. And again. When his hair began to tear out of his scalp, I used his ears, gripped them in white knuckles like handles.
The next part is hard to remember. I remember thinking that I should stop, that he was unconscious, that I should get up and walk away. I wove my fingers tightly into his hair and pulled his head back again and slammed it against the jeep as hard as I could. And again. And again. When his hair began to tear out of his scalp, I used his ears, gripped them in white knuckles like handles.

The bruises on my chest and arms later were like the kind you get from scurvy. They were soft, tender to the touch, like a cheap fillet that you buy when the good ones are gone.

The most terrible thing was not the blood, although there was a lot of it. My front was covered with blood, much of it mine, but most of it splattered from a wide square depression in Anthony's forehead.

The most terrible thing was the sound, sharp and hollow at first and then turning dull and soft, like the sound of a fish being clubbed too hard, bruising the flesh.
The most terrible thing was the sound, sharp and hollow at first and then turning dull and soft, like the sound of a fish being clubbed too hard, bruising the flesh.

Finally I let go of his head and stood up. My lungs felt full of fluid. I breathed in, and there was a rattle of phlegm in my windpipe, I felt like I might suffocate. When I think back I wonder why I didn’t steal the jeep, but then I remember that I might have been caught, accused of spying, taken to a jail in England. I walked away along the road. The road was longer and straighter than any I have ever seen in Iceland, at least that is how I remember it. I could only concentrate on pressing my feet against the ground, levering my body forward. I pressed my hands into my armpits, squeezed them, hoping the pain would recede. My fingers were crooked, swollen, and I was sure that they had all been broken by the back of Anthony’s head. This turned out not to be true, but all I knew was that the part of me that hurt the most was not the face with its ground glass or my bruised chest and chin, but my hands, my misshapen fingers aching in every imperfection. The pain caused my vision to blur, and after a while I couldn’t feel my hands, could only see the road splitting into two identical images in my head. I remember stopping, falling to my knees, wanting to throw up.

Then I must have collapsed onto my stomach, because the next thing I remember is strong hands lifting me by the abdomen, pressing too hard causing the bile to spill from my mouth like wine sloshed from a jostled cup.
This is the other way to tell this story: Finally I let go of his head and stood up. My lungs felt full of fluid. I breathed in, and there was a rattle in my windpipe, I felt like I might suffocate. When I think back I wonder why I didn’t steal the jeep, but then I remember that I might have been caught, accused of spying, taken to a jail in England. I walked away along the road. The road was longer and straighter than any I have ever seen in Iceland, at least that is how I remember it. I could only concentrate on pressing my feet against the ground, levering my body forward. I pressed my hands into my armpits, squeezed them, hoping the pain would recede. My fingers were crooked, swollen, and I was sure that they had all been broken by the back of Anthony’s head. This turned out not to be true, but all I knew was that the part of me that hurt the most was not the face with its ground glass or my bruised chest and chin, but my hands, my misshapen fingers aching in every imperfection. The pain caused my vision to blur, and after a while I couldn’t feel my hands, could only see the road splitting into two identical images in my head. I remember stopping, falling to my knees, wanting to throw up.

I remember the motion of his horse and cart making me sick. I remember wondering what sort of person still uses a horse and cart. I can’t remember his face, but I remember his smell, the faint odor of port on his breath, and the woody scent of his body, the close staleness of the space between his shirt and skin. He was immensely strong, although he must have been in his sixties. He lifted me easily over his shoulder, and dumped me like a bag of flour into the back of his wagon. He sang folk songs and clucked to his horse the whole way home.

I often wonder why he was out on the road, miles away from his farm. What sort of errand would bring a farmer all the way down the road at four in the morning? Then I realize that I have no idea what time it was when he picked me up. It could have been six, or even seven. As the sun began to climb higher in the sky, I laid my head on a board and slept.

I felt worse when I woke up. My tongue was dry, and the taste in my mouth was of bile and blood. I was still in the wagon, but it was no longer moving, and the man picked me up again, still humming, and carried me into an old house, which I can’t remember except that it was close, musty-smelling inside, and poorly lit.
The other way to tell this story is by remembering that there was a war on. Jesus.

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The old man bathed me. As he pushed my head beneath the water, I tried to draw breath, and for a moment my mouth and windpipe were full of soapy water. I clawed my way up and coughed, choked and breathed, thankful for the feel of air in my lungs.

He laughed. "Your face needs washing," he said. "Is that glass?" He whistled as he pushed my head beneath the water again.

I remember that the water turned pink with blood, and that so much hair and oil rose from the surface of my body that it floated like scum on the water. The old man gathered the stuff in his hands, walked to the door and flung it outside. When he came back he said "You're clean now. Will there be anything else, sir?"
The jeep story can be told another way too. An Icelander is picked up at random by a group of soldiers, who accuse him of espionage and drive him out into the country, pressing the tips of their bayonets against his ribs, holding him motionless between them. They park their jeep behind a hill and then one of them holds the man while the others drive their fists into his stomach again and again, until he can barely stand. Another soldier asks “Where are your cigarettes? Do you have any Cigarettes now?” before knocking the man’s front tooth out with a wedding band that he stole from the dead body of an Italian soldier in North Africa. When the man is lying on the ground, the soldiers sit in a circle around him and drink whiskey straight from the bottle, and when it is finished they break the bottle on the wheel well and grind the shards of glass into the Icelander’s face, leaving mostly small cuts, but also a long scar that stretches from the corner of his eye to his mouth, and pulls his lip into a kind of sneer. They cut their palms on the glass, and use strips torn from the man’s shirt to bandage their own hands. “I’m Christ,” one says, showing his deep wounds in the centers of his palms. “That isn’t funny,” an older one says. “And you know it isn’t.” All this time the Icelander lies perfectly still, waiting for them to go away, and when they do he waits in the bright silence of the summer night for an old farmer to come and bathe him, clean his wounds and drive him back to the city.

Anthony once told me that he had sat in a ground-floor room of a ruined house and watched the brains of one of his companions explode onto his lapels. “It was crazy,” he said. “They were pink. I had to throw that shirt away.” We sat in the jeep, in the semi-darkness, and he showed me with his palms the way he had held his friend’s head in his hands, pulled it, bleeding, to his breast.

I am sorry. I know of no other way to tell this story.