

Love on the sell-by date

All these lives. Idiots like weeds.

I've been watching, constantly. The days are beyond counting, and the faces are even more numerous, all those days I've been a spectator on life, generally invisible while I scrutinise people and their doings. They rarely see me, if they do it's when they notice me making a note of something while I have my eye on them. All the same, just sometimes.

'Look at her, I heard she had a stroke,' whispers a smart gentleman in a trench coat worn over a woollen roll-neck sweater, tightly belted at the waist, and he glances at his wife, who is a noticeably attractive woman although left a little weatherbeaten by at least half a bottle of wine every night before bed over the last few years. I can see that from her teeth and the shade left by neglecting to whiten them for a long time, and I can see when she has done it recently. His grey-shot, striped beard brushes against her hair. This flows from greying roots in raven waves down to her shoulders, which are a pale shade of red, her overcoat matching the colour of the tip of her nose in the cold stillness. All the same, not as red as her lips, which scream scarlet this early in the morning and the streetlights pick out the lines at the corner of her mouth.

'Wasn't it just dope?' the woman mutters back, a little louder.

Her whispered words are as fleeting as a breath of wind.

We're chilled to the bone, huddled in the wind-borne snow here on Skólavörðustígur, they with their frothy Italian coffee in cups that steam so beautifully; me further along the bench, having long since given up treating myself to fine coffee on a daily basis, now just three mornings a week. The bench is a good place to be, normally Skólavörðustígur is a sheltered spot and is hung with

lights on this winter morning that give it the look of a street from some romantic Christmas movie.

I have watched them while autumn morphed into winter, sometimes masked and other times not, but nobody wears a mask. I've listened to their talk, their endearments, disagreements and whispers, their subdued arguments, and now he mutters, 'there's something odd about her.'

'Look at the way she stares, could be in some sort of a cult, look at that bald head,' the woman says, and I know I'm staring, unable to look away, forgetting myself.

They've watched me, as I did them, wondering if there's a cropped head beneath that knitted hat. I don't know whether they think I can't hear them, or if they just don't care.

'Yes, it's not unlikely, people turn so peculiar when they join that kind of group,' he said, agreeing with her, and she pipes up, 'remember her from way back? Used to be around the bars all the time, Kaffibar, and 22, Kaffi List, Sólon Íslandus! Don't you remember? An artist! Knockout gorgeous, she was, back in the day. Used to be married to some big shot who fell right on his arse. The she was with, ach, what was his name again? Always so wired up.'

'Yes, him. That whingebag. Yep, I remember him, both of them,' the man says and forgets to whisper as he glares at me, not hiding his curiosity. When I think about it, it's a long time since anyone has looked at me, even longer since anyone saw me.

If there's anything in this that's touching, it's the recollection of being with someone like him, the whingebag, whose name they can't bring to mind. I feel like I felt this kind of emotional heat since little Aylan's body washed ashore in Bodrum. Maybe I felt the heat shortly after that, but the memory is as awry as it is final. I recall the tranquillity of the photograph on the screen as the newsreader read the news commentary, and it seemed improper to be romantic

just as Hálf dán sat down next to me, unaware of the screen, and lips so light on my neck that his kiss went straight to my heart. ‘Want to watch something better...?’ he murmured, running his fingertips down my spine.

I felt the warmth swell inside me, although I didn’t let on. A child was dead and the living room was filled with helplessness. I didn’t know that we would be finished as a couple before long. Our delicate existence, that had for years been some kind of parallel reality, was doomed. It was that evening when life began to become inexplicable. All the same, me at home at his place, but not at my place – but at home.

They remind me of us. She’s the awkward one, he’s humble but still in charge; they also remind me of my parents.

I know just how bad you feel, I want to say to her, and to him as well. I’ve spent so much time listening to their conversation in a variety of tones. A relationship in its death throes. Impatience meets inane chatter. Togetherness has become a habit, behaviour that sprang from love, and finally cracked it open and shook it off.

‘What’s new, people?’ barks a man who’s referred to as the Sleuth when he’s out of earshot and who bustles up around the same time every morning, bundled up in an everyday coat and an expensive scarf. It’s always as if he’s butting in, slightly out of tune with everyone else he talks unnecessarily loudly, endlessly running fingers through his sparse hair, conscious that nobody’s overjoyed to see him, and that applies also to the regulars who are like a large family in the mornings, before heading off to work. Most of them work independently and this is a moment to spend with people before they settle deep into solitude. But this guy has a workplace to go to, he’s some kind of an inspector at the City of Reykjavík, or so I understand from what I hear him saying. I somehow suspect that he finds it even more difficult to connect to other people at the

city hall, as he's accommodating but so sensitive that he can burn out; in his own way sensing his connection to these people here who seem to be constantly backing away from him.

I know how he feels.

I feel the pain of people who aren't as adroit as others at making new friends. They don't have everything that's so important; innocent, out of tune with everyone and everything. Those poor people, I so often think to myself with a pang of sympathy for us all. I know all too well how it is to hurt.

'Not too bad,' the trench coat man says with forced cheerfulness as his wife pretends to be absorbed in getting her gloves to fit just right. The owner of an old-established advertising agency, he knows how to be jovial when he needs to be, and so does she, from her days with the Minister of Education's team of advisers.

'We're fine,' she says in a clipped voice, leaning against her husband in a way that's bordering on sexual, slipping an arm into his, and asking in an unconvincingly flirty tone if it isn't time they were on their way. As usual, she decides. They stroll off into the day, so alike, similarly distant in their expressions, there must have been an instant attraction there, but I see she lets go her hold on his arm once they are a little way off.

The Sleuth shuffles his feet, suddenly looks my way, staring blankly through my face before he turns on his heel and goes inside to the counter for a cuppa and a chat with the laconic barista. My fingers are numb as I dive deep into my pockets to find the shabby leather notebook, snap the band from it and fumble for a moment to find a blank page.

Love at its sell-by date, I write with nerveless fingers. The red letters are clumsily large, because I'm so cold.

Addictive love

I felt I was special whenever Hálfmán looked at me. I was hooked on his gaze, how he saw when we walked, our steps synchronised, nothing was better than the feeling of his eyes resting on me, a hint of sadness in his smile as he watched.

I never understood what it was about me that made him smile like that. A look in the mirror told me I was pretty, but just ordinarily pretty; one of those pretty girls with fair hair highlighted to make it even fairer, a button nose and plump cheeks like a little girl. Yes, like Bambi, was what more than a few people said.

Some people thought I was twenty-five when I was already thirty-five, and more than once I was invited to take part in beauty contests. At some vague point in time I wanted to, didn't think it was cool enough for me, and at the same time I didn't dare. Didn't want to be under someone else's microscope, I imagine. All the same, until I was getting on for thirty I took part in fashion programmes and enjoyed having almost everyone try it on with me, as long as their efforts weren't too aggressive, as that would trigger an enduring anxiety that could last for days, sometimes for weeks. My adolescent looks meant that mostly men with a thing for little girls flocked my way, which I knew perfectly well, and didn't take their advances seriously, even though I couldn't thrive without them. But nobody saw me in the way that Hálfmán would.

Why am I thinking through all this?

I haven't thought this way about myself for a very long time, it's enough to watch and read tales of how other people behave themselves. But the memories have been persecuting me ever since I saw *her* the other day. Ólöf Brá, like a mantra, the name has a ring to it. Something is making heavy demands of my heart, flashing silhouettes rapidly, far too rapidly, through my mind.

I still miss him.

That's even though our love was past its sell-by date.

That's assuming it was ever fresh at all.

I'm empty without you, I used to whisper in Hálfmán's ear while he slept, snoring gently, so it was my chance to sniff his close-shaved cheek and breathe him deep inside me, the aroma of him and a faint smell of aftershave. Then I would feel a contentment so deep that I thought it would drive me crazy. I would never have said that to him when he was awake.

'What! You, chick,' I imagined Hálfmán saying if he had heard. 'You don't need me. You can't rely on me. I'm nothing at all.'

I would have shrivelled up in discomfort. Even more feeble-minded than the women who turned up their noses at him, or said that he was a screwed-up alcoholic, some of them saying he was an asshole, these were the comments I used to hear uttered around me.

He was something.

With hindsight, I could perhaps classify him as just a standard-issue alcoholic. Or was he a black hole?

Black holes are where the laws of time are warped, our understanding of it no longer makes sense, he rambled one time over a bottle of gin and whispered that genuine love is something that lives beyond our understanding.

He knew how to make skilful use of his gift of the gab, an effortless flow, while all I had at my disposal was what I had picked up in the schoolroom and used later on at trendy Reykjavík 101 companies. He had honed the lingo in an organic environment, trying out whatever he felt like.

He was still somehow more normal than other men I had been with. There was something special about his ordinariness, more remarkable than all that complex stuff the world is full of. He wasn't handsome in a cute way. He was loose-limbed and so pale

that his appearance was colourless, except for the pale red hair that fluttered into his smiling eyes with a shy twinkle, set in his slim face. There was always a warmth in the conflict going on with the defiance in his gaze when he argued with people. Always looking for a fight, I remember one of his colleagues once saying during a drinking session and I made a mental note of that while they wrangled. He was more smartly dressed than the other guy. He took a pride in dressing well, just as he carefully selected music, books, art and movies, but the outward impression was bland, no meat to it, no pleasure.

If he were to hear my words, he'd disappear for six weeks, at least, I thought as I whispered to him in his sleep. There was so much that I longed to say to him, all those years. Most of the time I had the wit to keep quiet.

'Your eyes are so expressive that it hurts to look into them,' I recall him saying once.

He reminded me of my own talents when others didn't. 'You're not made of the same stuff as the others, you're an artist, you think like an artist,' he whispered to me as we curled up together and I felt that I was worthless. He thought I was special, in a different way to the others. But still so similar, I felt, except with him.

What am I thinking about love for?

The morning glow lights up the snow, the brightness cutting through the grey, there's a rose-coloured flush on the far horizon, bathed in pink, but it's still snowing. I'm drawn to the light, absorbing it as snowflakes melt on the tip of my nose. Now would be the moment to sip a cup of coffee. I could allow myself, but that would break my strict rule. I can buy myself coffee on Friday, something to look forward to, and I hope the weather will be fine as I sit down with my fragrant milky coffee. What's best is when the air is still and the birds flutter in the dawn just as I drink my coffee.

It's a pleasure, while I revel in the feeling of caffeine putting some zing into the blood, and it's so good to just exist.

It's high time to make a move, my arse is about to freeze solid to the bench.

It's a habit I enjoy to stroll down to Austurvöllur at this time of day, although that's an end in itself.

When you're searching for something that's nowhere to be found, it makes a difference to have a particular place to go. It's enough of a walk to thaw the bum cheeks ready for the next bench, and there's plenty of benches here. There's a clarity about Austurvöllur in the morning, like a blank page that can be written on with pictures in the snow. The only sign of life is often the raven who struts along the roof of the Parliament building, and he's now there, as so often before, in his blue-black, the colour that contains everything, as he watches over the highest and the lowest, from the ruling class to the outcasts. God pays for the raven, my grandmother would sometimes say.

What did they do to them? I sometimes wonder when I look at the homeless people who know me these days, who often slump on the same benches opposite Parliament and remind me of the raven; and of myself. Every day we find ourselves here. They know I'll keep a distance, and they do the same. The danger is that if I don't look at other people, my thoughts go to myself, the words in a flurry in my mind, as determined as terns pecking at me.

Vera is there and her presence makes me as nervous as walking past the terns' nesting site, but all the same, I haven't been able to stop watching her since she turned up again. I've no idea where she has been this time, maybe in some institution or another town, but there she is, my sister for such a long time when we were friends and shared out nightlife, so synchronised that if one of us bought a

hot dog, the other would eat half, as if we were the same being. Her dull eyes flicker towards me, I'm not sure she recognises me. I've changed so much. So has she.

Vera Bjarna, snapping at a dead drunk guy in a padded overall. Her eyes are blank. What does she see? Maybe just a woman leaning against a tree, one of the blurred vignettes on the edge of vision, just like the fluttering snow buntings.

Vera's woollen sweater is ripped, old motorbike gear showing through the holes, the leather scuffed and torn, but she's still the one with the coolest street cred, even though it's not what it was back then. A rising model in her old life, just as I was, she was the one who made the rules when we were young. Her skin glowed, giving off an aura of its own, now it's coarser, and no longer glows. Her eyes are deep-set shadows. But Vera couldn't ever be anything but beautiful, she turns people's heads and they can hardly believe their eyes. How can this scruffy person be such a beauty? She's like a weatherbeaten statue. Her face is handsomely chiselled, her eyes strong, around the void within. But her body is so emaciated that it has a man's look to it, this same body that had been so full, as if moulded to fit accepted notions of perfection.

They're bickering over something, although not seriously, and it's reminiscent of animals provoking each other into play. It's human interaction, all the same, people behave as animals do, sniffing each other as they play, and if there's something addictive about the smell, then we stick like glue to that other being.

There's no hiding that she's cold. Her hands are red-pink, the skin the colour of genitals, and she gives up on whatever the quarrel was about and nestles against the guy who often has a bottle tucked away in a paper bag, but not today.

I don't know why, but I seem to recall his name's Henning; no idea if I've remembered correctly. He's apt to get fired up and go

for his brothers of the street, howling loud enough to pop his vocal cords and laying so brutally about him that an ambulance had to come once and take away his badly beaten pal. Now I remember that he has a dog that snaps amiably. His watery eyes are beseeching when he smiles so that his wrecked, brown-cruled teeth glint. His demeanour is as gentle as his face is lined, left stormbeaten by life, and with a mop of respectably silver hair. For the moment he's good to her, maybe so that she'll be good to him because love is sometimes a transaction. Sometimes it's an addiction.

'I want to go to New York,' Vera said over a beer at Kaffibarinn, I guess in around 1996, maybe 97, as she dipped a cheese-and-ham sandwich in the cocktail sauce. 'I heard about a school the other day, at a party with the Blur guys. Where were you Björt? You can do a course with famous directors, even Tarantino. Nick. You'll have to meet him, y'know, Nick once did the stage for a Prince concert, that's on a video now, and that's where we got to know each other. He knows how to use the internet! You'll have to check that out, brutal stuff!'

Her words sounded so strange that the image was etched into my mind, as she dipped her sandwich and talked about stuff that nobody else did. I hid my envy; everything she did was cool, things that wouldn't cross anyone else's mind. Both the girls and the boys eyed her up where she sat with her eyes made up as if she'd stepped out of Vogue, hair clipped into punk streaks, purple and black, her expression so calm, but still the most eye-catching person in the room.

Eventually she went to New York.

She had just given birth to a baby girl who was left behind with her mother. Her mother had just parted company with Vera's step-

father; I remember thinking at the time that it was all so weird, both her having a child and that she should leave such a tiny baby behind. Maybe she was still in shock. She hadn't found out she was pregnant until she was already six months gone, in denial, still boozing and partying, dieting constantly, but her belly carried on swelling.

All of a sudden the baby was born and she had to breastfeed at home with her mother who never stopped nagging. The child was five months old when she went to New York, after having an exhibition of artworks that were on the lines of re-interpreting well-know logos, and which attracted attention. She had sold most of the paintings to old squeezes, hoping to use the proceeds to get onto the movie course before long, to concentrate on writing in English and to build up something of a solid basis for herself and her daughter while the baby was looked after by her mother. Her stay stretched out.

When we parted I carried myself well, I felt I was uneasy around her and she seemed to be in shock after the birth and looked terrible, plus she had been partying even harder so she was drinking during the day, even when she was supposed to be breastfeeding, and had been in no state to stop during her pregnancy, endlessly arguing with her mother who could no longer bear to have alcohol anywhere near her. But she was always cool. Vera had a talent for not letting weakness show in her face.

I've seen her daughter around, laughing. What sort of an upbringing could she have had? Her grandmother was the authority figure, once she had been dried out and the the step-father had moved out of the house, and the old lady's tongue was as sharp as hell, although she was always as well turned out as her daughter

and had always been in demand at the hairdressing salon where she worked.

It wasn't Vera who came back, but someone no more than a shadow of what she had been.

Tales with faces, Vera and Henning, I don't know his backstory, haven't seen enough to pick that up, but I fish the notebook from my pocket and stand stooped forward so they don't notice when I write *remember to check out the snow suit guy, could be called Henning*.

They still don't see me as I sidle closer to the tree that's dressed in white so that the snow is sprinkled over me like holy water at a christening as the snow buntings tweet and hop from branch to branch, all so sparkling clean when I see him unzip his snow suit and guide her hand, rigid with cold, as he shuts his eyes, jaw jutting forward in determination. Her fingers whiten as they touch the shrivelled dick, it's warmer than those fingers, I guess, although he doesn't experience any joy other than power, I see that, I sense it.

Back then, she was the girl that some trendy paper, Eintak or Pressan, maybe Helgarpósturinn, profiled as the one the country's hottest bachelors competed to make their own. She was never her own. She was theirs.

That's how I remember it, but memory is so unreliable. It flutters. It makes things up. What do I sense, and what do I make up?

While I remember, I'll have to buy her gloves and bring them tomorrow. Surely I'll be able to place them at her side without her noticing. Maybe she feels she belongs to this guy, so that she belongs to someone. That need to belong was what ruined me.

Love up close

Buy gloves now, otherwise I'll forget.

The sunshine gives me warmth, its brightness illuminating the innumerable colours on the shelves of the wool shop on Skólavörðustígur. It's so comfortingly light in there that it's a pleasure to have an errand that brings me here, and I say so to the German girl behind the counter. Her Icelandic is practically accentless, although I can pick up a hint of vowels with German ancestry, plus she said 'good morning' in a rather European manner. Maybe she collected horse comics when she was a little girl in Germany and dreamed herself all the way here to get to know the Icelandic horses that look in children's eyes to be ponies, there's a chance that she's tried working on a farm in the countryside and now chaotic coincidences have brought her here. Her face is friendly and happy, eyes sparkling above a child's cheeks. She reminds me of myself before I became a chick, slim with long, fair hair and fairly colourless, wearing a knitted sweater with a Norwegian pattern. While she looks at me amiably, I'm not the person the couple of Skólavörðustígur saw, the odd one, but some other woman.

'I'd like to buy some gloves, preferably smart ones, if you have some in a shade of red,' I say slowly, dragging things out, while I breathe in the scent of wool, the all-encompassing shaggy aroma, and sense something there that has been long lost. It's a smell that was, back then, of my grandmother's knitting basket.

'Shade? You mean red gloves?' the girl asks in a clear voice.

'Yes, some sort of red.'

'Could I ask you to wait a moment?'

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed such courteous consideration, and feel my face reddening as a I reply.

'Of course. I'm in no hurry.'

'I'll be quick,' the girl says hurrying away to root through the choice on offer.

If anything, she's too quick. I hardly have time to absorb the mosaic of colours before she's back, with three pairs, all of them red. One is a deep wine-red, another burgundy with a brownish band around the middle, and the third pair is knitted in apple-red and pale pink wool, skilfully interwoven.

'I like these best,' I say, pointing at the patterned pair.

'So do I,' the girl says, smiling as if the choice has triggered a reaction in the loneliness of each of us. Then she seems lost for a moment her smile becomes more formal as she mentions the price, 4860 krónur. There's no look of surprise when I hand her a five thousand krónur note, as happens these days with some shop assistants who hardly know how to handle cash. She takes care as she gives me my change, counting the coins precisely, focusing on me and ending with, 'good day!'

'Good day,' I reply questioningly, and feel that I've spoiled the moment.

'I mean, have a good day,' the girl says, laughing as she slips the gloves into a little bag.

'Yes, enjoy your day,' I say, carelessly enough that she'll hear the correct expression without taking it was criticism.

'Thanks,' she says, a smile in her eyes. 'Enjoy your day as well.'

The wave of well-being carries me out of the shop, my thoughts surging ahead of me, a reaction to stepping out of this momentary encounter with closeness. My thoughts go to him, without me having anything to say in the matter. For two days I haven't been able to rest in nothingness, the nothingness that took me a few years to get used to. Rather than watch others, I've had to push myself out of my own thoughts, repeatedly. The mind suddenly so sharp as it delves into reminiscences, unstoppable and beyond control. It demands explanations, and at their worst my thoughts are too much

for me. All these words interrupting each other, a vast mass of images, old jerky movies, and I don't remember what.

What came alive inside me? What started all this off?

It's such a tiny thing, but I'm sorry to not have got further than I have. I saw *her*, in the distance.

This was the woman I saw him take by the hand, around three years after I disappeared, and was convinced that he'd lead her through the same dance steps as he did me, one step forward, two back. Now I've seen them together often enough for me to check the phone book, and they were registered at the same address. I saw her sitting on a bench at Lækjartorg in a biting wind, her hands clenched around coffee in a travel mug that she didn't sip. The steam had stopped rising from it as she stared helplessly at the district court building, a stone-grey building crawling with conflict, but all the same, not. I felt that I recognised her unhappiness from a distance.

*She wants to step out of herself*, a voice echoed in my head. *She longs for a judge who doesn't exist to rule that everything that could be so effortless and normal should stop being painful*. I sympathised, I felt she was uncomfortable.

Her name is Ólöf Brá Sigmarsdóttir.

Ólöf isn't the sort of woman people notice. Everything about her is understated, almost as if she had been born sad. She's slim, appears to be on the fragile side, with hair that could hardly be whiter, cut like a doll with a fringe across a delicate face, skin so translucent that the veins show through the surface. There's a dullness in her blue eyes. I also had dull eyes all those years, except when I had a rush of endorphins, when least expected. Everything about him was inscrutable, confused and wickedly good when it was good. So bad, when things were bad.

I could have sat down next to her, saying, ‘Hi, Ólöf!’

She’d have been taken by surprise. I can imagine her staring at me, mouth hanging open, her body wracked with tension from hiding how she really felt inside.

*I could have said, I know what it’s like when he looks at you just as he looked at me. I know what it’s like when he turns up out of the blue, just when you’ve stretched every sinew in you to forget him. I know how sweet but painful it is to kiss him. You glow, for a moment. Then there’s the blackness, everything you knew a second ago is no longer fact, not even so much as a flash that burned out. Don’t blame him. He has no sense of your agony. He isn’t capable of loving.*

She would have burst into tears. She might even have fled, struggling to conceal herself.

Something heavy weighed down my belly, my chest, and the cold was bitter. This was what I hadn’t felt for such a long time. So long since I’ve had a feeling anything like this, so that there’s something about it that’s welcome, even though it’s an ordeal.

I stared for a long time, until she glanced sharply towards me. Our eyes met, and I quickly looked aside and strolled away. She looked at me as if she knew. Maybe she saw a woman in a shabby coat that twenty years ago was as cool as it could get. That’s the woman and the coat. I revelled in bathing in the light, conscious that I was considered outstandingly pretty, although I didn’t know this myself, even though that was about the only thing I was aware of.

Or I thought I knew. But I enjoyed it! When men – and women – looked me up and down like a dessert they fancied. Dancing bodies on the tables at Kaffibarinn, suitably skinny, but still plump, gleaming with sweat and flashes of bare skin in the right places, hidden in the right places. The eyes measured me up when I

appeared on the lifestyle pages dressed in what other people wanted to own. *Trendsetter* Björt Vilhjalms, I read somewhere and spent that day walking on air. Some journalist was so impressed with me that I had been marked down as a *trendsetter*. I, who doubted every word I said. A *trendsetter*!

The tyranny of defining women almost finished me off. The other day a lad stopped me outside the Pétursbúð supermarket. 'Hey, mate. Got a spare hundred krónur?' he asked.

Mate suits me. She the mate.