

The collapse - Haukur Ingvarsson

When the banks collapsed I was in Stykkishólmur, a small town in northern Iceland. I had borrowed an apartment, meaning to work on a project looming over me for a long time, but I got nothing done. Instead, I sat at the computer, drifting between news sites, trying to get a handle on what was going on. But it was futile; this was a reality I could not grasp. Politicians and talking heads used imagery that evoked natural disasters and wrecked ships, describing mortal peril, but I couldn't see it: houses still rested on their foundations, there were no roof tiles flying through the air, no air-raid klaxons blared. Around noon, I would usually separate myself from the computer screen, walk over to the supermarket and buy something to eat. It was cold, snow-choked, no pedestrians but me around, and passing cars slowed down, allowing the drivers to scrutinise me as if I had done something wrong. I looked back at them, convinced that they were at least as guilty as I was. Of what I couldn't say, only that they were guilty. It was an uncanny sort of everyday existence, like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or tales of the last man on earth – all things were still the same, but all the same, things weren't still. At the supermarket, people stocked up on tinned food and frozen meat. There were rumours of impending shortages, but nothing could be confirmed. On the day of my arrival, I had boiled a stew, which I maintained over time by gradually adding chopped meat and vegetables. Standing over the pot and regarding the goop within, I sometimes felt as if I were tending to a monstrous creature, which fed on me just as I fed on it. At night, unable to sleep, I wandered the house, looking out at the fjord of Breidafjörður, where herring boats cast their nets close to shore, shining through the darkness like cities. No one knew what the herring was doing in such shallow waters until they unloaded the fish and cut into it, revealing bleeding pustules in the meat; the herring was sick, a plague straight out of the Bible. The catch was unfit for human consumption, and smelted into fertiliser and livestock feed instead. Yet the ships went on fishing as if nothing had occurred, everyone wanted to stick to their routine in the hope that the world might stay on the rails.

As this went on, my grandfather lost his mind. Everyone expected it to be the other way around, that is to say that grandma would fall ill and he would take care of her, because grandpa had been in rude health in past years, while she was often sick. It was never the same ailment that struck

her two weeks in a row, so she and grandpa spent their days consulting specialists. Every one of them could find something wrong with her, but nothing to explain her constant pains and malaise. One doctor suggested antidepressants, and for a while she felt better. Grandpa maintained that the pills made her careless, that they hid the affliction but cured nothing. His brow grew heavier. He was bored. Grandma stopped taking the pills, and went back to feeling miserable. Grandpa took on his previous duties of harrying receptionists, booking appointments and shuttling grandma between specialists. But then came the collapse.

Dad called, asked me how I was doing. I told him that nothing was the matter with me, and that yet I felt strange. Maybe it was just that this town made a strange impression on me; I knew no one, drifted about in isolation from everyone and everything. Dad was silent for a while, but then replied that he felt the same way, people were confused, they stayed at home and gathered their closest relatives and friends around them, it kind of reminded him of the wakes people held when he was little, with the deceased propped up in the

living room – except the corpse was missing, of course. He paused a beat, then added: “Your grandfather is turning into a geriatric in front of my eyes. He can’t take care of himself anymore.”

When I asked him what he meant he tiptoed around the issue for a while, said that he didn’t want to sound as if he were losing his marbles himself, but that certain things had changed with grandpa: the hair, always his point of pride, jet-black and gleaming, had turned white as chalk. It had faded, just like that, when the banks collapsed. Dad, who chooses his words carefully and is usually the one to keep his composure under pressure, now sounded bewildered, and meandered from one topic to another. He said it was a shame to bother me, now that I finally had peace to work, then asked if I wouldn’t just come home, then immediately backpedalled.

“I don’t know if there’s anything for you to do. He’s in the hospital, they’re taking care of him, but maybe you should come for your own sake, to say goodbye if you feel the need. So you won’t feel guilty when he’s gone.”

I had started packing before the conversation ended. That night, I was able to sleep for the first time in a long while; I dreamt of an old schooner fishing in the fjord, grandpa was onboard, he was just a boy and struggled to pull up a net from the water, growing more and more exhausted until

he clambered into a herring boat lashed to the schooner's stern, where he lay down and fell asleep. Grandpa dreamt of herring that rolled around in the large net, as fearful of the sky as he was of the ocean's fathomless abyss below.

House ghosts

The apartment in which I had dwelt for the past month and a half was a basement, a bright, white-painted space, with large naked windows on its side, facing the sea. The furniture was simple; white-painted or made of light-coloured wood. Upon entering this space for the first time I was taken aback, because it reminded me of a hospital room, more specifically a photograph I had come across at some point, showing an early 20th-century sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. The basement used to be a storage room for old books, and the rest of the house was the town's old library, now converted into an artists' residence. The intended inhabitant was a foreigner who had stayed there during the nightless summer months, but was unable to cope with the unceasing daylight and departed early, punch-drunk with insomnia. So it was by mere coincidence that I got my place there, in fact I was meant to serve as a watchman until the next resident arrived. While I lived there, I had no idea that in my mind, this living room would assume the form of a time capsule, harbouring memories of the collapsing banks and my grandfather losing his mind. That this was a scene I would need to come back to when I wanted to relive those events.

Once I had carried my luggage out into the entryway, I performed one last check-up on the apartment, making sure that all taps and electrical appliances were off, the windows firmly closed. Then I sat down to pull on my shoes, and suddenly felt as though I had to let someone know I was coming home. I took out my phone and stared at the screen while I wondered who was closest to me, and finally entered Unnur's phone number. She had been a sort of half-girlfriend for a while, we would call each other when we were lonely or drunk and needed to experience something tangible, but afterwards it never turned awkward. I would sometimes miss her when I stood in line at the supermarket or ate dinner alone in front of the TV. But I

didn't call her then. Probably because there would have been no obvious endpoint to that sort of encounter, it would just have gone on and on, until we were both old, neither of us having come across that one right person we were looking for.

Re-entering the realm of humanity after prolonged isolation is easier said than done, and it took me a long time to compose my message. I wondered whether I should mention grandpa, but at last settled on something simple and short: "Heading back to town." After sending the message, I sat for a while and waited for an answer, regretful I hadn't added something that invited a response: "Look forward to meeting you!" for example, or "Should we meet up?" But it was too late. Unnur had made clear that all follow-up messages were forbidden until she had replied, she hated feeling hounded, as if she had someone nipping at her heels. I stood up and shouldered my luggage, walked out into the refreshing winter air, closed the door behind me and turned the key in the lock. I was checked out.

The upper floor had housed the library itself. It loomed over town from the top of a sheer cliff, like a symbol for the enlightenment that was supposed to spread across the realm, in the wake of education and growing affluence. It was no coincidence that it looked like a lighthouse when one stood downtown and gazed up at it. As time wore on, the building was deemed unfit for its purpose, and the library was moved to a temporary space at lower ground, where it was more accessible and had plenty of parking space. The old library now has a work by a Canadian artist on display. The only duties attached to the basement apartment were to show the artwork if someone came knocking. The visitors that did arrive were few but memorable. I vividly remember a German mother and daughter who took a connecting flight in Iceland specifically to visit this old library. They drove a small rental from Keflavík Airport in the morning, arriving in Stykkishólmur around noon. After scrutinising the exhibition they went back the way they came, to catch a flight that same evening. They had to drive through winter conditions, but I wasn't surprised that they put themselves through it, because the work had an almost supernatural attraction, calling me to itself even in the dead of night, when I would much rather have slept.

After conquering the steps leading up from the basement, I crossed the parking lot, retracing my own footsteps leading to the old library. I wanted to make sure everything was OK there as well. I flipped a switch, and numerous glass columns connecting the floor to the ceiling were illuminated.

Each one contained water: core samples from Icelandic glaciers in retreat, which are rapidly melting and running off from the highlands and into the sea. Glaciers have a special kind of memory; the ice preserves remnants of warm and cold periods; ash from eruptions, pollen and seeds. All this is ejected from these ancient wellsprings of wisdom when they melt and turn into water. No one knows what is hidden under the vast plains of ice, nor what powers will be unleashed if the glaciers disappear, but when the broken-off icebergs are carried out to the sands they melt, leaving behind deathly deep bogs of sand, that never give up what they engulf.

The light in the exhibition hall was strangely greenish, and I felt as though I were onboard the *Nautilus*, the submarine of Captain Nemo, whose story my dad had read to me from a comic book. I walked between the columns to a curved window, striking the same pose as Nemo in the comic, legs slightly apart, hands behind the back, and looked over the village in the winter darkness. It was barely seven o'clock, and the townsfolk weren't out and about yet, apart from the fishermen leaving harbour in their small boats,

sailing out from the shelter of the luminescent town and heading out into darkness, following the shaft of light that they projected across the sea. I wanted to follow the boats beneath the surface of the sea; this was a childhood dream of mine that made an appearance every now and then, to vanish from the surface of the earth, but still be able to keep an eye on humanity from afar, to influence it, unbeknownst to all – for good and ill.

I kept vigil at the window and watched the village stir to life, lights appearing in windows, cars crawling down streets. Grandma and grandpa had lived out most of their lives in villages like this, archetypical societies that most resembled carpets for toy cars, spread out across the lowlands or at the bottom of deep fjords. Fish dictated the terms of their existence; they had moved house across the country many times to stay close to the herring, which in their minds most resembled the messiah himself, equal parts mortal being and holy spirit. Grandpa and grandma had seen with their own eyes how the herring could mutate tiny villages into towns teeming with humanity. Still, after the herring industry imploded at the end of the sixties, they eventually moved to Reykjavík. Long after grandpa stopped earning a living from fish, he would shush and demand absolute silence while a program on the fishing industry played on the radio. For him, numbers on catch sizes were more exciting than

football match results. He knew the boats by name, exulted in the work created in the towns, the wages going into people's pockets, and the riches delivered to the economy and the fishing magnates. Grandpa understood the value created by the fishing industry and he understood the economies of the fishing villages, or rather: he realised that every society nurses a dream of being the centre of the universe. This means that the town's residents need to take on many roles in order to offer a variety of trades and services; nobody is merely one, but many. Grandpa was a jack-of-all-trades and found an outlet for his strengths in these societies. He was a man of consequence, who earned respect, secured good postings and took on well-earning jobs. For a while, he was mayor of the town of Saudárkrókur, where my father and siblings were born and raised, and later an inspector for the Herring Fisheries' Committee in Seydisfjörður. In addition to his day labourer's wages, he was constantly looking for profitable ventures, and eventually became rather well-off. By the end, he was listed as "former executive" in the phone book. Many would call that an overstatement – he ended his career as one of two employees in a local branch of a large insurance company in Gardabær, the boss of the place; his office was large and well-furnished, had everything, a paper shredder as well as a fax machine. At noon he'd zip home, get a hot meal from grandma, treat himself to a foot bath, zone out on the sofa for a moment, and gather his strength for the next round in the office. When I was at grandma's as a boy, I could do as grandpa did. I remember watching him through half-closed eyes as I pretended to sleep, his stomach rose and fell, and the open newspaper covering it rustled. He dozed like Sleeping Beauty, right up until he jumped into action as if spring-loaded, completely out of the blue. Before returning to the office he would teach me something useful, so I could become a man some day. He taught me how to shine shoes, how to knot a tie, and sometimes he'd let me watch as he shaved – a momentous ceremony, and as ritualised as any Catholic service. Once he had scraped the lather from his face he smiled at me in the mirror, puffed out his chest and straightened his posture. I did likewise, and he turned to face me, knelt down and washed my face carefully with a hot washcloth, before splashing aftershave on his palms and saying:

“Well, let's see those jowls.”

Then grandpa gently rubbed my face, and the spicy scent that followed him everywhere filled my senses.

One day, it was decided to close down the insurance branch. Grandpa was offered a job at the headquarters instead, and he enthusiastically showed up, a painting from the old office under his arm and a van waiting outside with his mahogany desk. He was greeted by a man who took him to a cramped cubicle in an open-plan office, with a chair, computer and telephone for customer service. Grandpa made himself scarce. The desk was later driven home to them, and left in the driveway. It was caught out in the rain, but eventually carried inside under the cover of night. Grandpa was sixty-four when he retired, and still full of energy; he devoted himself almost fully to his consuming passion, gardening, and was constantly in the midst of some grand undertaking, never satisfied with the fruit of his labours. Walls rose and fell, bushes and trees constantly pinballed around, freshly laid cobblestones were immediately ripped back out – grandpa didn't like the pattern. With each passing year the flower beds spread out at the lawn's expense, bulbs burst into bloom, trees sprouted leaves and grandpa's money grew in the bank.

The town's lights had gradually multiplied, and when I saw schoolchildren out and about I knew I had to hurry, if I didn't want to miss the small bus that had brought me here a month and a half ago. I turned out the lights in the exhibition hall, where the glaciers' memories are held and, with my own ensconced in my head, I set out.

Haukur Ingvarsson

Translated from the Icelandic by Steingrímur Teague