

Sun Coffee

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The band wakes you at 02:47, as it has every night for eight years, with a warmth across the forehead like a hand checking for fever. Ninety minutes. You come up out of it the way you always do, all at once, with nothing on the far side, not even the sense of having been away.

The kitchen light is on.

You lie still and listen. The house on Sólgrata is narrow and old and tells you everything: the radiator ticking under the window, the wind working at the corrugated siding, the fridge. And under all of it, a chair scraping. Ásta does not get up in the night. Ásta sleeps nine hours, ten at weekends, the deep, dull, ordinary sleep of fifteen. She sleeps like the very young and the very old. She sleeps the way people used to.

You pull on Einar's jumper, which you still wear because it is warm and for no other reason, and go down.

She is at the table in her school hoodie with a mug of milk gone cold and a sheet of paper squared in front of her, the way she squares her homework, its edges lined up with the edge of the table. You know the form before you can read it. Everyone in the Westfjords over the age of fifteen knows the form. Form S16, Application for Compressed Sleep Therapy, Minor (Sixteen to Seventeen Years). Two signature boxes. Hers

is already filled in, in the careful round hand she keeps for anything official.

“I’m sixteen on the twentieth,” she says. “The health centre can fit me in on the twenty-first. I asked.”

“It’s three in the morning.”

“I know. I waited up for you.” She pushes the pen across the table, a cheap blue biro from the bank. “Everyone’s awake at three. That’s sort of the point.”

Outside, Ísafjörður is lit like a ship. It is the second week of December and the sun has not cleared the mountains since November. It will not come back until the end of January, when it touches the steps on Sólgata first and the whole town eats pancakes with cream to welcome it. In between there is only the long blue dusk at noon, and the dark, and in the dark, these days, the town is busy.

The swimming pool is open all night. The choir rehearses at four. There is a yoga class at half past three in the old school gym, and the hardware shop on Hafnarstræti does a night opening on Thursdays, because why not, because who is asleep. When the bands first came, the papers in Reykjavík ran long pieces about the six-hour gift, a second life laid quietly inside the first. Ninety minutes of dense sleep, slow wave and nothing else, the brain rinsed and wrung out like a cloth. Approved for adults first, then for sixteen and over with a parent’s signature. Never for children: a child’s brain still needs the other kind, the wasteful kind, the kind with stories in it.

Adults, the studies said, did not miss it.

You walk down to the bakery at the bottom of Silfurgata, because it opens at three for the trawler crews and because walking is what you do while you think. Snow has come in sideways off the fjord and lies in the lee of every doorstep like something curled up asleep. Pálmi has the door propped open with a sack of flour, and the smell comes out to meet you: cardamom, yeast, burnt sugar.

“Hrefna. Early, even for you.”

“Ásta was up.”

“Ah.” He knows. In a town of two and a half thousand everyone knows the date of everyone’s sixteenth birthday. He folds a paper bag of kleinur shut for you without asking. “Mine went on hers in the summer. Sigga. She’s doing her driving theory at night now, and an online course in Spanish. Spanish! I said, what for? And she said, Pabbi, I have six extra hours, I’ll find out what for.”

“Does she miss anything?”

He thinks about it honestly, which is what you like about him. “She’s less tired,” he says. “That’s all I notice. She was always tired before. Now she isn’t.” He shrugs at the ovens. “You’re on it. You’d know better than me.”

You would. That is the trouble.

What you have done with eight years of nights:

A nursing degree, by distance, from the university in Akureyri, three years of lectures watched between three and six in the morning with the sound turned low. The night rota at the hospital, which still pays a premium, even now that night is no longer the hard shift. The mortgage on the house on Sólgrata, paid down to a size you can look at. Fourteen jumpers, two blankets, a christening shawl for your cousin’s boy. Every one of Ásta’s handball matches, because you were never too tired. Her packed lunches. Your mother’s birthday cakes. The gutters.

What you did before: you slept. You must have dreamed. You know you did, the way you know you once had milk teeth. You cannot remember a single one.

You took the band four weeks after the Hafðís went down off Straumnes in a February storm, with Einar and five other men aboard. You were not sleeping anyway. And when you did sleep, the doctor said gently, you were waking up in a state, weren’t you? You said yes, though you

did not tell her what the state was. She said there was good evidence that the bands helped with what she called complicated grief, and she wrote the prescription on the same pad she used for antibiotics. You have never asked yourself whether that was the reason. The hours were reason enough. A woman alone with a seven-year-old needs the hours.

“Why now?” you ask her the next evening, when she is home from handball and eating skyr out of the tub, standing up, which she has been told a hundred times not to do.

“Mocks in March. Then the real ones.” She does not look at you. “Kristín’s on it. Björk’s on it. Everyone in my year who’s sixteen is on it except Óli, and Óli’s parents are Christians.”

“We’re Christians.”

“Not like that.” She licks the spoon. “You’re on it.”

“I’m forty-four. I work nights.”

“So it’s fine for you.”

“It’s different for you. You’re still,” and you hunt for the word, “growing.”

“I’ll be sixteen. The law says sixteen. Do you think you know better than the law?” She is not angry. She sounds like you do when you reason with a patient who wants to discharge himself. “I’m not asking for anything weird, Mamma. I’m asking for what you’ve got.”

You have no answer that is not hypocrisy, so you say you will think about it, which she knows means you are losing.

It is your mother who says it, in the end. Gróa lives at the top of Sólgata in the yellow house your father built, and she has never worn a band, not once, not even to try. She is seventy-nine and sleeps nine hours like her granddaughter and wakes at seven for the shipping forecast, which she says is the only poetry worth hearing. You go up to fix the latch on her storm door, and she makes you coffee you will not drink, because you fold at a quarter past one.

“Let the girl do what she wants,” she says. “You did.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“You had a choice.” She sets the cup in front of you anyway. “You just didn’t want to go where you’d have had to go at night.” She watches you not drink it. “You’ve stopped going anywhere at night, Hrefna. Eight years. You don’t know what’s out there any more. So how can you tell her what she’d be missing?”

So on the Friday, the fifteenth of December, you do not put the band on.

It sits on the bedside table in its cradle, a soft grey crescent the colour of a sky about to snow, its small light blinking green, patient, puzzled. You lie on your back in the dark. You have forgotten how to do this. Your body knows ninety minutes, then the warmth, then the day, and it does not understand being put to bed and left there. You hear the town: a car on Hafnarstræti, the choir faintly through two walls and the wind, singing something in four parts at four in the morning. You think about the gutters. You think about the form on the kitchen table, under the sugar bowl, one box filled.

At some point after five, without noticing the door, you go through it.

He is in the kitchen.

Not the kitchen on Sólgrata: the flat you had before, above the post office, with the blue tiles behind the sink. He is standing at the sink peeling a potato the way he always did, with the small knife and his thumb, turning it so the peel comes away in one long ribbon, which he holds up for you, because it was a thing he did, because he was proud of it, and you had forgotten. You had forgotten it completely.

“Look,” he says.

That is all he says. Look. The ribbon of peel turning slowly in the light from the window, the potato pale and wet in his other hand. He is not dead and he is not alive, he is not drowned and he is not saved. He is

simply a man showing his wife a potato peel in a kitchen that no longer exists, on an afternoon nobody wrote down.

You look.

You wake at ten past ten. The window is the deep blue of the noon dusk. Your face is wet and your chest aches as if you had carried something heavy up a hill, and for a long time you lie there unable to tell whether what you feel is the worst thing or the best thing that has happened to you in eight years. You think it may be both. You think that may be what dreaming was, and why you stopped.

The band blinks green at you. You turn it face down.

Ásta is at the kitchen table when you come down, in her pyjamas, eating toast. It is Saturday. She looks at you the way you look at a patient whose colour is wrong.

“You slept,” she says. “You never sleep.”

“I took it off.”

“Why?”

You sit down across from her. The form is still under the sugar bowl. You had meant to say something careful about informed choices, and what comes out instead is: “I dreamed about your dad.”

She stops chewing.

“He was peeling a potato,” you say. “In the old flat. You won’t remember the old flat. He used to do it all in one piece, the peel. He’d hold it up to show me. I’d forgotten. I’d completely forgotten he did that.”

Ásta puts the toast down, very slowly. She looks at the table, at the form, at her own round signature.

“He does it with apples now,” she says.

You don't understand her. For a moment you think she means something about memory, about how stories change in the telling. Then you see her face.

"Ásta."

"He's gone grey here." She touches her left temple. "Since about last year. And he wears glasses for reading, they're horrible, they're orange. He'd be forty-nine. I worked it out." Her voice is perfectly steady and her eyes are not. "He's there most nights, Mamma. Not every night. Most. Since I was seven. Sometimes we're on the boat, but mostly we're at the pool, or he's in the kitchen. He doesn't know he's dead. I never tell him. I tried once and he just laughed and asked me to pass the salt."

The radiator ticks. Somewhere up the street a shovel scrapes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you never talk about him." She says it without blame, as a fact, the way you would say the pass road is closed. "You put the band on and you went to work and you were so," she hunts for the word the way you did, "efficient. And you were fine. You were fine because you didn't have to see him. I worked that out when I was about ten." She picks at the crust of her toast. "I see him, and then I wake up and he's drowned again. Every morning. Every single morning for eight years he drowns again before breakfast. And then I go to school."

You think of every morning you have made her toast. Every morning you have stood at that counter, fresh from ninety blank minutes, cheerful, rested, asking about handball.

"I'm so tired, Mamma," she says. "Not tired from sleeping. Tired from him. I want what you've got. I just want it to stop."

That week you work four nights. On the ward the patients sleep or do not; most of the old ones still sleep properly, and at three you walk the corridor and listen to them breathing and turning and muttering, the small sounds people make when they are somewhere else. You used

to think of it as noise. Now you stand outside room six, where Herdís Jónsdóttir, eighty-eight, is laughing in her sleep, actually laughing, and you wonder where she is, and who with.

You think about what is fair. You do not have the kind of mind that is easy with that word; it is a word for people with time on their hands. But you do have time now. You have six extra hours a night. That is the whole joke.

Here is what is fair: she is right. You chose the band because you could not bear the mornings, and you never let yourself know it, and you called it the hours. And she has carried him alone for eight years, every night, the only person in the world still meeting him, growing older alongside him, finding out about his horrible orange glasses, while you knitted jumpers in the next room with the sound turned low. She has been working the night shift. Nobody thanked her. Nobody even knew.

Here is what is also fair: if she stops, he stops. Not the man at the bottom of the sea, who stopped eight years ago. The other one. The one with grey at his left temple who does not know he is dead. He exists nowhere else. When she puts the band on, nobody in the world will see him again.

Unless.

You sign the form on the nineteenth, the night before her birthday, at the kitchen table at three in the morning, with the bank's blue biro. Upstairs the band sits in its cradle, face down. You have not worn it since the fifteenth.

You do not tell her that until after she has started. You do not want it to be a bargain.

The health centre fits her in on the twenty-first. A nurse you trained with, Sólveig, settles the band on her forehead and runs the calibration and explains the warmth, and Ásta nods at all of it like someone who has read the leaflet four times, which she has. That night she folds at half past midnight. By two she is up, and from your bed you hear her

in the kitchen: the kettle, the radio low, the creak of the chair. You lie in the dark and listen to your daughter being awake.

The first nights are hard. Your body has to learn the long way down again: the hour of thinking about gutters, the door you never notice. Some nights you go nowhere you can remember. Some nights it is a bus, or the ward, or your father's boat, or the corridor of a hotel you have never been to. The dreams do not obey. Nobody told you, or you forgot, that they never did.

But some nights he is there.

He is not quite the man you married. He is older than you ever saw him. He has grey at the left temple, and his reading glasses are orange and faintly ridiculous, and the first time you see them you laugh out loud, in the dream, and he looks wounded and says Ásta picked them out. You wake up laughing with your face wet and lie in the blue dark, astonished, as if someone had slid a note to you under a door.

You keep a notebook by the bed now. You write him down before he can go.

On the twenty-fifth of January the sun comes back.

It clears the mountain at a quarter to eleven, and for a few minutes it lies across the steps at the bottom of Sólgata, the way it does every year, and the whole street is out in coats and hats to stand in it, squinting, as if it were a person stepping off a boat. Gróa has made the pancakes. There is whipped cream in a bowl on her window sill, Pálmi has sent up a bag of kleinur, and somebody's child is waving a paper flag. The light is thin and gold and gives no warmth at all, and your mother turns her face up into it with her eyes shut, like a cat.

Ásta stands beside you with her hands pulled up into her sleeves. She looks well. She looks rested. She is doing Spanish, of all things, with Sigga from the bakery, and she says the mocks will be easy.

“Where was he last night?” she asks, without looking at you. She asks most mornings now, and only about him, never about your other dreams. It is the one thing she still has to ask out loud.

You think. You take the notebook out of your coat pocket to check, because you no longer trust yourself without a pencil.

“The pool,” you say. “He was trying to teach me the butterfly. He’s very bad at it.”

“He is,” she says. “He always was.” And she smiles into the thin gold light, and for a second you cannot tell whether she is remembering it or hearing it for the first time, and you understand that it does not matter, that it has never mattered, that this is how the dead have always been kept: by someone who was awake telling someone who was asleep, and then the other way round.

At eleven the sun slides behind the ridge. It will be back tomorrow for a few minutes longer. Gróa goes in to warm the second batch, and Ásta follows her.

You stand a little longer on the step where the light was. Tonight you will go to bed early, the old way, and lie in the dark with nothing on your forehead, thinking about the gutters until you go through the door you never see. It is your turn now. Someone has to keep the night shift.

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