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Jane Smiley
The
Greenlanders

Jane Smiley is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Thousand Acres* and more than ten other works of fiction, including *Good Faith*, *Horse Heaven*, and *Moo*, as well as a critically acclaimed biography of Charles Dickens. In 2001 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in northern California.

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The Greenlanders

A NOVEL

Jane Smiley



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—J. S.

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*This book is fondly dedicated to Elizabeth Stern,
Duncan Campbell, Frank Ponzi, and to the memory of
Knud-Erik Holm-Pedersen.*

par munu eftir
undrsamtigar
guttnar toftur
i grasi finnask
paers i árdaga
áttar hofdu

Afterwards they will find the chessmen,
marvelous and golden in the grass,
just where the ancient gods
had dropped them.

“Völuspá”
 (“The Sayings of the Prophetess”)

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ASGEIR GUNNARSSON FARMED AT GUNNARS STEAD NEAR Undir Hofdi church in Austfjord. His homefield was nearly as large as the homefield at Gardar, where the absent bishop had his seat and he had another large field as well. From the time he took over the farm upon the death of his father, this Asgeir had a great reputation among the Greenlanders for pride. It happened that when he was a young man he went off on the king's knarr to Norway, and when he returned to Gunnars Stead two years later, he brought with him an Icelandic wife whose name was Helga Ingvadottir. She carried with her two wallhangings and six white ewes with black faces, as well as other valuable goods, and for pride folk said that Asgeir was well matched in her.

Asgeir built a special pen for these Icelandic ewes at the edge of his second field, and the pen was visible from the steading. Each morning Asgeir liked to open the door of the steading and gaze out upon his ewes cropping the rich grass of his second field, and when Helga brought him his bowl of sourmilk, he would turn and set his eyes upon her elaborately braided headdress and the silver brooches that lay against her throat. Thus he would contemplate his good luck. About this time, Helga Ingvadottir gave birth to a child who was named Margret, and who was a sturdy, quiet child and a great source of pride to the mother.

Also visible from the door of the steading was the turf hut belonging to Thorunn Jorundsdottir, and the bit of land surrounding this hut cut a notch in the Gunnars Stead property where it met the property of Ketil Erlendsson, Asgeir's nearest neighbor. Thorunn was an old woman, who kept one cow and only a few sheep and goats. She supplemented her meager provisions by going about to nearby farms and begging for some of this and some of that. She was also given much to whispering, and folk in the district were not disinclined to hear what she had to say, although they were disinclined to speak of it.

There was nothing about this Thorunn that Helga Ingvadottir cared for, neither her whispering, nor her begging, nor the sight of her hovel on the horizon, nor the way that the one cow and the few sheep and goats often strayed among Gunnars Stead beasts. One day Thorunn came to Gunnars Stead, as she was in the habit of doing, and asked Helga for some of the new milk. Helga, who was standing in the doorway of the dairy, with basins of new milk all about her, refused this request, for recently she had felt another child quicken within her, and it was well known among the Greenlanders that a woman hoping for a boy child must drink only new milk. Thorunn glanced about at the basins of milk and went away muttering. Later, when Asgeir returned to the steading for his evening meat, Helga spoke bitterly against the old woman, until Asgeir demanded silence.

But it seemed the case that Thorunn had indeed cursed the Gunnars Stead folk, for not long after this, one of Asgeir's horses stepped in a hole and broke his leg, and had to have his throat cut, and then, after the servants had filled in the hole, another of the horses stepped in the same hole, and broke the selfsame leg, and had to have his throat cut, as well. And the Helga Ingvadottir came to her time, but the birth did not go well, and though the child lived, the mother did not. This was in the year 1352, by the reckoning of the stick calendar at Gardar.

Asgeir named the child Gunnar, for there had been a Gunnar or an Asgeir at Gunnars Stead since the time of Erik the Red, when Erik gave his friend Hafgrim all of Austfjord and the northern part of Vatna Hverfi district, the richest district in all of Greenland, and Hafgrim gave a piece to the first Gunnar, his cousin. The child Gunnar was not especially small and not especially large. His nurse was a servingwoman whose name was Ingrid. Margret was by this time some seven winters old.

The child Gunnar did not grow well, and when he should have been walking, he was only sitting up, and when he should have been playing with the other children about the farmstead, Margret was still carrying him about in a sling upon her back. Asgeir regretted naming the child Gunnar, and spoke of changing it to Ingvi.

Asgeir Gunnarsson had a brother who also lived at Gunnars Stead, who was named Hauk. Hauk had no wife, and was very fond of all sorts of hunting and snaring and fishing. He had been to the Northsetur, far to the north of the western settlement, where Greenlanders like to hunt walrus and narwhal and polar bear, such large animals as were very valuable to the bishop and to the ships that came from the archbishop of Nidaros and the king in Norway. He sought the icy, waste districts both summer and winter, and his skills made Gunnars Stead especially prosperous. He spoke little. Asgeir said his brother could make the killing of a polar bear sound like a day at the butter churn. Hauk was the taller of the two brothers, very straight-limbed and fair-looking. Asgeir often urged him to find himself a wife, but Hauk said nothing to these suggestions, as he said nothing to most suggestions. He was well liked among the Greenlanders for his skills, and not blamed for his independent ways, for the Greenlanders live far out on the western ocean, and know what it is to depend upon themselves in all things.

One day Asgeir gathered together a group of men. Toward dusk, they surrounded Thorunn's little steading and called her out. When she came, carrying a basin and muttering in her usual fashion, Asgeir said that he was tired of her curses, and he killed her with his sheep-shearing knife. Gunnar was three winters old. Now he began to walk and to act more like other children. Asgeir stopped talking of changing his name to Ingvi. Folk in the district said little of this killing. Thorunn had a niece with a young daughter who lived in Petursvik, Ketils Fjord, far to the south, but no male relatives to exact revenge. It was clear enough that she had put a spell over the child, and many praised Asgeir for his decisive action, including especially Hauk Gunnarsson, who had been away in Isafjord and not present at the killing. After Thorunn was buried near Undir Hofdi church, Asgeir sent his servants to her steading and had them tear it down, and he gave the cow and the sheep to Nikolaus, the priest at Undir Hofdi church, along with all of Thorunn's house furnishings. In this way, the boundary between Gunnars Stead and Ketils Stead was straightened, and the unsightly steading could no longer be seen from the doorway at Gunnars Stead. After these events, it seemed to Asgeir that he had renewed his good luck, and he was much pleased with himself.

It was Margret's habit and pleasure as a child to walk about in the hills above the farmstead looking for herbs and bilberries, and most of the time she would carry Gunnar with her in a sling, for at eleven winters of age she was tall and strong, taller than Ingrid by far and not so much shorter than Asgeir himself. It happened on one such day a year after the killing of Thorunn the witch that Margret strayed beyond her usual range, and Gunnar, tired from playing among the tiny, trickling streams and tangles of birch scrub, fell into a deep

sleep. It was well past the time for evening meat when Margret carried the sleeping child back to the farmstead, and she looked for a beating from Ingrid, but instead she found the farmstead deserted and everything quiet.

The nurse Ingrid was a great storyteller, and she had told Margret many stories of the skraelings and their evil ways, and of the sad lives of little girls whom the skraelings stole and took with them into the north, farther north than the Northsetur, where Hauk Gunnarsson hunted for walrus and narwhal. Now Margret sat with her back against the tuft of the steading and contemplated how the babies of these little girls would never be baptized and would be taken out in the dark of winter and left to the elements. These little girls would be beaten if they dared to pray, and would have to submit to any man who wanted them. They would never bathe from year to year, and would wear only animal skins, and when they died they would have no final sacraments, and so they would spend eternal life in the same darkness and cold, and with the same sort of devilish companions as the skraelings. The fact was, that it was not unusual for Margret to give herself over to thoughts such as these, for though they frightened her, they also drew her. It made no difference that Asgeir laughed at Ingrid's tales, and declared that she had never seen a skraeling in her life (for the skraelings did not come near the Norse farms and never had), nor that Hauk Gunnarsson himself had frequent intercourse with the demons, and admired their hunting skills and the warmth of their garments. On the other hand, Margret had heard Asgeir and Ivar Bardarson, the priest who had Gardar in his charge until the coming of the new bishop, speaking of what had befallen the western settlement, for Ivar Bardarson had taken some men and gone there in a boat and found all of the farms abandoned and all of the livestock dead or scattered in the wastelands. And she had heard them mention skraelings more than once. She got up ostensibly to find Gunnar some bits of dried fish and butter, for he was whimpering with hunger, but really to look around the corners of the steading. There was no one, man nor demon, to be seen. Dusk was falling. She sat down and took Gunnar upon her lap. He began to eat, and she dozed off.

The two children were awakened by the glare of torches and the sound of Asgeir's rolling voice. "Well," he said, "here are the only folk along the whole of Einars Fjord who know nothing of the great event." He smiled in the flickering light of the torches. "A ship has come with my daughter, and though it brings no bishop, we will not send it back for one without unloading it first."

Now folk crowded into the steading, not only Gunnars Stead folk, but Ketils Stead folk too, for this event was interesting enough to draw the whole neighborhood together for talk and speculation. Gunnar sat open-eyed at the bench while Margret, Ingrid, and the servingmaids dished up sourmilk and other refreshments for the guests. Ketil Erlendsson spoke up. "Even so, it is but a single ship, and not sent of the king, either."

"Nor of the bishop," said one of the other men.

Asgeir said, "But it is large enough for there to be a bit of something for each of us." He laughed. "Something, it is certain, that we did not know we needed before this."

Now a man spoke whom Gunnar had never seen before, dark and sour-looking, with odd, crinkly hair. "The news is that King Magnus has given the throne to King Hakon now, though Magnus still lives." He spoke angrily, and Gunnar's cousin, Thorkel, said with a grin, "Erlend Ketilsson, you sound as if he might have given the throne to you, had events gone another way."

way.” Gunnar had heard the name of the man, Erlend Ketilsson, many times, and widened his eyes in the flickering light to get a good look at him. His gaze seemed to fall upon Erlend like the touch of a hand, for the young man turned at once and stared back. Now Gunnar raised his palms to his face and pulled his cheeks down, until his eyes were staring out of their sockets, then he thrust forth his tongue, nearly to the roots. It was the work of a moment. Thorkel saw him and laughed aloud. Erlend scowled. Ketil said, “That won’t be the only news, you may be sure, and the rest of it will be worse.”

“Few goods and bad news,” said Asgeir, “but I am content. That is enough for me, if there is nothing else.” The other men nodded and ate up the sourmilk and went off.

The next day, all the Greenlanders flocked to Gardar to catch sight of the Norwegians and to trade the goods they had been hoarding for many years. The captain of the traders, a Bergen man named Thorleif, seemed to laugh all the time. He roared with laughter at the sight of the Greenlanders’ tradegoods: sealskins and walrus tusks and lengths of homespun fabric, piles of sheepskins and reindeer skins and long twisted narwhal tusks. He came near the folk and peered at them, then laughed. The sailors seemed too sober by comparison, and hardly had a word to say. They stared at the Greenlanders, in fact, and stood like dolls around the Gardar field, as if they had never seen a cathedral, or a byre, or a hall such as the great Gardar hall, or sheep and goats and cattle grazing about the hillsides, or horses in the pens, or the landing spot, or the fjord itself, or the high dark mountains that rose all about. When Ivar Bardarson brought out cheese and sourmilk and boiled reindeer meat and dried sealmeat—a feast, in the view of most of the Greenlanders—they gazed at that for a long time before they began to eat it.

Asgeir said to Thorleif, “Are your men such farmboys that they’ve never seen wealth like this before?” and Gunnar thought Thorleif would choke from laughing at this joke.

“Nay, Greenlander,” he finally replied. “It is only what they have heard about this place. Some folk say that all Greenlanders are a little bluish, which is why you are called Greenlanders. And other folk say that you live on a diet of ice and salt water, and such a diet sustains you through your being accustomed to it.”

Now Asgeir grinned a wide grin, and said, “These things may be true of Herjolfsnes men for they live far to the south and keep to themselves. You will have to see for yourself.”

“Perhaps I will. Our voyage was not so short that I can return this summer, as I had hoped.” Thorleif looked about and laughed again. Asgeir said, “Most folk do not laugh at the prospect of a Greenland winter.”

“But they may laugh at the prospect of telling tales upon it for the rest of their lives.”

The trading went quickly, and there was little fighting. Farmers from as far away as Siglufjord and Alptafjord appeared with their goods, and Thorleif seemed always to have more to offer. The Gunnars Stead folk had much to trade, because Asgeir had raised and sheared many sheep and Hauk had been three times to the Northsetur. The large boat that he brought to Gardar was full of walrus hide rope, vats of blubber, feathers, down, and hides. When Thorleif returned a second time to negotiate about the tusks, Asgeir made him sit down and brought out a round of cheese. “Now, shipmaster,” he said, “you must try this, if you think the Greenlanders live upon salt water and ice, and then you must tell me some news. We Greenlanders have been pushing these goods out of our way for ten years now. It is you who have the real wealth, and that is news of other places.”

“That is such a coin as you might be sorry to receive, when you have heard what I have to tell.”

“Nevertheless, you must tell it.”

“Has a great pestilence not come to you here in Greenland?”

“No more than usual, though not so many years ago bad conditions drove folk out of the western settlement, and they have settled among us here.”

“The hand of God has not fallen heavily upon you?”

“Shipmaster, the hand of God rests heavily upon the Greenlanders, and that is a fact.”

Now the two were interrupted by an acquaintance of Asgeir’s, named Lavrans Kollgrimsson, of Hvalsey Fjord. Folk considered Lavrans rather foolish, but good-hearted, and Asgeir shared in this estimate. He offered Lavrans a bit of cheese.

“Nay,” said Lavrans. “I am here about this bearskin business, and will stand before the Norwegian until he gives me what I desire.”

Thorleif replied, “Old man, you are a fool. Folk tell me you had considerable trouble for this bearhide, and yet all you want for it is a length of red silk, no wheel hubs nor pitch nor iron goods.”

“It would have been a great thing to send a live bear back to the king of Norway, as the Greenlanders did in former days, but the animal died in my cowbyre, though not before it maimed a servant of mine. Nevertheless, I have my heart set on this bit of shining red, for no one in all of Greenland has such a possession. My wife is with child again, and it is no secret that she has lost the other three. Perhaps it will be good luck to have this banner from afar waving over her bedcloset when she comes to her time. I cannot be dissuaded.” And so Thorleif agreed to trade the silk, which he had brought for the see of Gardar, to Lavrans Kollgrimsson, a poor farmer from a poor district. Folk said Lavrans had gotten little for the trouble he had taken with the bear, but Lavrans, as always, paid no attention to the opinion of his neighbors. Now Osmund Thordarson, of Brattahlid, who also had a bearskin, and furthermore, a big one he had taken from the bear in the wilds, got two sacks of oatseed, one iron ax head, a vat of pitch, and a knife with a steel blade. But Osmund was known as a lucky man, who stepped forward and spoke up in all things. His mother’s brother, Gizur Gizursson, was the lawspeaker, but it was well known that Osmund knew the laws better than any man in Brattahlid district.

What with the trading and bargaining, it was well toward nightfall before Thorleif had the breath to tell his news, and then it was wondrous news indeed. For the wrath of God had indeed descended upon the Norwegians, and not only upon them, but upon all others in the world as well, man and woman and child, rich and poor, country folk and town folk. It was such an ill that no one had ever seen the like of it: there were families, said Thorleif, who were healthy at dinner and died before daybreak, all together; there were whole districts where every soul in every parish, excepting only one child or one old man, died within days. The streets of Bergen were less crowded during the sailing season, he said to Asgeir, who had been there, than they had once been in the dead of winter. Every sailor had lost parents or children or wife or brother; every sailor had seen the trains of penitents going from town to town, raising a great roar of prayers and alms-begging. Thorleif had seen the death ship itself, a little ship that floated into Bergen harbor from England—all of the sailors had the mark of death upon them, and then all were dead, and then folk in the town began to die off, and

others fled, but the pestilence followed them into every valley and up every fjord. And there was more: poisoned wells and folk burned at the stake, priests found dead upon their altars and corpses lying in the streets with no one to gather them into their graves, or to say a last prayer over them. Had none of this touched the Greenlanders? It had not. The sailors marveled at this, but in their turn, the Greenlanders were struck speechless and went off to their homes and considered these tidings for many days.

Ivar Bardarson, who was a great friend of Asgeir, found Thorleif an entertaining companion, and brought him to Vatna Hverfi to visit with Asgeir rather often, and Asgeir answered Thorleif's questions with glee. How was it the Greenlanders were so big and fat? (Plenty of sealmeat.) How did they do without bread? (Plenty of sealmeat.) Why did their houses have so many rooms and passageways? (The better to be warmed by seal oil lamps.) Why were the sheep and goats so big and the cows and horses so small? (Because they always had been so, since Erik the Red brought his shiploads of settlers from the west coast of Iceland.) What did the Greenlanders do for a bishop? (They waited, as they had been waiting for ten years, since the death of the last bishop, Arni.) Why did the Greenlanders have no ships? (The law of the king and a dearth of wood.) Nor did they have any cats, or chickens, or pigs, though some farmers had a fine breed of deerhound that Thorleif admired. The Greenlanders were so poor in weapons, how did they manage to hunt? (Even the best hunters, like Hauk Gunnarsson, used snares and traps more than spears or arrows.) Nor did they have any swords. Thorleif marveled. "There are other ways to settle disputes," Asgeir told him, "and Greenlanders prefer the peaceable ones no more than anyone else."

"And how," Thorleif said more than once, "have you escaped this pestilence that haunts the rest of the world?" For this, Asgeir had no answer.

Some sailors wintered in Vatna Hverfi district, and one of these, a boy named Skuli Gudmundsson, stayed at Gunnars Stead. He was very deft, and he always had a bit of wood in his hands, or some soapstone. He carved Margret a spindle whorl in the shape of a grinning face, which Ingrid said was sinful and idolatrous. For Asgeir he carved a set of chessmen. Even so, he had little to say of interest, for he had lived at his father's farm near Bergen until the very day he went off with Thorleif on the ship to Greenland.

It happened that the autumn of this year was an especially prosperous one for Asgeir. The grass stood high in the fields, there were many lambs to be slaughtered, Hauk brought back so much sealmeat and blubber from the autumn seal hunt that the drying racks bowed beneath it, and so Asgeir declared his intention to give a Yule feast for the priest Ivar Bardarson, Thorleif, and his cousin, Thorkel Gellison, who had just come into possession of his steading in the southern part of Vatna Hverfi district. And it was the case that Asgeir had given no feast at Gunnars Stead since his homecoming feast to celebrate his marriage to Helga Ingvadottir.

One night, when Hauk and Ingrid and the other members of the household were sitting about, Asgeir went to the storeroom and came back with a vat of honey, which he had gotten from Thorleif in exchange for two walrus tusks. The others sat forward where they were dozing or occupying themselves with game counters, and Hauk said, "It seems to me that we are not about to dish this onto our sourmilk."

"Nay, indeed," said Asgeir, and he mixed all of this honey, which was a great quantity, with some fresh water and with some measures full of rotten bilberries, and then he put

away.

Ingrid looked at him, and said, "This mead-making will have ill results."

"It will be a good surprise for Ivar Bardarson," replied Asgeir.

"You think to impress the shipmaster with the acquirements of the Greenlanders? Greenlanders always run after folk from other lands as if they were saints in heaven."

"We know what is suitable to a feast, as others do, and if we may supply it, then it is pleasant to do so."

"At least we will see," said Ingrid, "who has the head for drink and who does not."

Now Hauk spoke up and said, "Will the Ketils Stead folk be invited to the feast?"

"If they are not," replied Asgeir, "then Ketil will stand upon his fence and count our guests as they come into the steading, and in his opinion, he will be counting the heads of his enemies. It is better to have him inside the steading, where we can look upon him." It was a fact that though Ketils Stead lay hard by Gunnars Stead, Asgeir and Ketil were ill-assorted neighbors, and always found much to disagree about.

Hauk smiled, and Asgeir looked at him briefly, then said, "My brother, it seems to me that you are looking for a reason to absent yourself from the gathering, and seek the wastelands even in the dead of winter."

"It is certain that there are not a few pursuits I prefer to sitting about the steading with a lot of folk, stifling from the lamps and the talk."

"Even so, you will not find a wife in the wastelands, unless she is a ghost or a snow demon."

Hauk made no reply, and Ingrid spoke up and said, "A wife would be ashamed to go with a man who wears feathered birdskins next to his flesh, as skraelings do."

"And an old woman should be ashamed," said Asgeir, "to notice a young man in his undergarments," and he laughed merrily, for he was much pleased at the prospect of his feast, and it seemed to him that he had repaid Ingrid handily for her prediction concerning the mead.

Now the day of the feast came around, and many folk came from Gardar and other farmsteads to Gunnars Stead, and it was Margret's task to help with the serving, but also, of course, to keep her eye on Gunnar. She sat him at a bench with Skuli and Jona Vigmundsdottir, the wife of Thorkel. Margret was a little shy of Jona, though Jona was but a few years older, in part because Jona was married, but largely because Jona had been born in the western settlement. Those folk had come in many small boats, hugging their sheep and goats to their breasts and sitting on what remained of their wealth, carrying tales of year after year of bad weather—rain and ice all winter, wind and wind-blown sand all summer, fights at the Northsetur hunting grounds between Norsemen with their axes and skraelings with their bows and arrows. They had arrived thin and remained thin, most of them, moving to vacated farms in the southern parts of the eastern settlement, or taking service at Brattahlid or at Gardar. Once, Asgeir said, it was the western settlement where the wealthiest Greenlanders lived, but now not even the attractions of the Northsetur, where men went to hunt narwhal, polar bear, and walrus, could compensate for the dwindling of stock in the homefield. Men must eat mutton and cheese and drink milk. A diet of wild food makes the demons. Now only a few of the hardiest souls, like Hauk, went to the Northsetur, and most folk sought the eastern wastelands, though the game there was not as plentiful.

Even the fact that Jona had been married at such an early age betrayed her as a westerner for these farmers from the west were anxious to get their daughters off their hands, and find them places at other folks' tables. Gunnar sat across from her, and Margret set a big basin of sourmilk and a small one of honey between them. Jona had one child, Skeggi, some two winters old, who sat beside her. Gunnar passed the time making faces at the child, and Skeggi, who was a bold, defiant boy, only laughed at whatever Gunnar attempted. Soon some young men from Gardar took places at the bench, and when Margret brought them basins to eat from, they said their names were Olaf Finnbogason and Halldor Karlson. Halldor was another of the boys from the ship, and he and Skuli were much pleased to see one another.

Margret knew of Olaf, though she had never seen him. He was a boy from Brattahlíð whose father had died on a seal hunt one year, and his mother had sent him to Gardar to be made a priest. He was a quiet boy, thick and short of stature, about Margret's own age. His spoon, which he took out of his spooncase rather furtively, was of Greenlandic horn, and a bit of the bowl was broken off, too. The sailor boys had wooden spoons, and Skuli's especially beautiful, was of carved Norwegian ashwood, decorated with clusters of grapevines. Margret had admired it before. She went off to serve some other folk, then sat down beside Gunnar to eat her own meat.

Skuli and Halldor had dipped portions of honey onto their sourmilk, and Halldor was saying, in a loud voice, "Who are these Greenlanders that they have never tasted honey before?" To Olaf, he said, "Just because of the color, you think it is horse piss?"

Olaf sat silent, red-faced, and Halldor and Skuli began to laugh. Gunnar joined them. Margret spooned some of the honey onto her sourmilk, and looked encouragingly across at Olaf, but he ignored her. Just then there was a commotion, and Ivar Bardarson could be seen taking something from the sack he had brought. There were three of them, large and roundish, like stones, and about the color of stone, too. The guests muttered and laughed. Ivar Bardarson had brought bread, something most Greenlanders had never seen, for Greenlanders have neither grain nor yeast, and make do with dried sealmeat for their butter. Asgeir stood up with a shout, and called for his servant to bring in the vat. It was a great success. Ivar and Asgeir had each surprised the other, and the guests were more than eager. The Norwegians had tasted no drink in half a year. Some of the Greenlanders had never tasted drink in their lives, as there are no beehives, nor grapes, nor barley in Greenland and men can refresh themselves only with water and milk.

When Margret returned to her place, Olaf was silent, and Jona was talking with Skuli about the voyage.

"How long was your journey?" she said.

"Six weeks, by Thorleif's stick calendar."

"Is that long for such a journey?"

"We were hungry enough when we got here." Skuli and Halldor grinned.

"Were there storms?"

Halldor replied, "Thorleif says that there must be as many storms in every crossing as the ship can bear." Suddenly, Olaf Finnbogason grabbed the basin of honey and poured its entire contents over his meat.

"Ho! Greenlander!" shouted Halldor, loudly enough to attract the attention of folk at other benches. "You have doused your meat in the horse piss and left none for the rest of us!" And

he brought his fist down on Olaf's spoon, which lay between the two of them. The handle of the spoon broke off at the bowl. First Gunnar, then Skeggi, then even Jona began to laugh at Olaf's embarrassment, for his face truly flushed purple to his hairline. Other folk smiled and called out. Margret stood up, but really she didn't know what to do, because all of the Gunnars Stead spoons were being used for serving, and anyway, it was customary for a man to carry his own spoon about with him. Just then, Skuli Gudmundsson exclaimed, "Halldor, it is always the case that you make more trouble than pleasure," and he reached his foot under the eating board and kicked Halldor backwards off the bench. Then, amidst the gasping and laughter of the guests, he pushed his ashwood spoon across to Olaf and said, "Have this on Olaf Finnbogason. It is carved of sturdy wood, and will fit in your spooncase, to boot." Olaf muttered his thanks, and stared at the elaborate spoon, but did not pick it up.

The steading was in a great uproar. It seemed to Margret that everyone was shouting, and she was not surprised when Gunnar climbed upon her lap and nestled fearfully there. About about, men were calling out to one another, smiling, scowling, and pouring down the mead which Margret herself had tasted and found too sweet. Asgeir's face was as florid and shiny as anyone's, and Margret could see him, thumping the shipmaster repeatedly on the back. Margret had never seen her father behave in this way. Margret hugged Gunnar tightly.

Now it happened that Ingrid appeared and herded the children, including Jona and Skuli and Halldor, into one of the other rooms of the steading, where there were two bedclosets. All sat down in the doorways of the bedclosets and prepared to listen to a tale.

Ingrid told them one of her best, the tale of Thorgils the foster son of Orrabein. Even Jona sat open-mouthed at the familiar story of the big ship leaving Iceland with Thorgils and his folk, some thirty of them. They sailed late in the season into a huge storm, and the seas were so high that heaven itself disappeared from sight, unless you were to lie down in the bottom of the boat and look straight up. Two thralls were carried overboard by waves and another would have been had Thorgils not caught him by the shirt just as the wave took him. It happened that the storm lasted many days and nights, which proved that it was a magical storm, the fruit of a curse, and indeed they were cursed, for they were cast up on the eastern coast of Greenland, far from the settlements, and their ship was broken up in the ice floes. Before the onset of winter, Thorgils and his folk managed to build a booth and to kill some of the many seals that frequented the area, and indeed, the seals were not seals, because they smiled like men and came close to the booth. The folk inside could hear the swishing and flapping of the seals as they walked round and round the booth. But men have to eat, so they did eat the sealmeat, although Thorgils' old mother said that they were the souls of the men who had been washed overboard. In that year many of Thorgils' party died of the bleeding disease, but Thorgils' wife gave birth to a son, who was called Thorbjorn.

One day Thorgils sent his steward to fish with the thralls, while he himself climbed up to the nearest icefield to get a view of the pack ice. When he returned, he found the steward and thralls to have disappeared, taking the ship's boat and all the stores of food. Thorgils and his wife, they discovered, lay upon a bench in the booth, murdered, and the baby was suckling the corpus.

At this, though all Greenlanders know the story quite well, for it is a true story, the children let out little cries, and Margret shivered.

Thorgils took his knife and cut into his own nipple and put the baby to suck. First came

blood, then clear serum, then, at last, milk, and Thorgils suckled his own child thereafter, and discovered for himself what is possible in Greenland, where folk must learn new ways, or die.

Now the outcry in the hall had settled down, and Ingrid said that it was far past bedtime. The hall of the farmhouse was in great disarray, with benches pushed back and overturned and men and women slumped where they sat, asleep. Ingrid looked about. "Indeed, it is unlikely that this will be the only mess to clean up from this mead drinking."

Sometime later, the news got about the district that Sigrun Ketilsdottir had been raped by one of Thorleif's men, Ragnar Einarsson, on the night of the feast. Some folk said that Ragnar might not have been the first accused, had Sigrun been differently disposed in the past, but others said that Thorleif's men did not all comport themselves as well as they might, and furthermore, sailors are what they are.

It happened that one day Ketil and his son Erlend surprised Ragnar in the southern part of the district, where he was over-wintering with some Greenlanders, and they abducted him to Ketils Stead and beat him. Only the intervention of their servants prevented them from killing the sailor in anger, thereby having to pay compensation rather than receiving it.

Now it was well into Lent, but Ivar Bardarson left Gardar and came to Gunnars Stead on skis, and he and Asgeir decided between them that the case must be settled quietly in Vatnsdæli Hverfi district, and not taken to the Thing, where most cases were settled. No need to let matters stew until the summer, said Ivar, for it was not such a large incident, although Ketil might make it so. Ketil was well known to be a litigious man. The two went early the next morning around the hill to Ketils Stead, and the result was that Ketil received some compensation for the rape of his daughter, amounting to six large sheep, six goats, and three good milking cows from Asgeir, since the drink served at his feast had gone to Ragnar's head, and from Thorleif's store of untraded goods he received a small amount of barley seed, a vessel of pitch, and four iron wheel hubs. Ragnar was allowed to leave Ketils Stead and return to Gardar, where, some folk said, Thorleif ought to finish what Ketil and Erlend had begun. But Thorleif simply laughed at Ragnar's stupidity and did nothing.

As soon as the snow melted and the grass greened in the spring, Asgeir had the south end of the cowbyre torn down. The cows were carried out into the homefield. This spring there was no hay left at all, but the grass turned early, and a few of the younger cows were able to stand up almost as soon as Asgeir and Hauk set them down. Others were not so sturdy, but Asgeir said that they would eat their way back to health, and put Gunnar and some of the other boys to pulling the moist grass and carrying it to the leaner beasts. After four days all the cows but one old one were on their feet and grazing in the homefield. That was not much of a loss for one winter, and the sheep and goats, too, had lasted well, without sickness. Skuli Gudmundsson said that his father, and other farmers in his district in Norway, did not huddle with walling up the cows for the winter, and Asgeir was surprised at this, for it is well known among the Greenlanders that in addition to winter grass being unsuitable for a cow's stomach, winter light hurts their eyes and has been known to blind more sensitive beasts. Skuli said he had never heard such things.

Margret was extremely fond of her uncle, Hauk Gunnarsson, and in this spring, as Hauk was not going often to the wastelands, they spent a good deal of time together in the hills above the farmstead. They were of like temperament, and sometimes they went for an entire

day without speaking. Such days were a relief to Margret, for the nurse Ingrid was always chiding her to speak up, or to adopt softer ways, for soon enough she would be wanting a husband, and it was good to develop pleasing habits early.

Hauk's hunting prowess was well known among the Greenlanders, and Asgeir had joked more than once that he was not going to be the one who probed into what skraeling tricks his brother might have taken up. There was no telling what a Christian man could learn from the demons in the north. Nor did Margret ask questions, but she watched with eager, though veiled, curiosity, every time he set a snare or a trap, every time he fingered a bit of a plan or plucked it and put it in his pocket. She followed in like manner his gliding, calm, and silent gait, and emulated the utter stillness of his posture when he paused to listen for the sound of a hare or a fox in the underbrush. She had seen him, in other times, bend suddenly and pick up a hare by the leg or a fox by the neck, but he denigrated his own skills—skraelings, he said, could stand still as a stone over a seal's breathing hole, sometimes for two days and nights, and even then have the wit to sense the seal rising through the water and fling a harpoon suddenly downward to make the kill. A skraeling man could walk over ice in the fjord so quietly that the seals swimming below would not hear him, sharp as they were. "Maybe," he said, "that we Greenlanders, with our sheep and our cows and our great stone churches are not so well off as we think, and the skraelings, with their howling dogs and their everlasting moving about are not so badly off as we think." And that was all Margret ever heard him say on the subject.

One day, the sailor boy, Skuli, came up to Margret and handed her a bird cage that he had made from willow withes, and he told her only that her uncle had asked him to make it, and showed her the proper shape. Margret thanked him for his work, and her uncle came up behind her, and nodded at it, but he did not say what it was for. Some days later, when Margret was in the hills with Hauk, and he was laying snares for ptarmigan, she saw him do a thing that she had never seen a man do, and that was to reach out to a lark perched on a branch of birch and take the bird in his hand. Then he closed his other hand gently over it and put it in his pocket. When they returned to the steading, he took it, still living, out of his pocket, and put it in Margret's cage. "Now," he said, "when the bird sings to you, think of his song as your uncle telling you a tale, for if it had been up to me to choose a shape to be born in, I would have chosen such a shape as this."

Now Skuli went back to Gardar, and he gave Gunnar a great parting gift, such a gift as belonged to no child in the eastern settlement—a carved model of Thorleif's ship, with six men sitting in it and a sail made of gray wadmal that could be taken down and put up again, and Thorleif himself standing in the bow. The tiny mouth of the figure was open, as if it were laughing. He also had a small gift for Asgeir, a tiny knob of soapstone in the shape of a seal, as smooth and shiny and wet-looking as the real thing, Asgeir said.

Thorleif and his men were hard at work tarring and repairing their ship, and sewing up rents in the sail, even though there was still a great deal of drift ice in Eriks Fjord. Thorleif, Asgeir, and Ivar Bardarson spoke of the winter, as men must when they meet for the first time in the spring. The hall at Gardar had been covered, almost completely, by a snowdrift all through Yuletide and a while thereafter. "Not so bad," said Ivar, though Thorleif rolled his eyes. Had not an old couple in Isafjord died of cold inside their own steading, with seal oil still in the lamps? "Isafjord folk," said Asgeir, "expect the worst and, often as not, receive it."

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