

Chapter 1

The Sea

My maternal grandfather, Þorkell Magnússon, was the captain of a fishing vessel called *Gyða*. In early April 1910, he and his seven-man crew, including his eldest son, set sail from Bíldudalur, a small town in northwest Iceland. Their destination was the rich fishing grounds beyond the fjord. April was the beginning of the fishing season, which lasted until September. These were the “mild” months. In reality, the weather was often stormy and below freezing, pushing both the boat and men to the limit of their endurance. Three weeks later, on April 23, *Gyða* headed for home, her hull laden with cod, the valuable cash fish many fishermen had died for. Nearing their home fjord, the men’s hearts must have lifted. A hot meal, a warm bed, and the family’s embrace were within a day’s reach.



Gyða at Bíldudalur

That night, a furious northerly gale pounded the region with snow and sleet, whipping the sea into a deadly cauldron of crashing waves. All hands would have scrambled on deck to wrestle with the wind, jibing and tacking to keep the gusts from capsizing the boat. The battle went on all night. The next morning, *Gyða* was still upright and staggering closer to home. Einar, my

grandfather's neighbor and a former crew member, attested to seeing her from shore during a visit to his family's farm on the outer reaches of Arnarfjörður (Eagle Fjord). The wind was still howling, pummeling the boat from left and right. But Einar was confident the boat could hold herself together. After all, *Gyða* was a sturdy oceangoing vessel, one of the first to be built in Iceland with state-of-the-art technology. In just a few more hours, she would reach the safety of the harbor.

The next day, Einar found berth on a vessel that took him home to Bíldudalur. As his ship sailed into the harbor, he looked out for *Gyða*. He knew she was no longer out in the fjord, for he had sailed the length of it and hadn't seen another ship. The only place *Gyða* could be was home, at Bíldudalur. He scanned the half-dozen ships docked in the harbor. To his dismay, *Gyða* wasn't among them. With a sinking feeling, he knew what must have happened. The fjord had swallowed *Gyða* and her crew.

In the spring of 1954, I sailed from Reykjavík on the coastal vessel *Esja* to Bíldudalur, my grandfather's hometown. The sea was mirror calm as the ship's powerful twin diesel engines propelled her into Arnarfjörður, the scene of *Gyða*'s disappearance. This fjord was notorious for squalls that could come up without warning. But that day, it welcomed me and the other 170 passengers with a gentle embrace. The water was a sparkling blue satin cut from the same fabric as the sky. My fifteen-year-old self stood near her bow, marveling at the panorama of steep, snow-flecked mountains that rose abruptly out of the sea. Looking down, I was mesmerized by the thousands of jellyfish pulsating out of the way of *Esja*'s knife-like bow.

A year earlier, a shrimp trawler combing the bottom of the outer reaches of Arnarfjörður had hauled in a huge pole. Forensic analysis determined that this had been the mast of *Gyða*. The town decided to erect a monument, using the mast as the centerpiece. I was one of the relatives of those who perished on *Gyða* to attend the unveiling of the memorial. My mother and I, together with other family members, went to pay respects to *Gyða*'s skipper and her crew.

I tell this story sixty years later from my home in Virginia, across the Potomac River from the U.S. capital. I am now in my eighties, retired and carefree, with nothing better to do than pamper my grandchildren and tell them stories of my life. But they are too young to fully appreciate them, so I write them down for the time when they reach my age, when they are retired and carefree and want to record their own stories. As they search their memory, an eerie feeling that their lives aren't just the sum of their own experiences will haunt them. Strands of other people's memory will swirl in their heads, speaking in voices some of which they recognize and others not. They will find out life is a relay, every leg a continuation of the previous one. To understand themselves, they have to understand those who have gone before them.

I was born on February 5, 1939 in Reykjavík in the hallway of Landspítalinn (the National Hospital) because of an overflow that night. I arrived at that time and place because of the confluence of the voyages my parents, grandparents and all the previous generations had taken. My parents named me Þórólfur Sverrir Sigurðsson. The last is my patronymic surname, which identifies me as the son of Sigurður, my father's given name. Þórólfur (Þ is pronounced "th," as in thunder), means Thor's wolf, and Sverrir means swordsman, both names of the Viking era. For some reason, my parents always addressed me as Sverrir, perhaps because it rolls off the tongue more easily. In any case, the Viking brand is forever stamped on my forehead.

From an early age, I knew I would go on a voyage of my own, but I had never dreamed of reaching such distant shores as the Middle East, Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, and America. These travels have given me a great sense of fulfillment, but they are insignificant compared with the miraculous progress my people have made within my lifetime. I have the satisfaction of seeing my country thrive during the renaissance born of the most destructive war in human history, and rise from being one of the poorest nations in Europe to one of the most prosperous. There were many occasions in our thousand-year history when volcanic eruption, disease, and prolonged winters

drove our tiny nation to the verge of extinction. We survived, though barely. Thanks to the new postwar order, we made a quantum leap, joining the ranks of the world's advanced nations in a matter of decades. During this time, our population swelled from 120,000 to 350,000, and many a survey named us one of the happiest people in the world.

But I don't want to forget the hardships. My ancestors' endurance is my strength, in the same way Icelandic winters have seeped into my veins and inoculated me from the cold. My American friends poke fun at me for running around in shorts when they're shivering in jackets. So, I start my story by dwelling on the hardships—the sinking of *Gyða* and the loss of two family members that fateful day. My grandfather was forty-five at the time. His oldest son, Magnús, eighteen, was the mate. A merciful turn of fate spared his second son, Ólafur (Óli), who was fourteen. He had been fishing alongside the men since the age of ten, but that spring, he had to stay behind to complete his school-leaving certificate; otherwise he would have been on board *Gyða* too.

My grandmother, Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir, became a widow at forty-two. She had four surviving children, ranging from sixteen to an eighteen-month-old, my mother. *Gyða's* disappearance shattered my grandmother's life. In one fell swoop, she was transformed from managing a relatively well-off household in a prosperous town to a destitute widow with four children to feed. The two breadwinners were gone, and there was no insurance or other source of income to ensure the family's future.

To put the tragedy in a broader perspective, the loss of eight men out of a total of 270 residents in the town of Bíldudalur represented almost 3 percent of the population. And this wasn't all. A couple of months later, the fishing boat *Industri*, from the adjacent town, disappeared in a gale. The crew of ten included Einar, the last man to see *Gyða*, and his thirteen-year-old son. The ship had left the nearby town of Ísafjörður and was headed for Patreksfjörður, immediately south of Bíldudalur. She never arrived. The families mourned, the town mourned, and life limped on until the next tragedy.

Today it is hard to imagine an Icelandic fisherman's life at the turn of the twentieth century. Crammed into a boat with eight or nine other men, he suffered backbreaking work in the face of wind, rain, snow and ice for weeks on end. My grandfather didn't live long enough to write his memoirs, but in this day and age, the world's archives are at my fingertips through the internet. Two websites proved to be most useful: one contains the Icelandic censuses of 1703 through 1920, and the other stores every newspaper and magazine article published in the Icelandic language, including those published in Canada in the 1800s. I went online for information on *Gyða*. One link led to another, and it came to my attention that the Icelandic National Library had interviewed my uncle Óli for a cultural heritage project. I emailed the librarian, who promptly replied that Óli's granddaughter had digitized the cassette tapes. I clicked on one of the attached files, and there was my late uncle Óli speaking to me in his gravelly voice.

I could almost see him—a garrulous man with a big nose red from sniffing snuff—sitting in my childhood home, gesturing and regaling me with his seafaring stories. My poor Uncle Óli, who lost his father and brother at an early age, knew he should have gone down with them. What survivor's guilt he must have suffered. As if one tragedy wasn't enough, fate dealt him another blow when his wife died prematurely of illness, leaving him a widower at forty-nine with a teenage daughter to raise. Once in a while, when life became unbearable, he would hide somewhere and drink himself into oblivion. My mother would fret until he reappeared a week or so later. Despite all his hardships, he lived to ninety-one.

In the interviews, conducted over three days, he describes life on board a fishing vessel. Having spent three seasons aboard *Gyða* as a child sailor from 1907 to 1909, and later as crew on several other ships, he has plenty to tell. His material fills five hours of tapes.

For obvious reasons, I was most interested in Uncle Óli's accounts of *Gyða*. She was a sturdy vessel designed to sail the turbulent and fish-abundant currents of the North Atlantic. Óli estimates her to be twelve to fourteen tons. Knowledgeable sources in Iceland call her a Gaff Cutter and estimate that she would have been forty feet in length, about the size of a modern city bus. As we can see in the photo, there wasn't a whole lot of elbow space for eight men to live and work in. Indeed, Óli describes the cramped living conditions on board *Gyða* in the interviews. The forecabin, the forward part of the ship below the deck, was used as living quarters and could accommodate only four beds. The eight men took turns to sleep. As a child, and a "half-earner," Óli was last in line for everything. One night, he was so tired he didn't care that all the bunks were occupied. He crawled into bed with someone already in it and folded himself into a sliver of space. The next morning, he woke up bleary-eyed after a restless night of contorting his body. The cook, noticing his yawning, put something under his nose and told him to sniff it. He did, and his eyes popped wide open. What he inhaled was snuff—pulverized tobacco packed with nicotine. Ever since that day, a pouch of snuff and a large red handkerchief into which he loudly blew his nose became part and parcel of Óli's persona.

Being the skipper's son earned him no privileges. On the contrary, a father's discipline was harsher than a skipper's, as this incident proved: "Once, Papa called me to him," Óli says. "But I was so busy catching fish, I didn't go to him immediately. He grabbed a fish and whacked me on the cheek with it."

On the topic of personal hygiene, the interviewer suggests that perhaps he used a frayed bit of rope to clean himself. Óli's chuckling reply is, "Oh no. As long as you have a left hand and there's plenty of seawater around, you didn't need anything else." He also talks about lice infestation, a collective problem, for if one man had it, everyone on board would be scratching too. The interviewer discreetly avoids asking for the itchy details.

Once the ship reached a fishing ground, the workday didn't end with darkness, for the sun barely sets in the summer in this part of the world. The end of the day was whenever you dropped from fatigue. After a few hours of sleep, your work began again. Mealtime was the only break, and it consisted of fish and potatoes, or potatoes and fish. On holidays, such as Easter, the men were treated to lamb.

Fishing was by hook and line, usually with herring as bait. But when the fish was plentiful, all that was needed was a hook to snag the catch. Fishermen with this special talent were in high demand, and they didn't catch just any fish. To be worth their wage, they had to haul in cod, which would be salted and exported as *bacalao*. All other fish was "trashfish" and was eaten aboard by the crew, used as bait, or thrown back into the sea. A fisherman marked each cod he caught by making a distinct cut on one of its fins. At the end of the trip, each person's catch would be added up. The tally would determine the share of the proceeds for each crew member and the ship's owner.

Another trove of information I discovered was a logbook left behind by *Gyða*'s first captain, Veturlíði Ólafur Bjarnason. His family had saved it for posterity and made it available online. The log, which records every detail of *Gyða*'s voyages in 1900, ten years before she foundered, gives us a flavor of life on a fishing boat of that era. The moment a boat left harbor, she wouldn't dock again unless somebody was seriously injured, the catch needed to be unloaded, provisions needed to be replenished, or a storm blew it back. Otherwise they would work through the season with hardly any time off. In one log entry, the captain writes, "On April 28, the ship returned to the fjord to replenish her water supply (two barrels). Stormy weather forced the boat to anchor overnight." It was a lucky break for the crew—their first day off since the start of the trip almost three weeks earlier.

The log is typically terse and dry, recording the weather, the catch, and the ship's location, which ranged from Breiðafjörður Bay in the south to the Polar Circle in the north. The entries for

one trip, however, were unusually exciting. On May 18, *Gyða* set sail for Látraröst, the treacherous but fish-rich clash of ocean currents off the westernmost tip of Iceland. The crew returned to Bíldudalur on May 31 to unload the fish. A few days later, they left harbor again, but *Gyða* ran aground. The usually clipped log uses a few more words to explain the incident. Referring to himself in third person, the skipper lays the blame on himself: “As the flu was rampant on shore, the skipper stupidly decided to drink strong camphor-laced liquor, rendering him seriously drunk as now is common knowledge.”

Since there was nothing to do until the tide rose to lift the stranded boat, most of the crew went home on a dinghy. The skipper and a couple of others remained on board, and according to the log, “nothing further, good or bad, happened this day.” The next day, June 3, was Whitsunday, so the crew took a day off. On June 4, the weather was too still for sailing, but a departing steamship hauled *Gyða* out into the fjord. By her departure, three men had come down with the flu, and a fourth would join them by the time they reached the fishing grounds. Despite good weather and an abundance of fish, the lines were idle because all but the skipper and one crew member were in bed, delirious with fever. When the skipper finally succumbed to the flu, some of the other patients had recovered sufficiently to execute the sailing chores. On June 10, the crew was still weak but well enough to resume fishing. However, the bait, herring, had gone bad because the ice had melted while they were ill. *Gyða* returned to Bíldudalur on June 15 to replenish the herring. She made four more trips that season, returning to Bíldudalur in September to enjoy a well-earned winter vacation.

Understandably, Icelanders have a healthy respect for the sea. We fear its dangers, but we also know it can be a powerful ally. The sea is the highway that can lead us to treasures beyond our imagination, as our ancestors have shown. We have a word for stupid, *heimskur*, which literally means “homebody.” Anyone who stays home is dumb. Only by traveling far and wide can one gain fame and fortune and make something of oneself.

The first settlers came to Iceland some 1,100 years ago from Norway, where people lived in villages along the many fjords. A fjord is a deep, long valley of water carved by a glacier millions of years ago. During medieval times, the best way for these villagers to travel was by sea. Necessity compelled them to build better boats and hone their seafaring skills to an unsurpassed level. In the eighth century, these Norse sailors ventured on their brave new ships to what is now called the British Isles. From that point, there was no stopping them. They plowed on in their ships and riverboats to Russia, the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. Some sailed west and landed in North America. The first white child in America was born of Icelandic parents in what is now Newfoundland, shortly after the year 1000 AD.

This Nordic expansion was the beginning of the Viking era. How that name came about is up for debate. Some say it is derived from the word *vík*, which means creek or small inlet, while others say it refers to a long sea journey. These Vikings came from what is now known as Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland.

The reputation of the Viking varies, depending on whose side you’re on. When my son Steinn was nine years old and attending a British-run school in Africa, he came home rather distraught one day. “Dad,” he said. “The Vikings I’m learning about in school are horrible guys. But the Vikings I learned about in Iceland are good guys.” I had to explain to him the role of perspective in historical interpretations.

To the people of Scotland and Ireland, the Vikings were villains who raped and pillaged up and down the coast. In Iceland, however, children are taught that Vikings were heroes who sailed to distant lands in search of adventure and trade. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. No question about it: the Vikings plundered, raped and abducted women from the British Isles. My family tree includes an Irish princess named Melkorka, daughter of King Mýrkjartan. Around a thousand years ago, my forefathers kidnapped her and brought her to Iceland, where she spent the

rest of her life, never to see her homeland again. Yes, the Vikings were brutes, but they also contributed to the development of commerce, transport, and cultural exchanges throughout Europe and beyond. They established trading posts, which later became vibrant cities, such as Dublin in Ireland and York in England.

I feel that my youth in Iceland was really a preparation for my own voyage. I left home at nineteen to pursue a plan that had all the elements of a Viking exploit: going overseas to improve my fortune (without the pillaging and raping) and returning home after accomplishing my goals. However, the winds refused to cooperate and kept blowing me offshore. The pull of my roots is strong, though—no matter how long I live abroad. My cosmopolitan lifestyle in the U.S., which I thoroughly enjoy, has the ironic effect of bringing me back to my origins. Perhaps it is because as a nation of 350,000, at last count, Icelanders must either cling to their heritage or cease to exist. I visit Iceland every other year. During these trips, I sometimes go to my parents' hometowns to pay my respects. Unlike their childhood when the sea was virtually the only connector between communities, a ring road now encircles the country. My parents began their lives on opposite ends of the island and under very different circumstances, which I believe explains why their outlooks were poles apart. But their difference didn't prevent them from sharing the same dream. Through hard work and the courage to seize the day, they contributed to the Icelandic Miracle and paved the way for my journey.