

Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

# Familiar Strangers



Urban Volcano

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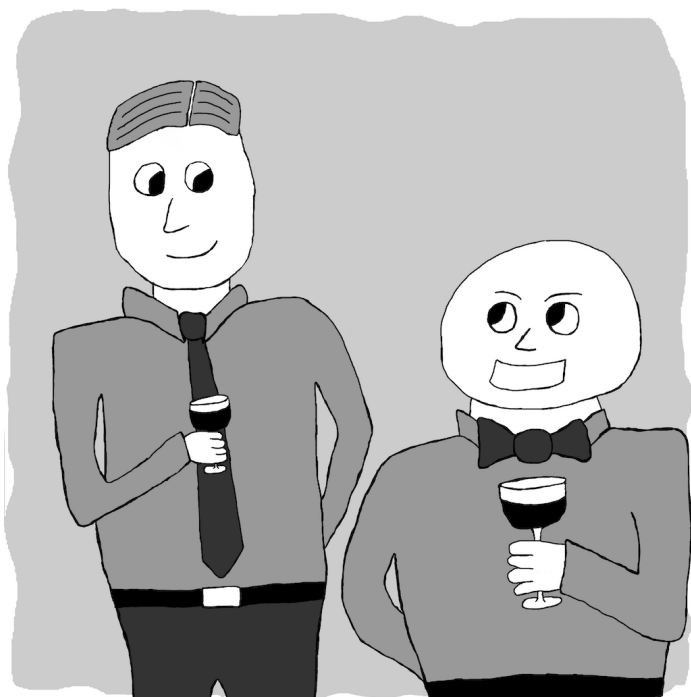
Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

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## FAMILIAR STRANGERS

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Eindrige walked by his wife's side through the wide door, into the ballroom where the company's annual Christmas party was already in full swing—her company's party. Passing through the doorframe, Ellinor's back straightened, her chin pushed up, and her pace slowed as she changed into her charm-the-clients gear. Eindrige followed her through the crowd, through the endless stream of Hello, how are you?... Lovely to see you... This is my husband, Eindrige... How are the

kids?... You remember my husband, Eindride? The clients had barely enough time to look at him and nod in recognition before Ellinor would steer the talk away from family friendly small talk and on to business, I hear it was a good quarter, I believe the appetite for mergers will rise in the spring... Eindride didn't mind how little attention he got. He knew his role. This was not his night. He wasn't the type of person who has their own nights. His role was usually that of a supporting actor, a part of the surroundings, a part of the crowd. Tonight was Ellinor's night and it was written in the unwritten contract between husband and wife that they support each other. And so they did. Each in their own capacity.

Eindride followed his wife for a while before getting bored of being a pet on a leash, picked up a glass of red wine from a roaming waiter's tray, and drifted into the periphery of the room where he could observe the crowd—see if he spotted anyone he knew, anyone he recognized, anyone he could casually walk up to and start a conversation with. Not that he needed someone to talk to. He would be happy to stay on the edge of the scene and observe people, study their faces, their body language, their interaction with others. He would be content watching the social dynamic of the room as if he were enjoying a movie. However, he felt uncomfortable in that situation. Not because he was

inherently uneasy with being an observer but because he knew people felt awkward by being observed by a member of their own species. They didn't mind the security cameras, the website cookies, and the mobile phone location tracking—or so he had read in an article on the Internet. People felt uncomfortable when a flesh-and-blood person observed them. That was considered inappropriate, weird, creepy. Eindride didn't want to be considered a weirdo—not at Ellinor's party.

The crowd looked the same as every year. Eindride recognized a few faces but could not spot anyone he was sufficiently familiar with to engage in a conversation. There was a large presence of wealthy-looking businesspeople, either current or prospective clients of Ellinor's law firm. It was not a gathering of the superrich, no one arrived by helicopter—at least not as far as Eindride knew. There was also a decent presence of what Eindride considered to be common people, friends of the law firm's partners, partners of the law firm's partners. Eindride had once even met the partner of a friend of a partner's partner. In particular there were many Norwegians.

Hello, I'm James, said a young man who had sneaked up beside Eindride while he was observing the crowd. Eindride, replied Eindride. Norwegian? Yes. Been in London long? How long had it been since

they moved from Oslo? More than three years. This was Eindride's third Christmas party in London. It had been four years since Ellinor had said Eindride, darling, come here and sit down, I have some news. It had been four years since Eindride had thought Ellinor was about to tell him she was pregnant. It was she who didn't want to have children. She said children didn't match her career objectives. Eindride was more open to the idea although he didn't have a strong opinion on the subject. He was not a man of strong opinions in general. At least not about everyday things. Not that having children was an everyday thing, in a sense. But anyway, Ellinor had not told him she was pregnant when they sat down together in their all-white living room in Oslo—or had it been lime-white? She had told him she had received an incredibly exciting offer to set up the law firm's new office in London. A bit over three years, replied Eindride to the young man, came here with my wife, she's a partner in the firm. Ellinor? Yes. I didn't know she was Norwegian, said James, nodding his head as if to reinforce this new piece of knowledge, I just started last week, I'm with the firm, an intern. James and Eindride chatted for a while. There turned out to be quite a few things the young man was curious to know about Norway and Eindride tried his best to answer faithfully, just north of five million, oil, no, but the European Economic Area, the

cheese cutter, football, skiing, and skating, Ole Gunnar Solskjær, but I guess that was before your time, Edvard Grieg and Edvard Munch, A-ha, also before your time, no, I don't believe Santa Claus lives there, or anywhere, for that matter. It was nice to meet you, said James finally when he had learned enough about Norway, I must continue my tour of mingling with the guests. It was nice to meet you too, Eindride replied and they shook hands on parting.

All the talking had made Eindride thirsty and he walked over to the bar and asked for another glass of red wine. So, you staff or client? asked a short elderly man as Eindride turned back to face the crowd after having his glass refilled. The man was wearing a black striped suit, white shirt, and a burgundy bow tie. Eindride guessed he was one of Ellinor's clients. One whom she advised on mergers and acquisitions, IPOs or whatever it was called, all that the firm offered. At home, they didn't talk that much about work. Instead, they talked about music and films—their common interests—the interests that had been the foundation of their relationship and still served as the glue. Eindride didn't recognize the man. Maybe a new client. Neither, answered Eindride, I'm the spouse of one of the partners, Ellinor. How lovely, the man continued as if he knew a thing or two about love, marriage, or the combination of the two. And what

is your line of business? the man asked. I'm a painter. How lovely, what is your particular style? I am mostly into collecting sculptures myself. Have I seen your work somewhere? Did I tell you I am into collecting sculptures? Yes I did, didn't I? Sculptures are not what they used to be. Now there are more installations—video installations, sound installations, and so on. I collect them too. Just bought one piece last week. A video installation of a woman smiling. It may sound trivial and snobbish but a genuine smile is just so lovely, it is truly art to catch it on film. You are a painter, you said? What sort of works do you do? I myself like impressionism. But hardly anyone does that sort of work anymore. Last week I even heard some artist are working in a post-contemporary style. Can you believe that word? How can people have moved past the contemporary? Are they painting in the future? Are they selling an option to have a painting painted? Just like they do on Wall Street?

On that philosophical question the man finished his monologue at last and Eindrude could answer the original question. I mostly do monochrome acrylic paint on concrete, he answered. How lovely, how original, the man replied, I am not sure if I have seen much of it. How do you classify that? Neo-minimalism? We must be in touch to follow up. I will get your details from Ellinor. Now I must dash.



Without another word the man bolted over to the other side of the room to pick up a new conversation—or to give another monologue. Ellinor always told Eindride to use the title *decorator* rather than *painter* when talking to her clients here in the UK. We must adapt to the local customs, she said. Eindride was not as good at adapting as Ellinor. He hadn't gone to university in Oxford. He didn't like the title *decorator*—even if it was the local custom. He didn't think of his work as decorating. He didn't decorate walls. He didn't arrange flowers and vases. He simply covered walls in paint. He was a painter, not a decorator.

Hey there, nice to see you again, said a man in Norwegian. Eindride remembered having seen him at last year's party. You look lost in thought, come over and have a chat, the man continued, inviting Eindride to a group of three people who looked somewhat familiar and were probably present last year as well. It's becoming a custom to meet like this every year, the man claimed. Eindride consented politely, while trying to remember who the man was and what his relation was to the firm. Was he the accountant, brother of the office manager? Oh boy, the traffic today, the man said to the group, it took me ages to drop the kids off at school this morning. So it was not the accountant. He didn't have any children at school, Eindride remembered from their chat the year before.

He had a grown-up son who studied civil engineering at university. When they met last year, the son had been about to go on a trip to the Gulf states to see some of the large-scale construction work going on in that part of the world. He was apparently fascinated by big engineering projects. He had always been captivated by construction. From the time he was a boy. Throughout his childhood, the accountant had often taken his son on excursions to building sites. Nowadays the tables had turned. The son took his father to see the sites where the most novel construction was taking place. They had a close relationship, father and son, even if they didn't live together anymore. The son lived with the accountant's ex-wife. The accountant lived with his husband. Or at least that had been the case last year when they spoke. It had been a pleasure talking to him. Eindride thought about how nice it would be to meet the accountant again this year. He was a much more interesting person to talk to than the group of three Eindride was facing at the moment, unable to be captured by their conversation.

Eindride took a big sip of his wine in order to have an excuse to leave the group. He felt awkward talking to people who were familiar but still strangers. There were too many unknowns in the discussion and he didn't feel comfortable asking questions to fill the gaps. It would only reveal the inconvenient truth that

he didn't really remember who they were. It could become awkward if they knew who he was. It might reflect badly on Ellinor. Familiar strangers were the worst. It was much better to talk either to people he knew or to total strangers. Eindride lifted his empty glass to the group of three. Time for a refill, he said and headed for the bar.

While waiting in a queue to be served, Eindride looked about the room and saw Ellinor in a lively discussion with clients. For a moment their glances met. He smiled and nodded. She smiled and nodded. It was just a split-second interaction before she returned to her conversation. She looked content. The party was apparently unfolding according to plan. Eindride was happy for her.

Rather than getting his refill, Eindride put his empty glass on the counter, walked out into the main hallway, picked up his coat, and went into the cold December night. There was a jazz club around the corner and Eindride knew he would have a better time there—away from the company of familiar strangers.



Börkur is an avid storyteller with a keen eye for quirky characters, funny dialogs and vivid scenario descriptions. Much of his writing falls within the genre of realistic fiction and his stories are more often than not based on real events in the author's life. Although the tales contain grains of truth, they are melded with fiction, making the reader curious to know the line between reality and fantasy.

### **Books**

Among Other Things, flash fiction (2024)

Talk To Strangers, short stories (2019)

Flash 52, flash fiction (2017)

999 Abroad, short stories (2012)

### **Links**

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