

Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

# Game



Urban Volcano

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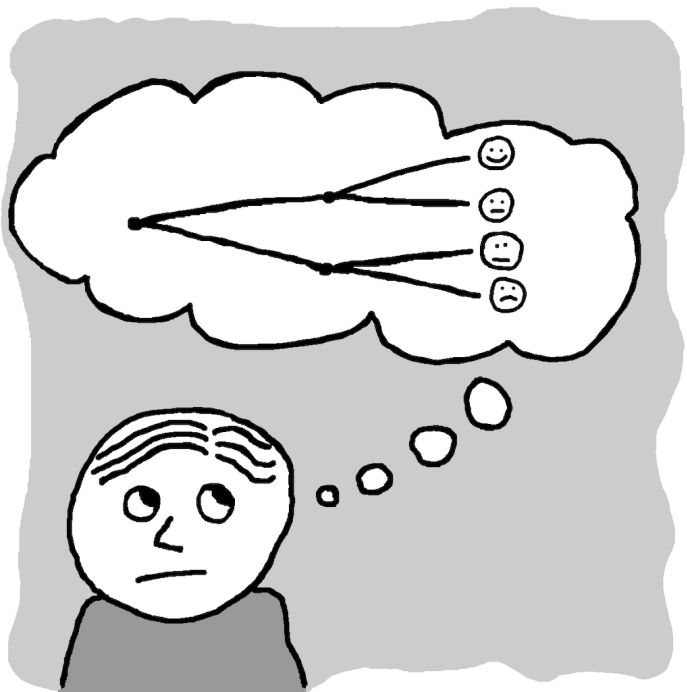
Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

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Illustrations: Börkur Sigurbjörnsson  
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## GAME

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I sat down at a table with a good view of the big television where they would broadcast the game. I had plenty of choices for seating since the restaurant was empty. I looked at my watch. It was eight o'clock. I would have to wait forty-five minutes until the game would kick off.

I reached for the menu and flipped through the pages. I had already made up my mind about what I wanted to have—the same plate I always had. I

was just killing time by looking at the establishment's complete offerings. If only I had taken a printout of the paper I was working on at the moment, then I could have used the time to read through a section or two. It would have been ideal since the deadline for submission was approaching rapidly.

"A shawarma plate and a beer, please," I said to the waiter who came over to the table to take my order as soon as I put down the menu.

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A breeze of cold air passed through the restaurant when the front door opened into the unusually cold February evening. I looked up and watched a woman enter. She was wearing a long black coat and blue jeans that reached down to the floor with the hems torn at the heels of brown hiking boots. On her head she wore a purple cap; a brown scarf was wrapped around her neck, and her purple mittens matched the color of the cap. She was obviously coming from the Laundromat as she was carrying two giant plastic bags that appeared stuffed with clothes.

She laid down the bags, took off her mittens, and put them into her coat pockets. She glanced over the dining hall, unbuttoning her coat and loosening the scarf, revealing a thick brown sweater. She took off her cap and untucked her long black hair from under the

coat collar. She met my gaze, smiled, and walked over to my table.

“Is this seat free?” she asked in English with a North American accent, pointing to the chair opposite to mine.

“Yes,” I replied, wondering why she would choose to sit at my table when there were plenty of other seats available.

“Good,” she said, smiling. “I don’t want to take an entire table just for myself.”

“Fair enough,” I replied, even if I was not completely convinced by the argument. “It makes sense to use the space efficiently, especially when a Champions League game is coming up.”

The waiter came to the table with my beer and the woman asked for a bottle of water.

“So you’re here for the game?” she asked when the waiter had taken her order.

“Yes,” I replied, unconsciously glancing at my wristwatch.

“It’s still a bit early, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I admitted, putting up an awkward smile. “I always make the same mistake, worry about not finding a good seat, rush to the restaurant, and end up way too early.”

“A dedicated soccer fan?”

“No, not really. I don’t watch that much. The big games. Against Madrid. The Champions League. You? A big Barça fan?”

“Can’t say I am. I’m here mostly for the mood. I like the heated atmosphere of crowded scenes where a large group of people watches an exciting soccer match. These days I’m attracted to warm places.”

The waiter came back to the table, bringing the bottle of water and my shawarma plate.

“Cheers!” the woman said after pouring herself a glass of water. “What’s your name?”

“Cheers!” I replied, lifting my beer glass. “I’m Borgar.”

“A what?”

“Borgar. B-O-R-G-A-R.”

“Burger?”

“More or less. You can also call me Bob.”

“Nice to meet you... Bob. I’m Alice. Where are you from?”

“Iceland.”

“Awesome! I love Iceland. In a way. I definitely want to go there one day. A friend of mine went there a couple years ago and she showed me like a million photos when she came back. I was blown away by the landscape. So empty, yet so beautiful. It has a kind of outer space feel to it. So outer space that I heard

NASA is staging their Mars stimulation there. Is that true?"

"That's true," I said without actually having a clue whether it was really true, but pleased that it set one of my favorite jokes up. "I heard the premise is that if they manage to find intelligent life forms in Iceland, they could be hopeful the same holds for Mars."

"Right!" the woman said, smiling. It seemed that my joke was at least a partial success. "In any case, intelligent life forms aside, it sounds like it's a truly amazing and unique place."

"Yeah, it's a nice place for tourism. Totally different from what you get in Europe."

"But Iceland belongs to Europe, doesn't it?"

"Yes and no. Geographically speaking it's half in Europe and half in North America, because it's on the Atlantic Ridge. Genealogically we are predominantly of Norwegian origin with a few Celtic chromosomes thrown into the mix. Historically we belong to Europe through the connection with the Scandinavian dynasties. Culturally we are however a mixture between Europe and North America. There's a lot of influence from the US in our lifestyle."

"Oh yeah? How so?"

"Don't know. Maybe because when Europe had its golden age, Icelanders were just poor farmers living in turf houses. Our golden age started only with the

Marshall Plan aid following the Second World War. We rose from poverty to riches under protection from the States. Iceland was an important strategic location in the Cold War. The US had an airbase there and poured money into the economy. I guess that explains to some extent why there's a lot of cultural influence from the US."

"I think that's the first time I've heard a European mention the States and culture in the same sentence. But what do you consider yourself? A European or an American?"

"Neither, really. I guess I associate with being Icelandic. But mostly I just consider myself, myself."

"Fair enough. And what brought you all the way to Barcelona? Escaping from the North American lifestyle? Trying to find your European roots?"

"No, not quite. I came here for a job. I work for a North American multinational company that has its European research arm based here. I'm an economist. Working mostly on game theory."

"Game theory? As in soccer?"

"No, not quite. Game theory as a formalism for studying decision making. It's used to model conflicts and cooperation between rational agents—as if they were playing a game. And you? What brought you over the Atlantic? Judging by your accent, I'm assuming you're American."



“Yes and no. I guess I can label myself as American. I’m originally from Canada but the desire for adventure drove me away from home and brought me all over the world. Compared to your game theory, my life is a completely different ball game. No fancy degree. Working odd jobs. Bars, restaurants, that sort of thing.”

“Traveling all over the world doesn’t sound that bad. Whereabouts?”

“All over, really. I’ve lived in the States, Argentina, Australia, London, Paris, Prague, Monaco, and now in Barcelona.”

“That’s quite an impressive list! And now, working in a Barcelona bar or restaurant?”

“No, not at the moment. I’m between jobs, as they say. I’m unemployed.”

“And how do you fancy Barça’s chances tonight?” the TV commentator asked their special guest as the waiter cranked up the volume and the pregame broadcast began. “They haven’t been at the top of their game lately.”

We let the television volume disrupt our conversation and started following the program. Gradually, people had begun to pour into the restaurant to watch the game, and Alice got the warm atmosphere she was seeking.

During the game and halftime we talked casually about the game and football in general. I ordered a couple more beers but Alice stuck with water.

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The referee blew the final whistle and the crowd clapped. Barça had won and was in a good position to reach the next round of the competition. The waiter put the check on the table and I took out my card to pay. Alice took some coins from her pocket and started counting.

“Allow me,” I said. “It was only a couple bottles of water. I’ll take care of it.”

We put our coats on while the waiter went to get the payment machine to process my card.

“You live close by?” I asked. “We could walk together if we’re going in the same direction.”

I had enjoyed Alice’s company during the game and wanted to prolong it a few moments longer, although I did not have much time to spare due to the upcoming paper deadline. I thought it would be nice to walk together, exchange phone numbers, and then meet again for drinks or something when there was less time pressure.

“No, I can’t really say I live close by,” Alice replied, looking out the window. “Last night I slept in that

bank lobby across the street. At the moment I'm homeless."

I looked at Alice. I looked at her bags. Perhaps she had not come directly from the Laundromat after all. I looked out the window, toward the bank across the street.

"Could you enter your pin, please?" the waiter asked, having returned with the payment machine.

I typed in the code and waited for the receipt before turning my attention back to Alice.

"Can I ask you a favor?" she asked as I put my card into my wallet.

"I suppose," I said, still shaken after what I had just heard.

"Can I crash on your couch tonight?"

Crash on my couch tonight? I hesitated. A few moments ago she had been an interesting woman I would have liked to get to know better. A few moments ago I would not have thought twice about inviting her to my place. Now, there was something holding me back. I felt awkward about inviting a homeless stranger to spend the night at my place.

"Just for one night," Alice begged. "I just want to get one night away from the cold. I want to sleep in a secure place. Away from the dangers of the street."

I felt my palms sweating and my cheeks burning as blood rushed to my head. I was very bad at handling

spontaneous decisions. I always panicked. But now I needed to calm myself. I needed to think straight. To reason. I needed to put the situation into a context I was familiar with. I had to look at it from a game-theory perspective. I could set it up as a two-person game, where it was my turn to play. In that situation, I could either answer her request with a yes or a no. Then it would be her turn to show her cards. There were two possible outcomes. She could be honest or dishonest. Hence, in total, there were four possible results. If I said yes and she was dishonest, I would lose. If I said no and she was honest, she would lose. If I said yes and she was honest, we would both win. If I said no and she was dishonest, I would win. It was my turn to play. In game-theory terms the choice was clear, at least for a risk-averse person like me. In order to guarantee that I would not lose, my safest strategy would be to say no.

“I suppose you can,” I replied, somewhat to my surprise. My gut feeling had overcome my reason. I was not behaving like the rational agents I wrote about in my academic papers.

“Thanks!” Alice exclaimed and hugged me. “I appreciate it very much.”

She picked up her bags and we headed for the exit. I held the door open for her as we left the restaurant.

“I love Barcelona nights,” Alice said as we hit the street. “And especially Gràcia. It’s so busy and yet has such a calm atmosphere. It has a natural flow to it somehow. In a sense it’s a bit like Icelandic landscapes, I guess, busy with exotic landforms but still so empty and quiet.”

“Yes,” I replied, not paying much attention to what she was saying. Had I made a mistake by following my gut feeling rather than my game-theory argumentation? She seemed like a nice girl and if I looked at the situation from a probabilistic perspective, there was no reason to worry. In all likelihood she was an honest person and I had no grounds to feel uneasy.

“Is that what you like about the Gràcia neighborhood?” Alice asked as we walked along Carrer de Verdi. “That it flows naturally like the Icelandic landscape?”

“I suppose,” I said, wondering whether it was stupid of me to look at the situation from a probabilistic angle. Could I really claim that she was a nice and honest girl in all likelihood? I should assign some of the probability mass to the scenario where she was dishonest. What would happen then?

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“This is it,” I said as I fumbled with opening the door to my apartment.

We entered and I locked the door behind us with the bolt. I thought about locking it with a key as well—to bar Alice from running away with my belongings. That might look awkward, though. How would I justify my actions if she asked?

“Here’s the bedroom, the study, the bathroom,” I said, leading Alice toward the living room. “And the kitchen is farther down the hall.”

“It’s a nice place you’ve got,” Alice said as we entered the living room. “You must be making a small fortune playing this game thing of yours.”

“That’ll be your bed tonight,” I said, pulling the seat of the sofa forward to turn it into a bed. “Let me get you some sheets.”

I went into the study and grabbed a set of bedsheets from the wardrobe that covered one wall of the room opposite a densely packed bookshelf. I took a deep breath. Alice looked to be a perfectly harmless woman. There was definitely no reason for me to worry about her being in my apartment.

“Good night,” I said after preparing the sofa bed for Alice.

“I hope you get a nice deep sleep,” Alice replied, smiling.

I replied with an awkward smile and left the living room, heading over to my bedroom.

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I opened my eyes and looked at the alarm clock. It was one a.m. I could not sleep.

“I hope you get a nice deep sleep,” Alice had said. “You must be making a small fortune playing this game thing of yours.”

What did she mean by that? A nice deep sleep? Was she hoping I would be so deeply asleep that she would have a good opportunity to rob me while I snored? Was she eyeing my laptop? My camera? My stereo?

I took a deep breath. There was nothing to be afraid of. Probability was on my side. In all likelihood Alice was an honest woman. She was here as my guest, just to get a secure night’s sleep. She was not here to cause me harm.

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I opened my eyes and looked at the alarm clock. It was two a.m. I held my breath, listening to the sounds coming from the living room. There was a deep breathing sound. Like someone in a good sleep.

“I want to sleep in a secure place. Away from the dangers of the street,” she had said when convincing me to take her to my place for the night.

How could she feel secure while sleeping at a stranger’s place? How did she know I was no danger to her? I could just as well be a lunatic, violent, and a

rapist. Was she secure because she had a third party on her side? Someone who she would let in during the night while I was fast asleep? Or in a deep sleep, as she had put it. Was she pretending to be asleep? Was she waiting for me to fall asleep? Waiting until she would have the apartment to herself? Waiting until she could have her way and rob me? I should have locked the door with the key.

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I opened my eyes and looked at the alarm clock. It was three a.m. I heard noise coming from the hall outside the apartment. I heard the rattling of metal. I cuddled up in the fetal position, hugging my extra pillow. What had I done? What was going to happen? I was such an idiot. Why had I let that woman into my house? What would I do?

I heard my neighbor's door open. He was most likely coming home from a late-night shift. The danger was over for the time being, but my heart kept pounding at an accelerated rate. My mind replayed a series of scenes in my head, over and over again. The moment when Alice walked into the restaurant. How she singled me out as her victim. The scene when we walked together through the streets of Gràcia. How she smiled a seemingly innocent smile when saying good night.



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I opened my eyes and looked at the alarm clock. It was four a.m. I heard someone clear their throat by the foot of the bed. It was Alice. She stood there looking at me with her hands behind her back.

“Awake, are we?” Alice asked, grinning. “Having problems sleeping because you didn’t dare lock the front door with a key? Who do you take me for? Some evil bitch who’s going to do you harm while you sleep?”

I blinked, but I could not utter a word. My head felt heavy, halfway between being asleep and awake.

“Alice!” someone shouted from the hallway. “Let’s go!”

I felt a knot in my stomach. I wanted to jump out of bed but I could not move. It was as if my arms were tied to my body and my legs to each other.

“Shh,” Alice whispered, pulling one hand from behind her back and bringing her index finger to her lips. “Just lie back and relax. I’m leaving.”

She pulled the other hand from behind her back and pointed a gun in my face.

“Game over!” she yelled as she pulled the trigger and everything went black before my eyes.

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I opened my eyes and looked at the alarm clock. It was ten a.m. I would be late for work. I had overslept.

I got out of bed and put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt.

I staggered, half-asleep, into the hallway and to the bathroom. As I sat down on the toilet I started recalling last night's events. The game. Alice. The gun. Was she just a dream? Was she still sleeping? Was she real? Had she left? What was a dream and what was reality? Were my things in their place?

I looked around the bathroom. Everything seemed to be as it should be. No, wait. My hair dryer. My hair dryer was gone. Alice had stolen my hair dryer.

I walked back into the hallway and looked into the living room. The sofa bed had been turned back into a sofa. The bedsheets lay neatly folded with my hair dryer on top. Alice was nowhere to be seen.

I heard noise coming from the kitchen. The washing machine was going into its final and loudest spin. As I entered, I saw Alice standing by the stove flipping a pancake. She had changed clothes from the night before and was wearing black jeans and a red sweater.

"Good morning," she said, smiling. "How long you slept. I thought you were never going to wake up."

"Yes, no, good morning," I murmured, rubbing my right earlobe between my thumb and index finger. "I didn't sleep all that well. I had some weird nightmares."

"That's too bad," she said, frowning. "I hope you don't mind me borrowing one of your towels and taking

a shower. I also took the liberty of using your washing machine to wash one load of clothes.”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“Very well,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “Enough chitchat. Breakfast is ready. Could you take these into the living room?”

She handed me a large plate of thick American pancakes and two smaller plates with cutlery and napkins.

“Lungo or espresso?” she asked as a trained waitress. “Milk or sugar?”

“An espresso, thanks. Black,” I said as I took the pancakes to the living room. In the background, I could hear the humming of my Nespresso machine thrusting hot water through the coffee capsule.

“Do you mind if I use your dryer while we have breakfast?” she asked as I reentered the kitchen, seeing her already taking her clothes from the washing machine and loading them into the dryer.

“Not at all,” I said, yawning, not fully recovered from the disrupted sleep. “Is there anything more I can bring to the table?”

“Indeed!” Alice said, handing me a tray with a mug of coffee, my espresso cup, maple syrup, Nutella, two jars of jam and butter.

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We sat down at the dining table. A breakfast like this had not been prepared in the house for a long time. I had forgotten I even had all this stuff in my cupboards.

“The pancakes are very tasty,” I said, having taken the first bite. They were truly delicious and I could feel the energy slowly build up in my body.

“I’m glad you like them.”

“It’s nice to have a proper breakfast once in a while. I usually just have two or three cups of coffee until lunch.”

We sat in silence for a while enjoying the pancakes and coffee.

“How did you end up on the streets?” I asked after having cleared some of the fog in my mind with a sip of my espresso.

“My home went away with my last job,” Alice answered, pausing for a moment before continuing. “I was an assistant chef at a burger joint in Sants. I was living with the main chef. The relationship went up in flames. But it wasn’t all my fault. I didn’t know the deep fryer would catch fire when I threw that bottle.”

“What bottle?” I asked, not sure if the story was confusing or if I was just tired.

“The bottle of whiskey I was unloading from a delivery box. I’d just found out that Tony, the Swedish chef, the chief burger flipper, the owner, the guy I

was living with, had slept with big-boobs Barbie, the waitress who was apparently just as busy serving her massive melons as she was serving juicy burgers. That pretty much sums up how I ended up on the street. I threw the bottle. Tony's burger joint burned down. He threw me out."

"When was this?"

"A month ago or so."

"How long had you been working at Tony's?"

"Half a year."

"And before that?" I asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"No, it's fine," she said and gave me a smile. "I owe you for the favor... Before that? I was working at a raw-food vegan tapas bar. The food was—believe it or not—really good, but it was hard to sell the tapas bar concept without the ham and cheese platters. The place went out of business... without flames... in many ways.

"Before that I was fired from a hotel receptionist position. For giving one of the guests an off-the-menu room service, if you know what I mean. All legal, but maybe not very professional."

"Wow, it seems like you're haunted by some sort of bad luck."

“I’m not sure if my systemic misfortune can be written off as bad luck. I’d rather say I have a talent for messing up everything I do.”

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After breakfast we took the plates to the kitchen and I washed them while Alice folded her laundry, which could hardly have been fully dried after such a short while in the dryer.

“Well, I shall be off then,” she said as she took the final piece of clothing out of the dryer, folded it, and put it in her bag. “I don’t want to keep you all day. You must need to get to work.”

“Would you like to stay another night?” I asked her, putting aside the fork I had been drying. “Or at least stay for a while to finish your laundry, let it dry properly?”

“That’s a very sweet offer, thank you,” she said, walking over to me, putting a hand on my upper arm, and looking me in the eyes. “But I’ve made a principle of not staying at the same place for more than one night. I don’t want to build habits. Not in my current situation. But thanks for the offer. I appreciate it. Maybe later. Under other circumstances. When I’ve managed to get myself off the street.

“Thanks for everything,” she said as she leaned forward and kissed me on both cheeks. “Goodbye.”

I walked her to the door. A tear formed in the corner of my eye as I watched her leave my apartment, walking into the hallway with a giant plastic bag in each hand. I swept the tear away just when she turned around to give me a smile before descending the stairs.





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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