Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

# Rain in Kraków

short story

Urban Volcano

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Rain in Kraków

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I shook the raindrops off my coat before taking a seat next to the window of a nearly empty café. My plans had changed. After a week-long meeting I longed for fresh air. I had planned to use the weekend to wander about in Kraków. Get to know the city. Take some photos. The skies had other ideas, though. The weather was not on my side.

"Co dla Pana?"

I looked at the waitress who had addressed me. I guessed that she was asking if I wanted anything. What she could get me, or something like that.

"Sorry, I don't speak Polish," I replied.

"Oh, I was just asking if I could get you something," she replied in English. "I thought you were Polish. You have a Polish aura."

I ordered a latte and a croissant. I looked across the square. The rain was pouring down. There were few people out in the rain and I was the only customer in the café. I dug my notebook and a pen out of my backpack. I wanted to write a description in the atmosphere on the square. Kill time. Perhaps I could write it into a short story.

"Where are you from?" the waitress asked as she brought me my coffee and croissant.

"Iceland," I replied. "Reykjavík."

"Oh, Iceland," she said in a dreamy voice looking out of the window and across the square. "I have heard it is beautiful. And many Polish people have gone there to work."

The waitress left me with my coffee and returned to the bar. I took a bite of the croissant and sipped the coffee. I looked around me, across the square and around the mostly empty café, in search of inspiration for my writing.

Loud music played in the café—mixed with the conversations of the two waitresses who were both talking on their phones. I did not understand what they said, but could imagine that their conversations were quite different. I guessed that the one who had served me was having an argument with her mother while the other was speaking to her boyfriend. One was shouting but the other spoke softly, blushing from time to time and laughing timidly.

"I have told you many times that I am not coming back," the angry sounding waitress shouted at the phone and hung up. She was tired of how her mother insisted she return to the village. She was not going back home. She had made up her mind. She was going to stay here in Kraków and earn money for her trip around the world. Her mother was still hoping she would return to the village and marry the priest's son. She, however, had made up her mind. She would not marry him. Their relationship was over. They did not have anything in common anymore.

They had been close in their youth—she and the priest's son. They had played together. They had daydreamed together. They had decided to travel the world together. They had spent hours upon hours dreaming of faraway cities in faraway continents. The world was theirs and they were going to explore it. Their dreams started with the big Polish cities—

Warsaw and Kraków. They would often lie in the fields outside their village and make up stories about their future lives in the cities. Later, they dreamt of big European cities—London, Berlin and Paris. They spent many hours in the school library studying books about foreign places. Gradually, their dreams moved on to even more faraway places – America and Asia. Their dreams had no borders.

As they grew older they started to grow apart. She continued dreaming of faraway places, while his thoughts moved closer to home. He decided to follow in his father's footsteps and take over the priesthood of the village. The world stopped calling him. The priesthood became his calling. He stopped dreaming of the world. His world consisted of the people in the village and their relationship with God. He had tried to convince her to stay by his side as the priest's wife, but he had given up after a while when he realized that he was far from convincing her.

I stopped writing, asking myself whether catholic priests could get married at all. Something told me they could not. I wrote a note to myself reminding me to look it up when I got home. I was not sure if I was going anywhere with this story. I put the lid on the pen and looked across the square. It was still raining heavily. Few customers had shown up at the market to buy food for supper. The street vendors

stood under their tents discussing the weather. Or, at least, I presumed they were discussing the weather. It did not seem likely that the rain would stop any time soon. There was thus nothing for me to do than return to writing my story. I looked to the bar. Now there was only one waitress there. The one who had served me. The one who had been speaking angrily on the phone. There were no other customers. She killed time by polishing the bar.

The night before her eighteenth birthday she had packed her most essential things. Before dawn the following day she snuck out of the house without being noticed. She left a letter for her parents. She told them she had gone to see the world. She told them not to worry about her. She was a grown-up now and could take care of herself. She told them she would call.

She arrived in Kraków shortly before noon. She started walking from one restaurant to another looking for a job. She had heard that restaurants and cafés were the best places to seek work. The job hunt was not as easy as she had imagined in her daydreams. Nobody wanted to hire an inexperienced girl from the countryside. She had been hopeful when she left her village in the early morning, but as the evening drew closer she conceded that finding a job would take some time. However, she did not give up all hope. She was sure she could handle it. She had saved enough money

to stay a few nights at the cheapest guesthouse in town. Those few nights would give her time to find work. Some job. Any job.

The following day she continued her job hunt. She gave up on the restaurants and turned her attention to the bars and cafés. She kept her standards high to begin with and explored the posh cafés. Gradually she let her standards drop and went for the less posh cafés. By the end of the day she had managed to get a job as a dishwasher and waitress at a bar downtown. The working hours were long. The pay was poor. She barely managed to make a living. She stole old bread and other leftovers that were put aside at the end of the day.

And so the first few weeks went by in the world outside her village. Life was far from being anything close to what she had imagined in her daydreams. However, she kept her hopes high. She thought that this was only the beginning. Things would get better as time went by.

Now a year had passed since she had moved to the city and she was celebrating her nineteenth birthday in solitude. She had long ago lost count of the bars and cafés she had worked in. She had gradually managed to work her way up the gastronomic ladder. She was far from her dream of exploring the world. Nevertheless, she had not given up hope. She kept her dream alive.

She was going to go to Berlin, London or Paris as soon as she could.

She called home once a week to let her parents know that she was fine. She was careful not to let them know where she was or what she did for a living. She wanted to keep them at a certain distance. Every phone call ended with an argument with her mother who wanted her to return to the village. She remained loyal to her dream. She was not going to go back. She was going to explore the world. And so ended today's phone call, like all the others.

She sat behind the bar and looked across the square. The rain was pouring down. The café was almost empty. A foreigner with glasses, sideburns and goatee sat by one window. He was writing furiously. Occasionally he looked up from his notebook, letting his eyes wander across the square and taking a sip of his coffee before continuing his writing. When he had entered the café she had thought he was Polish, but he had not understood anything when she had asked him what she could get him. When she had asked him where he was from, he had said he was from Iceland. She found it curious. During all her daydreaming her mind had never travelled to Iceland. She had heard of some Polish people who had found work on that mysterious remote island. But Reykjavík did not sound as attractive as Berlin, London or Paris. However, she

thought she should not exclude it as an option. She wondered if she should ask him for his card in case he could help her find a job in Reykjavík.

"You have changed!"

She looked at the customer who had entered the café without her noticing him. She could hardly believe her eyes. He had also changed. He had a beard and wore glasses. He looked older. He had grown up—somewhat. He looked more like a priest than the son of a priest.

"So have you," she answered timidly, feeling herself blushing.

They smiled awkwardly at each other. They were shy. They, who had played together every day when they were younger. They, who had known each other better than they had known anybody else.

"I am going to Paris," he said, pushing his glasses higher up his nose.

She stared at him not knowing whether to laugh or cry. For so long she had dreamt of hearing those words. In another context though. She had dreamt they were going to Paris together.

"I want you to come with me," he continued, smiling awkwardly.

She did not know what to say. Too long time had passed since they had lain together in the grass outside their village and dreamt about going to Paris together.

“I am going to a seminary in Paris. I want you to come with me. I have a small apartment arranged by the school.”

She smiled. He had aged and matured, but deep inside he was still an innocent boy from the countryside.

“And what do you think the teachers at the seminary will say when you bring a girl with you to Paris? You, the unmarried priest pupil?”

He did not answer right away. He looked puzzled. He had apparently not thought this through. He looked away and stared at the bottles behind the bar. As if he could find the answer in a bottle. She shook her head. She waited for him to answer. She polished the bar. They remained silent.

“I will tell them you are my sister. I will tell them that you are with me to help me while I study. To do the laundry, cook and that sort of things.”

He looked at her again. So innocent. So sure of himself.

“It will not work. It is better if you go alone.”

She felt a lump in her throat as she said this. She looked away, secretly wiping away a tear that had formed in her eye. She could not go with him. Not under these circumstances.

"Ok, well, if you change your mind, here is my address in Paris. I will take the train tomorrow morning."

He gave her a card with a trembling hand.

"I might write you a postcard," she said, forcing a sympathetic smile.

She said this to justify accepting his card. She did not want him to think that she was considering going after him. She did not want to raise false expectations.

He said goodbye and left. As soon as he was gone she was overcome by emotions. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She could not hold them back. She thought about the times when they had dreamt about exploring the world together. That dream had never been as close to becoming reality as now. Yet it seemed so far away. She wished it could come true but deep inside she knew it would not. They had grown apart. He was still a boy from the village. She was now a woman in the city. They were too different.

I looked up from my notebook, looked out the window and across the square. The rain had stopped. It was time to put my previous plans into action. It was time to wander about in the city. This short story could wait until later. Moreover, I was not sure if it was on its way to becoming something or not. I didn't know enough about the life of young catholic priests in Polish villages. It would be difficult for me to make this story

realistic. I packed my notebook into my backpack and went to the bar to pay my bill. It was time to explore Kraków.

"Here is my card," I said as I paid my bill. "You can contact me if you decide to try your luck and find a job in Reykjavík."

I had surprised myself by giving the waitress my business card. The act was spontaneous and without much thought. I did not know why I had done it. Maybe I was having trouble distinguishing between reality and the fiction I had been writing.

She watched the customer leave the café and walk into the square. It had stopped raining. She looked at the card. She wondered if she should accept the offer. Was this at last her chance to go and explore the big wide world? At worst, she could live with him for a few days while she looked for a job and found her own place. She put the card in her pocket. She would sleep on it and decide later.

Börkur Sigurbjörnsson 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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