

Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

What We Want to Want



Urban Volcano

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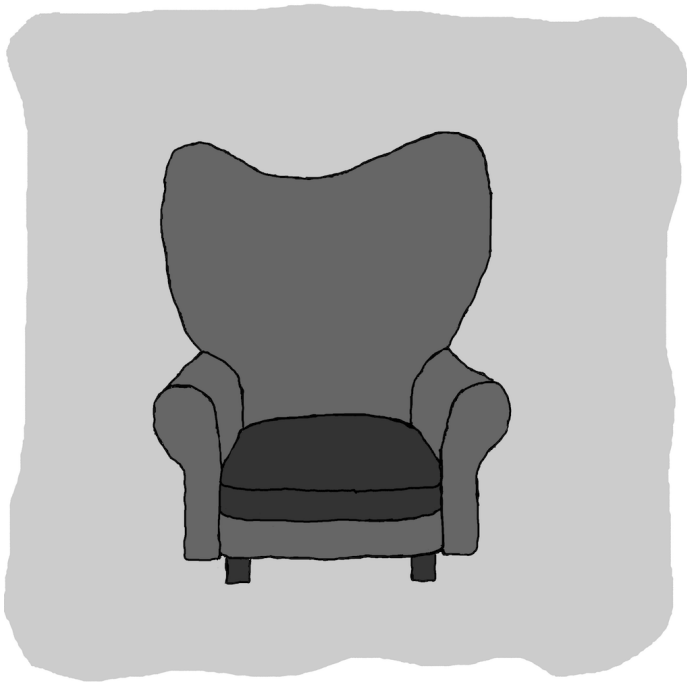
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WHAT WE WANT TO WANT

Valur closed the front door of the apartment building behind him and shrugged when confronted with the fresh Icelandic summer breeze. Having lived abroad for a decade and a half, he was struggling to get used to the fact that the ideal dress for summer days was not simply a T-shirt—even at midsummer. Valur looked up between the midrise residential towers where he was staying this week. The sky was gray. Although it was not what he was used to these days, the weather could

hardly be more typical for this part of the world at this time of the year. It was one of those days where it was uncertain if it would rain or not, but one thing was sure, it was going to be cloudy.

The weather was one of the parameters Valur had to keep in mind if he was to move back to Reykjavík. He had to make sure he would be able to accept it. There would not be as many sunny days in Reykjavík as he was used to enjoying either in Amsterdam or Barcelona. There would definitely be more cloudy days. More rain. More snow. More slush. Then there would be that indecisive constant drizzle that could go on for days without making up its mind if it was going to fall as proper rain or not. He should embrace the fact that there would be weeks where he would hardly see the sun. It was true that he sometimes complained about the suffocating summer heat by the Mediterranean, but he had to keep in mind that all in all Barcelona had a better climate than either Amsterdam or Reykjavík. It was also one of the few positive aspects of his frequent journeys between Barcelona and Amsterdam that he could choose to spend an extra couple of days in Holland if Catalonia was too warm.

Valur walked across the parking lot between the apartment buildings and made his way toward Borgartún. It was arguably among the denser parts

of Reykjavík, and by urban theories it should be accompanied by an active street life. However, there were few people out and about on this Tuesday morning. The only sign of life was a constant stream of cars moving up and down the street. Come to think of it, this was typical of Reykjavík street life. The few people who ventured outside stayed inside their automobiles. What was it about his fellow countryfolk and cars? Did they really like them so much or were they merely caught in a situation where the urban design with low density and mighty suburbs made it too difficult to break out of those motorized steel cages? Maybe it was a chicken and egg problem where few people used sustainable transport because the infrastructure was lacking and no politician dared invest in infrastructure for sustainable transport since there were so few users—so few voters, so few votes. In any case, cars were not Valur’s cup of tea and he wondered how much he would miss the street life of the two cities he was contemplating leaving behind. He would miss the bustling squares of Barcelona, the busy pavements, the small shops that he could reach on foot, the greengrocer, the butcher, the wineshop. He would miss the cycling in Amsterdam, the canal walks past ever-changing gables, and, last but not least, the Vondelpark picnics. He would miss the cities where life took place in public spaces—not only indoors, be

it doors to houses or doors to cars. He imagined how different it would be if he were wandering about Barcelona today. He would sit down for a coffee in a café on a busy square, enjoying watching people as they went about their business in the midmorning sun. If he wasn't in a Tuesday morning meeting, that is.

As Valur reached the open area around Höfði he stopped for a moment to look over to the mountains across the *blue straits*. The scene that had inspired so many poets—one describing the mountain ranges as purple dreams on a spring night. The mountain view, the straits, the islands—one could hardly imagine a better frame for a city. Reykjavík was an urban area in close proximity to nature, and the wilderness was no doubt one of the main attractions of Iceland, not only for tourists but also for himself. He loved the endless views of emptiness. The quiet nature. For sure it was easy to get to the mountains from Barcelona. The Pyrenees were only a couple hours away by train. However, even if both Reykjavík and Barcelona had an easy route to mountains, it was not the same. There was not the same sense of isolation on the Iberian Peninsula as in the Icelandic highlands. As much as Valur didn't like the lack of people on the streets of Reykjavík, he did not like the abundance of people in the Pyrenees. He realized he was an extremist in that sense. For him there were only two possible states of

being. The big city with its crowds and dense street life on one hand and untouched nature on the other, where he could be alone or with a small group of close friends, with a low probability of running into other people.

Valur was really looking forward to the trip he had coming up the following week. He was traveling with the usual group of friends to the remote northwestern part of Iceland where they were going to spend eight days walking in the wilds without ever seeing a town, without ever coming across a human-inhabited place. It was going to be a week on the border between civilization and the uninhabited ice sheet of the North Pole. Valur missed these outings. The group did at least two weeklong trips every year and then there were the more frequent, but shorter, weekend excursions. Valur tried to catch at least one of the longer trips every year, but he could not make it for the weekend escapes. It would be so much easier if he lived in Reykjavík.

When Valur reached Laugavegur, the street got livelier and there were more people around. They were mostly tourists, though, and he wondered if he himself felt more like a local or a tourist. The scene was in some ways familiar, but at the same time quite novel. He struggled to identify with the place. So much had changed in the past fifteen years. Icelandic society had evolved, and he had matured too. There was something about the way of life in Iceland that he

could not relate to. He liked living a modest lifestyle in a small flat, without the luxuries of a microwave, television, dishwasher, or dryer. He didn't own a car or have a mortgage. Things in Iceland were different. Here he felt that everyone was expected to have the same lifestyle, with their house and garden, children and cars, dishwashers and dogs. Valur wanted to be agile—free to move around—free to live in the present without having to think about the future. He was afraid that if he moved to Reykjavík he would plant his feet too rigidly into the infertile Icelandic soil.

At the bottom of Bankastræti Valur headed toward the harbor where Harpa, the relatively new concert hall, stood. He paused on the hill in front of the hall and admired the fancy construction. The building itself was an impressive glass structure influenced by the hexagonal rocks found in abundance in Icelandic nature, but the surrounding was not as stunning—a mix of vacant lots and vast empty holes waiting to be filled with the foundations of new buildings. It was now four years since the 2008 economic crisis had put construction on hold, and there were not many signs of the pace picking up anytime soon. The square in front of the concert hall was as depressing as the building was stunning. Most of it was covered with black asphalt, not so different from an empty parking lot. In order to prevent drivers from mistaking it for parking, a

number of concrete blocks had been scattered over the surface. Valur did like the iconic Icelandic landscape of black sand as far as the eye could reach. However, this was not the venue for the desert. Just as the black sands was uninviting to human populations, this ocean of asphalt was equally harsh. This was the city. This should be a welcoming place for people. There were admittedly a few benches scattered across the square but nothing to attract interesting city life. No vegetation. No street cafés. Nothing. Valur felt sad. He really wanted to be in love with Reykjavík. He longed to be excited. It would make his decision to relocate to the city so much easier.

Valur walked across Lækjartorg, down Hafnarstræti, heading for the Reykjavík Art Museum. He needed to clear his mind. He needed a mental diversion. He had to stop thinking about the relocation for a while, and a museum was an ideal distraction.

Although it was a cloudy summer morning with tourist season in full swing, he was alone in the big hall. There was a complete silence apart from the squeaking from under the rubber soles of his shoes as he walked across the glossed concrete floor. Valur felt a relaxing sensation go through his body and ease the tension that had been building up for the past few days.

Visiting the museum had been a good idea. The theme of the current exhibition was art from everyday life. The advertised goal was to find the border between things we consider artwork and things we use as part of our daily routine.

At the center of the hall, Valur stopped by quite an ordinary armchair, placed next to a big sign asking guests not to sit on the artwork. He stared at the armchair. Was this art or was this just an item from everyday life? That was an intriguing question. What was art, anyway? Can an ordinary armchair in the middle of a room be art? For sure there was design in the chair. But art? Where did the line lie between art and design? Between design and manufacturing? Was the design present in every produced iteration, or just in the original prototype? Plato would surely have had an answer for that.

“Is this art?”

Valur jumped. He had not heard anyone enter the hall, and the voice seemed to originate from right behind his back. He turned around and faced a woman standing a few feet away. She was below average height and slim. Her chestnut hair was cut short, at chin height, and her bright gray-blue eyes pulled at his attention like magnets. Her skin was pale and smooth. She was smiling. On one hand she had a childish look

to her but something in her aspect made Valur guess she was about his age—recently past her midthirties.

“Quite frankly, I have no clue,” Valur replied after he had recovered from the startle. “I was actually pondering that exact question. I find it hard to see a chair in the middle of a room as an object of art. If this chair is called art, then anything can be labeled as art. Can’t it?”

“I’m not sure if it’s that simple,” the woman said as she moved closer and walked around the chair to view it better. “Maybe the art is not so much in the chair itself. The artist could be challenging us to look beyond the chair and ask ourselves a different set of questions. Isn’t it too narrow to focus solely on the chair as an object of art? Could it be that the art lies in the combination of the chair and the sign? In the contrast put forward by not allowing people to use the chair for the purpose it was made? Maybe the purpose of the artist is to make us choose between two incompatible choices. Maybe the artist really wants us to sit down, even if we are told not to do so.”

She finished her walk around the chair and sat down. Valur could feel the hair on his arms rise and a nervous tension spread through his body. “You can’t do that,” he whispered, looking about the room to see if there were any guards. “Someone might see you!”

“I doubt that,” she said grinning. “I think the artist wants you to think about the contrast between the things you should do and the things you want to do. The contrast between the things you think you should do and the things you really want to do. The contrast between what you want to want and what you really want. People are asking themselves the wrong questions all the time. They are obsessed with asking the questions that lead them to the conclusions they want to reach.”

“Are you the artist?” Valur asked, calming down a little, suspecting this scene was all a part of the show.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” the woman asked, staring at him with those hypnotizing gray-blue eyes.

“No, should I?” Valur answered, wondering if she was an old classmate from high school or even elementary school. No, he could not locate her in his memory.

“It’s me, Uгла,” she said. “Don’t you remember? Your old friend.”

“Uгла?” Valur was taken aback. The scene had been confusing before but was now turning into something too surrealistic to believe. “Uгла? My invisible friend from childhood?”

“Do I look invisible to you?”

“No,” Valur admitted, though unconvinced.

“Then I’d prefer if you referred to me—” she said, pausing for a moment—“simply as your friend.”

Valur was silent, his eyes fixed on the woman sitting in the armchair in front of him. She stared back, grinning. Valur closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Ugly, his imaginary friend from childhood. He smiled. He had not thought of her in a long time. In fact, he had no personal recollections of her. He remembered her only through the stories his parents repeated so often. According to them, he and Ugly frequently played together. He had his parents put a plate for her at the dining table, as she joined them for dinner from time to time. She even traveled with the family. Until one summer when they were on holiday in Ireland, she disappeared. He stopped mentioning her. He stopped playing with her. It appeared as if she had disappeared entirely from his mind—ceased to be a figment of his imagination. No one knew what had terminated their friendship.

Valur opened his eyes again. Ugly was still there. Sitting in the armchair, laid back and relaxed, staring at him.

“Why don’t we go somewhere nice and have a drink,” she said, standing up from the chair. “We have plenty of catching up to do.”

Valur and Ugly left the museum and walked back into the chilly Icelandic summer morning. Noon was still over an hour away and there would be no problem finding a quiet space to catch up. Valur suggested they go to the restaurant in the Falcon House as it was reasonably close by and, quite frankly, one of the few places he actually knew in town. He visited too infrequently to keep up with the fast turnover in the gastronomic scene.

“I’ll go to the restroom,” Ugly said as they had found themselves a nice table by a window, overlooking Ingólfstorg Square.

Valur sat down and studied the wine list. He was no expert but managed to recognize two reds on offer, a Spanish Crianza from Rioja and an Argentine Malbec from Mendoza.

“We’ll have a bottle of the Malbec,” Valur said to the waiter as he came over to the table. “And two glasses.”

Valur could not help grinning. It was just as in his parents’ stories where he felt he had to ask to have the table set for Ugly.

“Should I bring the wine now, or wait until your party arrives?” the waiter asked.

“Bring it now,” Valur replied. “We arrived together. She just went to the bathroom and will be right back.”

“Sure, of course,” the waiter said, lifting his eyebrows. “As you wish.”

The waiter returned with the bottle of wine and two glasses. He poured Valur a small glass for tasting. Valur let the wine roll around on his tongue for a while before accepting it. The waiter filled his glass and went about his business. Valur reached for the bottle and poured a half-full glass for Ugly.

“So, what brings you to Iceland?” Ugly asked as she returned from the bathroom. “I thought you were living in Barcelona, or was it Amsterdam?”

“Yes, I mostly live in Barcelona, but I also spend a lot of time in Amsterdam, for work. I’m just visiting.”

“To Amsterdam and Barcelona,” Ugly said, raising her glass for a toast. “Sounds like a nice combination.”

“Cheers!” said Valur, lifting his glass. “It is. But what about you? Weren’t we in Ireland last time we saw each other?”

“Yes we were, but I have no fixed place of residence. I wander around. Go where I’m needed. I usually do short stints in each place. Now I’m on a project in Reykjavík. I guess it will be a short stay, though. And you?”

“I’ll be staying a couple of weeks.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Both. I’m going on a hiking trip with my friends next week, but I’m also here for a job. Yesterday I had an interview with a local company.”

Thinking about the job interview, Valur felt butterflies in his stomach. Was he really this nervous about getting the job? Or was it the effect of drinking wine before lunch? In reality, he had no reason to be nervous. He had had much tougher interviews in the past. This one had been pretty easy in comparison. It was as if the job description had been written to perfectly match his education and work experience. The interview had gone really well and he felt a good vibe among the people. The chemistry had been right on so many levels. If anything, it had been too good to be true. It was a brand-new chemical engineering startup where he would be able to focus his energy exclusively on experimenting with natural chemicals under inspiration from Icelandic geothermal areas. The product was based on a concept he had been thinking about for a while. It would be a great contrast to the large multinational chemical giant where he currently spent more time in boring meetings and dealing with company politics than actually doing chemistry.

“Hopeful?” Ugla asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“About what?” Valur had forgotten she was there and what they had been talking about.

“The job, of course.”

“Oh, yes. No. I mean yes. Both. Yes and no. I’m torn. On one side I’m hopeful that I’ll get it. On the other... I don’t know... I hope that I won’t. It’s complicated.”

“Is the job not interesting enough?”

“No, it’s not that. I mean yes, it’s interesting. If anything, it’s kind of a dream job for me.”

“So, it’s almost certain you’ll get it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“That’s great then!”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I’d have to move to Reykjavík.”

“What’s wrong with Reykjavík?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not sure I like the city. I’m not sure I fit into the Icelandic mentality anymore.”

“Why not?”

“I enjoy the modest urban lifestyle I maintain in Barcelona. I like to be able to have breakfast outside on a terrace all year round.”

“How often do you have breakfast on a terrace in Barcelona?”

“Hardly ever, really.”

“So?”

“That’s not the issue. It’s more about the concept. I would like to have the option. I just don’t visualize myself in Reykjavík.”

“Why not?”

“Many things. For one thing, I like a car-free lifestyle. My parents’ town is an hour’s drive from Reykjavík. My friends live all over the capital area, split between the city center, the suburbs, and the satellites. It would be madness getting around.”

“Then why move?”

“For two years I’ve been casually thinking about returning to Iceland. I want to spend more time with my parents. I have a very close group of friends here. I miss them. I miss spending time with them, hiking, enjoying nature.”

“I see,” Ugly said, putting up a soothing smile that made Valur relax.

“I don’t like the choice. For two years I’ve avoided addressing the question of whether I really want to live in Iceland, brushing it away by quite rightfully claiming that there were no jobs for me here. No jobs that fit my expertise, that is. I convinced myself that I had specialized myself away from the Icelandic job market. Therefore, I did not have to choose between the big city and my hometown. There wasn’t a choice to make. Then, a few weeks ago, this company approached me and invited me for an interview.”

“And since the interview went well, you can no longer hide,” Ugly concluded, looking Valur in the eyes and reading his thoughts. “You cannot hide behind

the excuse that there are no jobs for you in Iceland. You have to make up your mind. You have to make a decision.”

“Exactly!” Deep inside Valur hoped the answer from the job interview would be negative. He hoped he wasn’t the right person for the job and he wouldn’t get it. Then he wouldn’t have to answer any of those difficult questions. He could hit the snooze button once again. He could postpone the decision of whether to move back to Iceland or stay in Barcelona. He found the choice hard. Both options had their pluses and minuses. Neither option was clearly better than the other. “I want to spend more time with my friends and family, but I also want to live in a real city.”

“What’s real?” Uгла asked.

“Isn’t it a bit ironic that you of all people would cast a doubt upon my notion of reality?”

“You’re saying I’m not real?”

“I don’t know,” Valur sighed.

“What I’m saying is that sometimes it’s not easy to distinguish between what’s real and what’s not. We find it hard to make a distinction between what we want to want and what we really want.”

“I’m not sure it’s that deep or philosophical,” Valur said. “I think it’s a quite straightforward conflict of constraints. In any case, I was trying not to think about it for a while. Can we change the subject?”

“Sure,” Ugly said. “How’s your brother?”

“My brother?” Valur felt his body tense, the blood rush to his face, and his voice get louder. “What has he got... got to do with anything?”

“Take it easy. I was just asking,” Ugly said, shrugging. “I was just curious since I remembered you having an older brother. A year your senior, no?”

“Yes, I did have an older brother,” Valur replied. “I do have an older brother. I guess he’s fine.”

“So you haven’t been in touch with him since you arrived?”

“No,” Valur replied, looking away and over the square. “I’ve been busy.”

“And the fact that your brother married your childhood crush—the love of your life—has nothing to do with your doubt about relocating to Iceland?”

Valur closed his eyes and felt as if the world was spinning around in his head. This was not happening. He was not being lectured by an entity that didn’t even exist—from some imaginary creature that seemed able to enter and exit his life at its own will every few decades. What did she know about what he thought or did not think? What he wanted to want or what he really wanted?

When Valur opened his eyes again and looked across the table, Ugly was gone. All he sat across was a half-full glass of red wine. His own glass was empty. He poured the last drops of wine into his glass and leaned back in the chair. He was tipsy, but his head was clearer than before. He had made a decision. She had been right, after all. He did not have to wait for any more answers. He was not going to take the job if they offered it to him. He was not ready to move back to Reykjavík. He was not ready to face reality.

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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