

# ICELAND MADE ME

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## ABSTRACT

I have been to Iceland twice—first, for about eight months, in 1976-77, on a Fulbright, and second, a couple of years ago, when I was invited to return and celebrate all of us Fulbrighters who got the chance to spend time in Iceland. This is the speech I wrote for that occasion. My Fulbright in Iceland grew out of my love for the Icelandic Sagas, which I studied in graduate school. I expected to be inspired to write a dissertation about the Sagas. But instead, my trip to Iceland pivoted me away from academia toward fiction writing—I wanted to write my own saga, and about a decade after I got back, I did—*The Greenlanders*.



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The thing you want to remember most about going to Iceland is all the hiking you did—up the hills and across the dales, wind, rain, and sunshine poured over you and through you, but you were always facing down the elements, maybe with the aid of a little hat and a poncho. You will have knitted your own socks from oily (but natural) Icelandic wool, and your own gloves, too. Your backpack will have contained dried reindeer meat for sustenance, a few containers of skyr (like yogurt), and, because you were so adventurous, some hakarl, which is shark meat allegedly buried in the sand, and then preserved by fishermen who urinate on it as they go by everyday for a few months, until it is truly inedible to everyone but Icelanders. You will not have had even a sliver of rjomaterta in your backpack (cream cake) because you were too sturdy for that, and your only reading matter was by medieval saga writers (Halldor Laxness was way too modern for you).

But I am unlike you—my main memory from my eight months in Iceland is sleeping. My favorite dream was of myself swimming in the waters of the north Atlantic (unrealistically warm and bright), and being approached by a pod of dolphins, who lifted me out of the water as they leapt into the blue sky, then let me down gently to float again in the gentle sea. Almost all of my dreams were more vivid than any I had ever had, and from them I understood some of the incidents in the Icelandic Sagas—for example the monster who sits astride the roof of a house in Grettirs Saga, and rides it until the roof beams crack. As the nights grew longer and the days shorter (down to two hours in December) I remained on American east coast time—I would go to sleep around four a.m. and get up at dawn (1 in the afternoon), go swimming at the local pool (hail and ice on the concrete between the locker room and the hot tub) (the hotter one, not the hottest one, where the old men were boiling themselves and talking), then walk home in the dusk, stopping at the

American consulate to take a book from the library, something I had never read (*The Grapes of Wrath*) or never heard of (*The Man Who loved Children*, by Christina Stead) or was long enough to require many dark hours of concentration (*Anna Karenina*).

Iceland made me.

I was always a traveler. My earliest journey I do not remember—my mother and father driving from LA to Michigan when I was a year old—but I think I remember all of them after that—from St. Louis to Chicago on the train with my grandmother, to visit cousins when I was three, to Grand Rapids around the same time, to visit the other grandparents, down to the Current River in southern Missouri when I was nine and ten, then camp in northern Wisconsin and Vermont when I was eleven, twelve, and thirteen. Always staring out the window of the plane or the train or the back seat of the car, fascinated by the landscape, listening to people around me talk. When I was a senior in high school, my parents let me go to England for two weeks during spring vacation, and that's where Iceland was planted, right there in those cathedrals and those dialects that my very saintly hosts exposed me to, day after day. After college, there were no jobs, so my first husband and I scraped together three thousand dollars and went to Europe for a year, first working on an archeological dig in Winchester, England, then hitchhiking through France, Italy, Greece, Crete, Yugoslavia, Austria, Switzerland, France again, Denmark, and back to England. He was 6'10", my mentor and protector. We met other travelers who had been scammed and robbed and frightened. The closest we came to being taken advantage of was in an Italian train station, where we fell asleep on some benches, and my husband woke up just as a man was attempting to steal his shoes from under his head (size sixteen—maybe they were worth something on the black market?). Much more typical was our experience at an outdoor bazaar, where we ponied up the asking price for some item, and the seller took pity on us. He taught us how to bargain, then gave us the item half off. In grad school, my boyfriend and I thought nothing of heading out to Iowa to California, Oregon, Idaho, New York, Martha's Vineyard, by car or motorcycle.

But until I went to Iceland, I had never traveled alone.

There were seven or eight of us—my fellow Fulbright recipient, Elizabeth, and other students from England, Denmark, Norway, and even the Soviet Union (he said his father was in the KGB, which was why he was allowed to leave—he also knew how to knit, thanks to his grandmother, so he fit right in). Elizabeth had gone to Radcliffe and graduated summa cum laude. She had grown up in the Upper East Side of Manhattan and read *War and Peace* when she was ten. We got along well. While I was catching up on classics, she was plowing through Barbara Cartland. The Danish boy (four years younger than I was) was Knud. He was handsome and personable, with blond hair and a square, open face. He was a whiz at Icelandic—not all the Danes were. There was a woman who knitted in the lobby before class who was rumored

to be stuck between the liquid pronunciation of Danish and the harsher, multi-consonantal pronunciation of Icelandic, unable to go either back or forward. She knitted like a whiz, though—the whole front of a baby’s sweater in twenty minutes. Elizabeth and I lived in a dorm at Haskoli Islands. From the front door, you could see the mountains beyond Reykjavik rearing into the sky, crusty and barren. Once, I was sitting at my desk, and three swans flew by outside the window, close enough to touch, it seemed. An American professor was in Iceland on a teaching Fulbright. His name was Oscar, and he hosted informal parties every Sunday, where we ate the food he liked to cook, chatted, and played hearts or whist. What was eerie and alluring was the walk to his house, along the dark beach at night (it was always night), listening to the water lap the sand, to the wind slithering here and there. Oscar liked to bake, but Iceland was a treasure of baked goods, so buttery and creamy that for the first time in my life, I had to pay attention to how often I gave into temptation.

It was an easy walk to downtown Reykjavik, and I loved to observe the Icelanders, who spoke loudly and stood closer to one another than New Yorkers. My favorite episode was at the local grocery store. I was walking past the meat counter. A woman customer and the woman butcher were looking at a plate sitting on top of the butcher case that contained two stalks of celery. The butcher said, very clearly, “SELL-ER-EE.” Then the two women shook their heads slightly and shrugged. No idea what that green thing was for. The greatest difficulty when I went to the grocery store was bringing home eggs—no cartons, just plastic bags. I could not get more than three or four home intact. But the skyr was great, the granola was great, the precious oranges from somewhere far far away were great, and there were other vegetables, too, grown in Iceland, in thermally heated greenhouses. My fellow students were more gustatorily adventurous than I was, and even ate whale meat (which was cheap).

Occasionally, we went to the movies, if only to test our Icelandic, and many Fridays we went to the philharmonic hall, which was within walking distance, where we listened to the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. At Christmas, I went to New York, where I stayed with a friend on the Upper West Side. The first morning, I sat up in bed, wide awake, thinking it was noon. The sun was pouring through the windows and it was eight in the morning. After Christmas in New York, I went back to Iowa for a few days, where my boyfriend broke up with me (not unexpected).

Now I didn’t even have a reason to write letters. When I got back to Reykjavik, the days were getting longer, but I didn’t notice. All I did was read and read and walk. In late January, I did get so depressed that the only book that could help me was a collection of humorous essays by S.J. Perelman that made me laugh in the bathtub while I was hiding out from the darkness and my shirked responsibilities toward my language class and my dissertation. At some point, one of those points that are so sunk in the endless passing of

time, I started writing a novel, always from about eleven at night until about four, when I fell onto my couch/bed and continued to dream of what I was writing. It was set in Idaho, and concerned my grandparents and my grandfather's brother trying to start a ranch with a little money my great-grandmother had given them and their winnings from as many poker games as they could get into. The best episode was very Icelandic—they were caught in a blizzard and had to dig a hole in the snow. They saved themselves by lying in each other's arms until the blizzard covered them over and then subsided. My Idaho had no trees. I wrote and read, read and wrote, went once a week to the best hotel in Reykjavik where I did eat rjomaterta, a six-inch-tall wedge of layer cake, all the layers made of cream flavored with different liqueurs. The other meal I remember was a traditional Icelandic end-of-winter feast, *Porrablót*, consisting of everything that traditional Icelanders would have found in their frozen storerooms at about the time when the grass greened up and the sheep were allowed out into the pastures. The most startling thing on the plate, to me, was the singed sheep's head (*Svið*)—eyes restfully closed. I took one look and opted for one of the alternatives, maybe a roast chicken. Elizabeth ate everything on her traditional plate with relish, including the liver sausage and the *Súrsaðir hrútsþungar*, which were lambs testicles cured in lactic acid.

The days got longer. The Fulbright Committee packed Elizabeth and me onto a plane and sent us to Berlin for a meeting with all of the European grantees. The hosts showed us around and invited us to appreciate the difference between West Berlin and East Berlin, then still behind the Wall. I did appreciate the difference, but not as they wanted me to—what I saw in East Berlin was some kind of patience—letting the ruins from the war sit there until someone came up with a better idea than replacing everything with chrome and neon lights. We were taken to Dahlem, where we visited the Botanic Gardens and a few of the museums. The best piece of art I saw was a Japanese scroll painting that ran along the entire wall of one of the galleries, the story of a single journey up mountains and through forests that unfolded as you walked past it, peering carefully at the trees and the rocks and the tiny figures. The principal difficulty of solitary travel, I decided, was not being able to turn to your companion, to say, "Look at that! I love that!" Whatever revelations were pouring into you and out of you, they were yours alone.

I felt this the following week, too, when I hiked in the southwest of England, a region John and I had missed in our months spent in Winchester, York, and the Lake District. Exeter, Dartmoor (which reminded me of the Hound of the Baskervilles), Newton Abbot, Dawlish—the place names, the wide landscape, the grass and blossoming trees and the wealth of flowers (going from Iceland to England in March is indeed a revelation) seemed to sink into me and disappear, escaping all of my attempts to capture the view, the fragrance, the warm feel of the air in letters or diary entries. When I read the old letters now, I am embarrassed at how desperately they grasp at the things I was seeing and try to push them into the minds of my recipients. When we re-

turned to Iceland we had five weeks left, the sun was everywhere, and I went back to work, this time relating the tale of my grandfather winning a diamond ring in a poker game, giving it to my grandmother, who had no wedding ring, and then my grandmother losing it down the drain of the kitchen sink when she was washing the dishes.

I began preparing to go back to Iowa City. I would move into my ex-boyfriend's apartment, I would work on my dissertation, applying modern theories of literary criticism to the Icelandic Sagas; I would continue my solitary existence and come to enjoy it as well as rely upon it. Duncan asked me to go with him riding.

Duncan was an oboe player from Edinburgh who had by that time been in the Icelandic Symphony for two or three years, though he was a year younger than I was. He was maybe the only person I knew then who was gainfully employed. He was also handy (he did, after all, have to make his own reeds, and they had to be good). He was outdoorsy, he was adventurous, and he had a car. In the last three weeks (now April and May, sun up at four, down at nine or ten), we drove to Dritvik, Laugurfell, Hlítharendi (the setting of *Njalssa-ga*), and Eyjafjallajökull. We saw Skógafoss, and stayed in a youth hostel near Bergþórshvoll. The grass in every valley was brilliantly green. On our second morning in the hostel, another Brit arrived—a sailor taking a break, as I remember. The two men talked all day about sailing and life on the ocean, and never once acknowledged my presence, which was an illuminating experience, the first time in my life as a 6'2" American woman that I was entirely overlooked. Which is not to say that Duncan was unkind. Every time we met for those three weeks, he had a plan or an idea about something that might be fun to do. He also had a lot to say about Scotland, the oboe, the orchestral life, music, nature, haggis, his former plan to sail from Scotland to Iceland to Greenland to America by himself. He wore glasses, his hair was red, he was as easygoing as any man I had ever known. We knew that our relationship was neatly circumscribed by my imminent departure. He didn't ask me to stay and I didn't ask him if I could. What Iceland had to offer me was strangeness, the theme of seven and a half months on my own now gently expanded by his knowledge and mobility. My vocation, I knew, was to return to America and keep writing, but to have Iceland deeply engraved into my own sensibility, not only by the land and the people I met, but by the ghostly presence of the saga writers and the living Icelandic writers whose work I read, most notably Halldor Laxness, who was still alive and writing not far from Reykjavik, but whose books, especially *Independent People*, entered into me as if they had existed forever.

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On the way home, we flew over Greenland. The sky was clear, and I stared down at the glaciers and the icy coast, felt more deeply into my fascination with that far flung offshoot of Nordic restlessness, and arrived in New York, where the first movie I saw was “Annie Hall,” of which no film is less Icelandic, and the first food I ate was a bagel with lox and cream cheese from Zabar’s, Icelandic in a much-translated but still evocative way.

I went back to Iowa City. My old boyfriend was gone for the summer. I moved my suitcase and my typewriter into his apartment. Now, when I wrote, I was looking out the window at green grass and the white siding of the Foursquare house next door. I kept on with the grandparents in Idaho, my mother as an adventurous two-year-old wandering among the cattle while my grandmother cared for the new baby in the house. But I knew that the work to come, whatever it would be, had taken on a deep Nordic tinge, let’s say a combination of wind and sky and snow and grass, of making the best of isolation and hard work, tragedy, luck, and magic.

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Jane Smiley is the author of many works of fiction, and nonfiction, most recently *Perestroika in Paris*. She grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, lived for a long time in Iowa, then moved to California in the mid-1990s. She is known for the variety of her work—tragedy, comedy, historical novels, novels set in the present day, novels for young readers. She explores the form of the novel in her nonfiction work, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for *A Thousand Acres*. She was a Fulbrighter to Iceland in 1976-1977. Jane Smiley can be reached at [jane.smiley@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jane.smiley@sbcglobal.net).

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