

AND THE SWANS BEGAN TO SING

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*To my Mum, Guðbjörg Þórisdóttir.
Thank you for having the courage to
let me write your story.*

AND THE SWANS BEGAN
TO SING

1

HE OPENS THE trap door and I know that I have to step inside. I don't say anything – I can't utter a word when it is just the two of us. I descend the steep stairs that lead down to the coal cellar, praying silently. It is dark and it smells of mildew. The trap door slams shut. What happens next is what I have spent half my life trying to forget. There is no picture of the Virgin Mother in the cold cellar, cradling the Baby Jesus, as there is in the house. Downstairs, in Grandpa's bedroom it hangs in a black frame above his futon and I like to look at the picture on the wall, feeling the peace. I sense that even though the world can be cruel, there is always beauty in heaven.

Stories heal the soul. There's relief in giving the wings of fiction to life's secrets and watch them trailing up to heaven like an offering of incense.

"It does no good," my mother said on her deathbed, "carrying your past around on your back. Write your story; the good and the bad." She looked right into the eyes of her sixty-one-year-old child, a child who yearned to reveal her untold story. When she encouraged me to write she asked me not to spare her in my reckoning.

A few days later she passed on. I keep her old letters and photographs at my house. Every now and then I sit on my red velvet sofa, the one my mother kept aside for me, flick through photos of people long gone and read crumpled letters. That's how I manage to move closer to my people, closer to my past. Tonight, I will wrap my mother's dark pink shawl around me (the one she crocheted as a gift for my fifty-fifth birthday), turn the radiator up against the bitter cold of Reykjavik's winter night and review my personal story.

The memories stretch far back, but I must have forgotten so many things. I've never been particularly good with dates or with remembering facts or names, but I do recall how I felt in whatever crucial situation I found myself – and how I coped. Not everything that has happened to me belongs in a book. Real people are frequently unbelievable characters, and in an account like this it's imperative to choose well and leave certain things out.

The ghost that arose out of my childhood silence forces its way on to the stage. It demands to take over the space and be the main character in my book. If I allow it to happen, nothing will be said out loud. "You cannot write about the surrounding silence in your life unless you give it a shape," it hisses, while fighting for its existence. Silence has been my worst enemy through my entire life. The silence I carried with me created a chasm between me and the rest of the world. I have to get rid of this ghost so I can finally speak up and write my story.

Somewhere deep inside I have a memory of moments passing as I suckled at my mother's breast. I drank the so-sweet milk, stopped to watch it trickle down her chest before I suckled again. I let go and looked at my mother's breast, then at her face, then at her breast again. I played with the nipple and watched the brown aureole grow and shrink. The memory is hazy, but the recollection of the emotion is strong, like my longing to remember all the people that have influenced me, to reminisce about old times and

arrange my story into a fluid sequence. My name is Guðbjörg Þórisdóttir and I am sixty-three years old when I finally sit down to write my story. I was born on Lady Day or the day of the Annunciation: the twenty-fifth of March in 1952. People used to joke about how I was only conceived because the pharmacy in Husavík had closed by the time my father ran out to buy condoms. Therefore, I could say my existence is due to a pharmacist who went home early, the pharmacist and also translator Helgi Hálfánarson: known for his great Icelandic translation of the complete works of Shakespeare.

I grew up on the west side of Reykjavík, but my childhood home was demolished in 1985. It was a pale beige corrugated iron house called Mörk, meaning 'limits' or 'boundaries' in Icelandic, on Bræðraborgarstígur 8b. I studied Icelandic at The University of Iceland and have a diploma from the old School of Education. In my studies, I focused on Icelandic literature and wrote my MA thesis on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* – The Great Weaver from Kashmir – by the Icelandic Nobel prize winner Halldór Laxness. But for most of my life I've worked as a teacher and school principal.

I have always loved literature and have had the privilege of reading fiction aloud on Icelandic radio, Channel 1. When I've shared books with radio listeners I've aimed for stories that resonate with my own experience, books that have given me strength and helped me to heal, in the hope that listening to the stories will also help others.

Lately, with my eyesight worsening due to a rare disease called Benson syndrome, I have started listening to audiobooks. My reduced sight is also a reason why I've had to go on leave from my job as Principal of Breiðagerðisskóli Primary School, where I've worked for almost twenty years. I have two grown children now, who, with their partners, have brought me three step-grandchildren and three grandchildren of my own. I have always been surrounded by children, what with my school, my own children and now my grandchildren.

I've always dreamt of writing fiction and although I wrote a few unpublished stories for children forty years ago I didn't dare to take it any further. I think I was afraid that I would reveal myself somehow by writing, that by reading my stories, people would realize I had a dark secret. I was afraid of being judged if people knew what I had been through. Shame is a cruel and sneaky emotion, I can see it clearly now and I am ready to return it to where it belongs by writing my story. Even though my heart thumps loudly in my chest with each word that reveals my past I know I have to go on, otherwise evil will prevail.