





Fishers of Fortune

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What happens to the seaside village when the nation outgrows cod?

Groska felt the water burst between her legs at 10 pm and a pressing weight drop into her abdomen. The baby had decided to come.

Outside, the deep midwinter snow of 2002 hurtled down into piles up to the windows and the sun hadn't come up for weeks. The entire world had stopped, except for Groska's belly.

She had left the high fences and growling guard dogs of Poland with her sister in search of a simple and peaceful life in Iceland. But somehow in the mayhem of marriage and family she found herself on the edge of the frozen north with a child trying to rip out of her stomach.

Her husband Róbert clung to the phone to call for help. There was no obstetrician in Bolungarvík. No midwife. There was only his 48-year-old father, Gunnar, who built machines for fishing boats.

Leaving his warm couch, Gunnar rushed out to his jalopy, a '91 Nissan Sunny. Around him rose the old fishmeal plant, a vacant but sprawling network of rusted iron walls and holding tanks. Róbert had worked there as a teenager. When his son used to come home on lunch breaks, Gunnar had made him sit outside to eat because of the stench. Those times were all behind him. Gunnar raced toward the future.

With Groska panting in the backseat, and father and son in the front, the Nissan bounded over trench and drifted towards the only way out of town, the Óshlíð coastal road, carved out of the side of a craggy mountain, closely hugging the steep incline.

Óshlíð is one of the most treacherous stretches in Iceland, with landslides and avalanches threatening to plummet down from the rocky cliffs on one side, and the towering winter waves crashing in from the other.

Moreover the road had been declared impassable due to snowstorms, but this is the only way to Ísafjörður, 15 kilometers away and the regional hospital for the West Fjords. And this is the road Gunnar would take to meet his first grandchild.

Three men, one digger, and half an hour later, the Nissan came out the other end of Óshlíð, and by noon the next day Tinna Róbertsdóttir was born. They called the baby *Tinna óvedursbarn*: Tinna, the inclement child.

More so than fishing quota, government subsidies, tax relief or tourist attractions, the birth of a child is a boon for Bolungarvík, a fishing village whose population is steadily emigrating.

In 1982 Gunnar was 29 years old and married to Hlédís, three years his junior. His son Róbert was six, and his daughter Sunna Kamilla would be born the next summer.

There were 1,287 people living in Bolungarvík at that time, the height of the town's population. If you didn't make your living at sea then you made your living from it: processing the fishermen's catch, teaching the fishermen's children or repairing the fishermen's boats.

For most of its existence the town was one of the most prosperous ports in Iceland, pulling in the prize catches of the region with its harbor full of trawlers, and booming business on land processing the tons of cod, haddock, shrimp and capelin once hauled in every day. Children were raised to believe that the sea offered all the good fortune of the world, and to obtain it the only thing you had to do was learn to reel in the line.

But as the story goes, the shrimp stock faded away, fishing quota changed hands to large conglomerations in the south, mechanization began to replace human labor, and somewhere along the line the wealthy island of Iceland decided to become a service-based society instead of a fishing nation. Ambitious Icelandic children can still tell you the difference between halibut and plaice, but these days they grow up to be bankers, software developers and geneticists.

In fact the government recently made a loud statement by aligning its policy with ecologists instead of fishermen. With heavy heart, Minister of Fisheries Einar K. Gudfinnsson, a native of Bolungarvík whose grandfather by the same name built up most of the town's fishing industry, made a decision prompted by ecological data from the Icelandic Marine Research Institute, to cut the fishing quota by 30 percent effective September 1.

By the end of 2006 there were 902 people left in Bolungarvík. Last year over 10 percent of the town up and left. Six people died. The town waits with fists clenched for the annual population figures from December 2007.

There are still vestiges of maritime glory, with the telltale signs of a booming fishing industry dotting the townscape. The route into Bolungarvík is graced by an iron sunrise welded above two holding tanks of the lifeless fishmeal plant. Continuing into the heart of the village, the road leads past the faded yellow Jón Fr. Einarsson building, the tallest structure in town, whose shop windows were once filled with imported furniture, stereo systems and bicycles.

The jaundiced façade now sits in the middle of town, its windows staring out like great catatonic eyes. Some of the rooms are vacant while others are makeshift housing for Polish workers who bait the fishermen's hooks. Across the street stands the remaining core of Bolungarvík: a cement box housing the post office, bank, magistrate's

office and town hall. Above the entrance is a giant digital clock, counting down the minutes like a ticking time bomb.

Two streets away most life still centers on the harbor, although the freezing plant is closed for the summer and the shrimp plant hasn't run since May. The fishing fleet is now made up almost entirely of small boats. The only trawlers left are what the locals call "harbor flowers," vessels left behind to rust and decay in the far off corners of the docks.

Bolungarvík fishermen wake up before dawn, pick up their long lines, which have been baited the night before with mackerel and squid by Icelandic teens, Poles, and Thai, and two by two sail off into the cold sea. Although the waters to the north are rife with sea creatures, the ocean is relentlessly choppy, and long-line fishing is no job for the meek.

The 18 to 19 kilometers of line are cast out, which takes about an hour under the angry, incessant screeches of gulls. Then the line is hooked up to a machine that pulls it in—along with whatever has been hooked—for six excruciating hours. One fisherman stands over the incoming line like a slot machine player, lucky to gaff in large cod, haddock, halibut, plaice and skate, but most often chucking back an unending procession of starfish, small sharks, sea cucumbers and the odd ill-fated seagull.

The second fisherman stands over a trough where all the writhing victims come sliding in. He takes them up one by one, passes a knife through their throats, and sorts them by tossing them into a complex system of chutes down into the belly of the boat.

The particularly grim-looking wolffish is not given the honor of being bled. There is some history between the fishermen and the feisty jaws of the wolffish, a palpable animosity. Some fishermen even go as far as to spit into their mouths before hurling them to their doom.

Despite the rain, spewing blood, stink of fish and rollicking waves, the men are jovial about their work. They compete to see who can bring in the most halibut, call each other on their boat phones, and are unabashed about peeing on the deck at any time.

In the early evening the men return to the harbor and hoist their catch on the scale to show for their hard work before the fish disappears into the market. They look forward to hot showers, sleeping with their wives, and exaggerating about the size of the cod they caught when reliving the day for their kids.

But they don't want this for their children. They want them to be happy. And they know that the road does not lead to the deck of a boat. At least not for their children. At least not anymore.



THE BAITERS AT BOLUNGARVÍK HARBOR

In 1992 the tiles of the swimming hall risers felt warm and smooth under Sunna Kamilla's hands, almost human. Nestled among the bodies sweating in the humid air, she eagerly awaited her father's appearance on the floating platform.

The bright stage lights and smell of chlorine only fueled her excitement. She was always proud to see her father show his creative side in the amateur theater, but this year they were staging Mrozek's "Out at Sea" in the town pool, which made the entire affair all the more intriguing with actors sloshing around.

In the play three men are stranded on a life raft. With little else but their wits, the trio hashes out their fate by deciding that one must sacrifice himself for the greater good by allowing the other two to eat him. It's the law of nature, as cruel as it sounds, that one must perish for the others to thrive. Once one of the men is persuaded to die for the other two, his destiny fills him with a fey sense of purpose.

The cruel allegory of Bolungarvík's sacrifice is harsh but apparent by the end of the play. But at 10 years old, Sunna Kamilla saw no doom in the splashes of Absurdist Theater her father was enacting. She was only proud to see him on the stage, and slightly embarrassed when he sang.

The decline of the fishing village is the result of the nation's move towards technology, a highly educated workforce, and the desire for a knowledge-based society. For a region already desperate for employment opportunities, the new quota cutbacks are perceived as having a ruinous effect on the local economy. Bolungarvík's number of fishing boats has already begun to decrease and crewmembers have been issued their walking papers.

This state of general panic has led some to drastic reactions. Most surprising was the proposed oil refinery that found support in the communities of the West Fjords, which has long prided itself on holding out against establishing any large-scale industry like the aluminum smelters of the East Fjords.

Mayor of Bolungarvík Grímur Atlason compares the situation to a starving man in a supermarket. He doesn't reach for what's nutritious. He grabs whatever will fill him up fastest. The mayor does not want to ask for more aid or try to entice big industry to come to town and set up shop. He understands, as many have come to realize, that change will need to come from within the people of Bolungarvík if the community is to thrive.

Atlason, 36, held a number of positions before taking the helm in Bolungarvík—from developmental therapist in Denmark to indie rock concert promoter in Reykjavík. While he has little experience as a politician, the tall and sinewy city boy has a track record for giving voice to the often neglected underdogs in life.

Most people like him because he is a vocal advocate and has a youthful approach to old problems. But he is still regarded as an outsider from the south pushing an agenda that takes away from the fishing industry. There is certainly a faction that would like to see him go back to Reykjavík and his rock music.

However, it is not only Atlason who is directing the community's efforts away from the harbor. A number of other respected townspeople, many with their roots in fishing, have endorsed projects like the construction of a retirement complex coupled with a program in geriatric medicine at the university satellite center in Ísafjörður. Although Atlason will be the first to admit the town needs more young people than old, professional careers like healthcare workers will have to be established before Iceland's younger generation can be enticed to live in such a remote place.

Other dalliances have included opening a junior college for the West Fjords, establishing a call center for Northern Europe, and even founding a homeopathic cosmetics company. Naturally all these projects require a significant investment of risk capital, manpower, and old-fashioned entrepreneurship. But with a generation of fishermen comprising the principal workforce, one is hard pressed to find out-of-work sailors to teach travel and hospitality courses, answer tech support calls, or discover the rejuvenating effects of moonwort on crow's feet.

But despite these efforts, inchoate notions of disaster linger eerily on the community's horizons. Words like "depopulation," "ghost town," and "abandonment" crop up in casual conversations.

It has happened before. In the 1950s the people of Hornstrandir—without telephones, electricity or roads—voted to make a mass exodus from their homesteads in the far north West Fjords. Atlason's grandfather was one of them. Many even relocated to Bolungarvík. The blood of the Hornstrandir émigrés still runs in the people of Bolungarvík, and a number have already given up and moved on.





In May of 2007 Sunna Kamilla stood next to the radio in the hemophilia lab. She had been in Reykjavík for nearly six months finishing her final project to qualify as a biomedical technician. While studying diseases of the blood, she listened to glam rock and Leonard Cohen, watched zombie movies, and went home whenever she could afford it. The news came blaring on and word from the West Fjords caught her ear. Póls, the fishing equipment company her father Gunnar worked for, would be shut down. Three years ago Marel, a multinational based in a Reykjavík suburb, had bought the company and harvested their patents, but under the pretense of keeping the business open.

At the age of 54, Sunna Kamilla's father would lose his job. The pressure of her studies had already manifested as a tick in her left eye, but the distance from home, the helplessness of hearing bad news from a radio, and the gray weather outside came to a head, and she began shouting curses in the middle of the hospital research laboratories.

Through fits of crying she managed to pick up the phone. Róbert

and Groska and baby had left the West Fjords for Skagaströnd, five hours away, for better work, so Sunna Kamilla called home. Her mother answered. Her father had been offered work in the south. But if they moved they would get nothing for selling their house, and they wouldn't give up their home anyway. Not now. Her mother made a joke about people in the south and how Bolungarvík should secede from the country and form their own sovereign nation. Simply stop plowing the road.

In reality, they will stop plowing the road. But for just the opposite reason: a tunnel is being blasted through a mountain to form a direct route to Ísafjörður and there are eventual plans to merge into one municipality. Nevertheless there is a manifest and growing sentiment to turn away from the rest of the country. For years Bolungarvík diligently supplied Iceland with what it needed: fish. But now the country cannot make the town grow larger or imbue it with some nebulous entrepreneurial spirit, and in response much of the people's resilience seems to have slinked off like a cat ready to die.



GRIMUR ATLASON, MAYOR OF BOLUNGARVÍK

The last day of Gunnar's employment with Marel was September 1. These days he stays close to home, listening to Billie Holiday records and cultivating a vegetable garden with Hlédís in the field outside their house. Sunna Kamilla isn't sure whether the full impact of losing his job has struck him yet, but so far he has managed to grow raspberries, lettuce, carrots, broccoli and a handsome potato patch in a field where others said nothing would grow but wild cumin. All the while he still wears his Marel t-shirt with the words across his chest *Snúum bökkum saman*: "United We Stand."

More than sailors or politicians or even babies, the town needs the vitality of men like Gunnar. They are the caretakers and adventurers, the gardeners and entertainers, the builders and thinkers of their community. If Bolungarvík is to be saved, it will not be by those who wait for rescue to come to them, but by those who strike out into life's risky waters to seek out their fate. **IR**