The TRICKING of FREYA

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You want a bit of Birdie?

Try this, a June afternoon, early 1970s, on the beach at Gimli: Birdie in a skirted turquoise swimsuit and cat-eye sunglasses, lounging legs crossed at the ankles on her aluminum chaise. Just past forty and still glamorous, on her good days. Not a movie star but a kind of star you don't have a name for. You're just past eight and far from glamorous. Birdie compares you, kindly, to an egret as you stride the beach, your legs long and skinny as stilts, your wispy white-blond hair tufting in the wind, your eyes a blue so light they startle.

“See?” Birdie is dangling something in her hand, something small and glistening, jewel-like. You've played this game before. She's going to throw it and you're going to catch it. By mouth. You stand a few feet from the edge of the blanket, bare toes clenching sand, arms swinging restlessly at your sides. Your eyes fix on the prize.


“Come on!” you shriek.

“Three!” Birdie tosses the thing in the air. It's a single mandarin orange segment, straight from the tin. You're a dog, no, a seal, a trained dolphin leaping up, snapping your jaw, swallowing the slippery minnow whole. Orange syrup dribbles down your chin. You smack your lips in citrus triumph.

Birdie claps and laughs, claps and laughs. “Bravo, elska! Bravo!” Elska
means love in Icelandic. Like honey or dear. Birdie always calls you elskan. Then tosses you another mandarin fish.

Gimli is Icelandic for heaven. Except this Gimli isn't in heaven or even Iceland, but on Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Birdie lives in Gimli with your amma Sigga. Amma means grandmother, afi means grandfather. Your afi was a hundred and one years old when you were born except he was already dead. Some words are Icelandic and some are English. Mama is the same in both. Your mama and Birdie share a mother so they're sisters. You don't have a sister or a brother or a father you remember.

Every year from your eighth on, you and your mother take the train from Windsor, Connecticut, to Grand Central to Winnipeg to spend the summer on the lake at Gimli. With Your People. In an old white farmhouse with song-yellow trim and book-lined walls. The house is called Oddi—in Iceland even houses have names, and some in Gimli do too—after a place where famous writers lived, like Saemundur the Learned, a wizard who rode the back of the devil disguised as a seal. And Snorri Sturluson, esteemed historian and scribe, was raised at Oddi too. He's one of your ancestors.

Birdie says writers run in the family, all the way back to Iceland, to the greatest Viking poet, Egil Skallagrimsson. You descend from him.

And your grandfather's uncle, the famous farmer-poet Pall.
And of course your grandfather Olafur.

"And you?"

"And me," Birdie admits.

Me too? you want to ask but don't. The ancestor-poets race through your mind in a line, crossing frozen ocean, one after the other, words flying off their heels in a spray of ice, skating all the way back to Iceland, Egil and Snorri and Pall, your grandfather Olafur, who died before you were born, your Auntie Birdie.

"Why not Mama too?"

"It's something you're born with. Your mother can sing and play the piano, embroider and knit, a very talented woman in her way. But she's no poet."

"Does she want to be?"

"Hardly."

You can't imagine not wanting it. Words live inside you, rearranging
themselves in your mind like building blocks. A shy fly. A pig’s wig. This before you can spell or even write. When words are pure sound. Plants at a dance. A lonely lonely. Strings of words to make your mother laugh. But it is Birdie who says, You have an ear. A tongue.

Doesn’t everyone?

If it’s hot at night and the mosquitoes keep buzzing you awake you can knock on Birdie’s door and sometimes she’ll let you in and you can lie in your white cotton nightie on Birdie’s four-poster bed watching her fingers dance along the typewriter keys like your mother playing piano. Except it’s a different kind of music, typing. Like a rainstorm. Or hail. Birdie’s been working on the same poem forever. One poem, years long.

“What’s it called?”

“It changes. At the moment I’m calling it Word Meadow.”

You smother a giggle with your hand. Birdie could get mad if you laugh but she doesn’t. “Word-meadow is a kenning for tongue,” she explains. “And I suppose now you’ll want to know what a kenning is.” She sits beside you on the bed and rubs your head like a pup’s. “A kenning is a different name for a thing. Instead of calling the sun the sun, you can call it a day-star.”

“Why not use its real name?”

“It’s boring, that’s why! The old poets were never content with just one or two words for a thing. Masters of periphrastic trickery, magicians of poetic circumlocution, tossing kennings right and left.” Birdie’s speeding up, the pupils of her eyes widening black saucers, shiny as record vinyl. You’re older now, nearly eleven, but even if you live to be a hundred you’d never keep up with Birdie, not when she’s revving buzzing humming words.

“Kennings were a way for poets to show off, verbal razzmatazz of the Vikings. A fierce warrior-poet like our infamous forebear Egil Skallagrimsson could choose from over a hundred kennings for the word sword alone!” Birdie shakes her curled head in wonderment. “A marvel, how those Vikings loved their swords. Problem is, a thousand years later the poems don’t make sense, because most of the kennings reference Norse mythology, and who remembers the old myths anymore? A common kenning for poetry was Odin’s mead, but if you don’t know the story of how Odin tricked the giants out of their mead so he could imbibe the gift of verse, you’d be utterly lost anytime a
poem made reference to the All-Father’s malt-surf, or the raven-god’s holy drink. That’s why our ancestor Snorri Sturluson wrote down all the Norse myths in the twelfth century, so that Iceland’s new Christian poets would understand what the kennings meant. Without Snorri, those myths would be lost to us for eternity.”

Birdie pauses for the barest fraction of a second. She is pacing now, back and forth in front of the window in nothing but her pink teddy. It doesn’t matter, there is no one to peer in and see her. At two a.m. all Gimli sleeps save you and Birdie. Her words swirl your mind, a vast Milky Way of glittery word-stars, most of it far beyond your grasp, but you’re used to that, to being drawn into word-spells that riff like the jazz music she plays on the phonograph late at night. But sped up, 78 rpm, talking faster than the speed of light. Getting talky your mother calls it. Birdie’s getting talky. Sometimes Birdie gets so talky she stops making sense. That’s when your mother says Birdie’s going over. Over what? But not tonight. You hear logic in Birdie’s voice, even if you can’t follow it.

“Today no one but a scholar can wade those kenning-thick verses,” Birdie continues, curlers bouncing off her shoulders. “Kennings wrapped within kennings. And translators beware—as your afi Olafur well understood it’s nearly impossible to translate skaldic verse into English. Please, promise me, baby”—she comes and sits on the edge of the bed, turns on you her vast mental enthusiasm—”promise me you’ll never read those poems in translation. Some of the greatest pagan verses, the most magnificent poetry ever written, reduced to drivel!” She looks as if she is about to weep.

You nod, happy to promise her this, or anything. “What’s a scholar?”
“Someone who studies things.”
A school-er. “Are you a scholar?”
“No?” Birdie snorts. “I’m no scholar, baby. I’m a pretender. A dabbler, a dilettante, heir to the air, a quack of the worst kind, a—”
“Tell me one of the ones for sword.”
“One of the what?”
“The kennings. For sword. You said there were a hundred.”
“Let’s see. There’s striker. And lying-striker. And life-quencher. And wind-bright. And some really gory ones, you wouldn’t want to hear those.”
You would.
“No they’re not!”
“Don’t tell your mother.”
“I won’t.”
“And word-meadow,” you add. “That’s the other one for tongue. Like the name of your poem. Is it a meadow because words sprout on your tongue like flowers?”
“On a good day,” Birdie says. “On the good days they do.”

A bad day: your mother sends you upstairs to knock on Birdie’s door because it’s past noon and Birdie isn’t out of bed yet.
“Go away!” Her voice is scratchy, thick.
You bite your lip. “But the day-star came out from behind the clouds. Mama says you’ll take me to the beach.”
A hard silence.
“I want you to.”
More silence.
“Please?”
“You know what you are?” The voice has changed now. It’s low, a spider creeping over gravel. “Do you know what you are?”
You hold your breath on the other side of the door.
“You’re a pest. No wonder I can’t get any work done.”
“But you’re not even working!” You haven’t heard a single drop of raining-type for days.
“How do you know what I’m doing, you little sneak? You think I don’t know how you lie with your ear to the wall every night? Mama’s little spy, her tattler. So go tell your mother this”—she is speaking slowly now, mean-slow—“Leave. Me. The hell. Alone.”
You try not to cry on the way down the stairs. You can’t tell your mother what Birdie said to say or it’ll start a wild fight. And besides, Birdie doesn’t
mean it. That’s what she says afterward. After a week of living in her nightgown, hair lank and snarled, voice rusty and eyes dull. All the beauty saps out of her and the faults of her face rise to the surface. Her eyes drift too close together, her mouth slackens, her plump cheeks sink into saddlebags. She stares at the floor, the wall, nothing. And then one day she emerges from her room again, blond hair curled and shining, mood sunnier than sun.

“Come here, elskan, and kiss your rotten aunt.” Her cheeks high and apple-bright. “You know I don’t mean it, baby, when I say mean things. You know that, don’t you?”

You nod, though you’re never sure. Your mother says Birdie’s moods turn on a dime. Whatever that means. You think of Birdie like lake weather—she shifts fast. You learn to keep alert, read the signs: a dark flash of the eyes, a mean twitch of her lip. You learn when to take cover, when it’s safe to emerge into Birdie’s light again.

But this is farce. A masquerade of pronouns. You were not that girl. That girl was me.

And Birdie? Meet your mother. My aunt. Our mothers were sisters. The difference being, my mother got to raise me and your mother had to give you away. Get it?

Sorry. I was hoping that if I recorded for you my Birdie-memories I could make you me. I’d become a cousin in the shape of an umbilical cord, reattaching you to a mother you’ve never known. But I knew Birdie only as an aunt. An aunt is not a mother. Though Birdie doted on me with a ferocity I suspect was surrogate for you.


Our mothers have passed.

Trying to be gentle here, genteel even. But what’s the point? Birdie’s manner of death precludes gentle mention: your mother committed suicide.
On my fourteenth birthday, no less. The gift that keeps on giving. My own mother went next, linked like dominoes those sister-deaths, despite seven years wedged between. Aneurysm was the official cause of my mother’s death; I call it giving up.

Your father? I have no idea. Then again, I have little idea of my own, either. He died before I formed a single memory of him.

It’s a lot of death, I know. Believe me, I know. But we’ll try not to focus on that. The point here is resurrection, wordly reanimation. Infuse the dead with words and they’ll spring to life on the page, just for you.

And your name is?

Sorry, can’t hear you!

Feeble, I agree. But you see the problem, don’t you? I’m writing a letter addressee unknown. So let’s do like the skalds; when a name can’t be spoken a kenning will do. Take your pick: Nameless Child, Lost One, Birdie’s Secret, Ingibjorg’s Loss, the Unknown Cousin . . .

Plain Cousin, you say?

Cousin it is.

And who am I? you’d like to know. Freya Ingibjorg Morris, a.k.a. Frey, the only child of your aunt Anna Petursson and your uncle, an American accountant named Ed Morris. Prepare for my measly particulars. Despite (to spite?) Birdie’s best efforts, I have not joined the long line of family poets skating back to Iceland. You have an ear. A tongue. So Birdie gaveth and so Birdie tooketh away. I’ve turned my back on words, consort with images instead. Give up? I’m a darkroom hack, a black-and-white printer of archival photographs, ungainfully employed at Klaus Steinman’s Photographic Ltd., near the Hudson River piers. Not that I see much river view—the lab is two floors down, sub-basement. My fellow printer, Frank, calls it the Sub because it reminds him of the three months he spent on a submarine during a brief stint in the navy. To me it seems more like a mid-Manhattan Hades, dark and dank, the sound of water running, sloshing, dripping constantly. To enter my darkroom each morning I pass through a revolving door called a light trap.

No, it’s not the life my mother envisioned for me, hands immersed in harsh chemicals, daylight spent in blackness. Well, if Mama wanted a different life for me, she should have hung around! It was after she died that
I dropped out of college and began spending most of my time underground. At twenty-one I was too old to call myself an orphan but I certainly felt like one. Lose your balance for a moment and there you go, the world flings you off its spinning surface and it's not so easy to scramble back on.

Time gets reduced by a darkroom. It's not only the lack of daylight, it's the way time itself is constantly slivered: ten seconds here, three minutes there...eight years. Eight years. And still I made no move toward the earth's humming surface. And so life—which as we all know stands still for no one—made a move toward me.

Last month an invitation arrived for my grandmother Sigga's one hundredth birthday celebration. Our grandmother, I should say. Having outlived her husband and both daughters, she resides at Betel, a retirement home in Gimli on the shore of Lake Winnipeg. I did not intend to attend. I hadn't returned to Gimli since Birdie's suicide. Sixteen years Gimli-gone and Gimli-free. Sixteen years without visiting my own grandmother. Each the other's only living relative. (The unknown you withstanding.) How could I do such a thing? You'll understand later. Maybe. The point is that I succumbed to pressure from Uncle Stefan (no relation to either of us). I flew to Canada, I attended Sigga's birthday party in Gimli. And that's when I learned about you.

You think someone told me straight out? Ha! I pieced you together from scraps. A dream Sigga had about an eagle-swiped lamb. Fragments of conversation floating out the window of the old folks' home in Gimli. I began investigating. At first no one admitted your existence. I searched for evidence, found none. I hung around Gimli sniffing up false trees and hounding everyone who would speak to me and some who wouldn't. It was a most unlikely somebody who told me, finally, skimpily—if only to get me out of town—Yes, Birdie had a child. Taken at birth. Given up for adoption: closed, blind, and secret.

According to my source, you were born in 1962. That makes you three years older than me. I don't know if you are a boy or a girl. Or rather, a man or a woman. You're thirty-three years old, whatever and wherever you are.

Why didn't my own mother adopt you? She and my father were childless at the time. It's not uncommon for aunts and uncles to adopt a niece or
nephew when circumstances warrant. We could have been siblings, you and I.

It's a good question, but I doubt we'll ever learn the answer: everyone involved in making that decision is either dead or senile. My theory is that Birdie wouldn't have stood for it. Your mother did not approve of mine. Then again, Birdie may not have had any choice in the matter. The hospital where you were born was no maternity ward but an insane asylum. Birdie was resident there throughout the pregnancy and birth.

Whatever the reason, you were given away to a good home. That's all I've been told. And suddenly and more than anything else in my life I want to find you. You raison d'etre, you! In the month since I've returned from visiting Sigga in Gimli I've been busy busy busy. First, I hired a private detective in Winnipeg to look into the matter of your adoption. A limited search to match my limited funds. We'll see what if anything he unearths for the fee.

And I've been writing to you, evenings when I get home from the Sub. I can't seem to stop. It's all I can do for you, Cousin, until I locate you. Just write.