



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

Chasing your Tale

On Working Title and the Creative Journey

B.A. Essay

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University of Iceland
School of Humanities
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Abstract

This thesis is an English creative writing thesis and is divided into two parts. The first part is a novella called *Working Title* about a young English woman named Emily Davies. Emily, known to her friends simply as Em, is going to Iceland for the first time in her life. She suffers from an irrational fear of flying and the only thing she has for comfort on the plane is a book. However, it is a book she does not understand, it is worn and tattered and she has had it in her keeping for years without being able to read it as it is written in a foreign language. The purpose of her trip is to return the mysterious book to its owner. Yet she is not entirely alone, there are other people on the plane. Through a fellow passenger's bottomless curiosity we learn where Em comes from, discover her past, realise what may be waiting for her in Iceland and wonder why the book carries so much significance in her life.

The second part is an exposition of the story and its writing process. It discusses the development of the idea from beginning to end, the progress of the characters' creation as well as any research that was carried out in connection with the story, its characters and setting. Finally it takes a look at themes appearing in the story and the lessons learned throughout the creative process. Each topic is supported by ideas and examples from published writers and writing instructors as well as literary, cultural and anthropological texts discussing how each one influenced the writer and the story. In short, the exposition describes the wild "tail"-chase that is creative writing.

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I. *Working Title: A Novella*

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen and welcome on this flight from London to Keflavík, Iceland.”

I was pulled back into reality by the pilot’s voice on the announcement system. The faint picture of my happy place disappeared into the shadows of my mind and I was again painfully aware of the metal tube that I was sitting inside, flying through the air.

“My name is Guðleifur Ásgrímsson and I will be your pilot today.”

I tried to ignore his continuing speech while wishing I would never have to pronounce his name. My palms started sweating again as he listed cruising speed and altitude. So fast, so high. I closed my eyes hoping I’d find my wonderland there waiting for me. It wasn’t there this time, the dark and the faint musky smell of perfume coming from the person next to me just made me feel more claustrophobic. I opened my eyes again.

“In about ten minutes we will be flying over the Scottish Isles and we might be able to catch a glimpse of them in between the clouds on the right hand side.”

In my mind I thanked God for placing me on the left hand side so that no one would expect me to lift the plastic that was covering my window. Then I felt silly, surely if God existed he had nothing to do with airplane seating. Obviously he had nothing to do with the screening program either. They were showing some comedy lead by Charlie Sheen. I had been given to understand that most airplanes now had small screens on the back of every seat where you could choose what you wanted to do or watch. This one only had those little screens in the ceiling. In spite of my sensitive nerves and the fact that this was an Icelandic airline, I felt slightly annoyed that they weren’t showing British material.

For the third time I closed my eyes.

*“Did you know that *stressed* spelled backwards is *desserts*?”*

I took a deep breath and chose to ignore the person sitting next to me. I had to find that happy place again. It had trees, lots of trees.

“I’m just asking because you look a little nervous.”

This time I looked up into the round face and curious blue eyes of my fellow passenger.

“You don’t like flying?”

I stared at the woman for a second or two and wondered if she was really a woman, she looked a bit as if she used to be a man. Her jaw was very manly I thought, but then again that didn’t really mean anything.

I shook my head in denial. Looking away I reached into my bag that was stowed under the seat in front of me, and pulled out a paperback. I knew I was quite tall for a woman, but my aching feet and lack of space made it all the more tangible. The mild claustrophobia didn't help. I felt a little calmer with the book in my hands, the once slick cover felt a little raw at the spine and it was torn here and there but there were still some smooth bits in between. It wasn't very big but my feet could feel the difference, my bag, standing between them took up a little less space now.

"Me, I love flying, I have to really. If I didn't I couldn't really do my job. A lot of travelling you see." She seemed in no way to be discouraged by my disregard.

I continued with my quest for calm and opened the book in the middle and tried to focus on the words.

"Hey, what's that you're reading? The cover looks interesting but what language is that? Is that Icelandic? Oh. Perhaps you don't speak English."

I kept focusing on the book.

"Wow, that's embarrassing. I'm sorry."

Finally I had peace again, or as much peace as you can get on a small plane when you are this tall. Somewhere in the back a child started crying. The words in the book I was holding in front of me had no meaning at all, not to me at least. I started a short Icelandic class once but only showed up for the first two lessons or so. Still, I took that book wherever I went even if I didn't have a clue as to what it was about.

I scanned the pages slowly, imagining what the words would sound like, picturing the teacher pronouncing them. She was very attractive, I remembered that clearly, not a blonde though, even though she was Icelandic. She said that was a bit of a cliché, Icelanders being all blonde and blue-eyed. Sure there were some, but not all of them, not even close. I knew some of the words, the very simple ones. Some I tried to guess the meaning of but there was not a single sentence I could understand in its entirety.

"It's funny, I really thought Icelanders were all very good at English, or at least the younger ones. You don't look a day older than twenty-five. I don't think I've ever met an Icelandic that didn't speak English. I say, you do look quite stiff and uncomfortable, are you alright?"

I put the book down on my lap. She obviously wasn't going to stop talking even though I didn't answer. I took a deep breath, slowly, before answering.

“No, I had not realized that stressed is desserts spelled backwards, yes, I am a little nervous about flying. I look uncomfortable because I am: These seats are not the most spacious. And yes, this is Icelandic, but I’m not... and I happen to be twenty-eight years old.”

She just stared at me for a while, as if she was trying to figure me out but not quite succeeding. Maybe she was wondering if my hair was naturally red, or if I had trouble getting clothing in a suitable length. In fact I did sometimes have trouble, the sleeves of the jumper I was wearing were just an inch shorter than my liking. Perhaps she just found me rude. Usually that would have bothered me but I didn’t care, I just wanted the flight to be over. I wanted to be standing with my feet on solid ground, free to move around and scratch hard-to-reach places. She didn’t seem insulted though, she actually just looked rather impressed.

“What’s the book about?”

I noticed there was a different show starting on the screens.

“Where did you learn Icelandic?”

It was another American show. I felt disappointed.

“Have you ever lived there?”

I focused back on her as she was still coming up with more questions.

“It’s a beautiful country don’t you think?”

I thought I should better answer her before she could come up with more.

“Erm... I don’t know. And I haven’t.”

She stayed quiet for a moment while matching my answers to her questions.

“So you’ve not been to Iceland before? What made you decide to go there?”

I could no longer hear the child crying in the back. I found myself wishing I was an infant. Then I could scream as loud as I pleased when I felt like it, and I sure felt like it. No one really minds about your manners when you’re a child.

“No I haven’t”

Silence.

“Business or pleasure?”

One of the flight attendants walked past at that moment and I politely asked her for a pillow without answering the woman’s question. She looked at me, waiting patiently for my reply.

“Do you always ask so many questions?” I finally asked her.

She laughed.

“Oh yes. You’ll have to forgive me. They say I’m borderline autistic. Asperger syndrome or something like that. My mother always said it was all nonsense, that I’m just

naturally honest, curious and talkative. I think they both had a point, she and the doctors and teachers. Some people can't stand it, but I can't help it. The words simply have to come out. I'm not sure what happens if I don't let them out, but I'm not interested in finding out either."

It wasn't hard to believe that she had a genuine fear of not speaking her mind I thought to myself as she went on.

"I read this book when I was a child about a man who had so many thoughts in his head and it kept growing and growing with each new thought and he never told anyone about them until his head was so big he couldn't get out of his house. It really scared me. It didn't look anything like your book though; it wasn't a little paperback like that. It was this big hardback with colourful pictures and a large font. It is a funny looking title on that book of yours, *titi*... Oh, I know they pronounce that double l funny. And there's that funny letter, the i with the apostrophe above it. Where did you get that book? It looks as if it's been read quite a lot."

I looked back down at the book in my lap and my left hand that was still holding it. She was right: it looked old, weathered and worn. The edges were no longer sharp or the corners pointy, they were bent and torn and the spine was broken. It didn't look like it belonged in my hand. The contrast was quite interesting. I wondered why I hadn't noticed it before. My hands with the soft skin, the neatly polished, well-kept nails, hands that looked like they had never known hard labour, or labour at all, and this book that looked like it had survived a tornado. The only link between them was that one nail on the pinkie of my right hand, the one I had bitten all the way down to the core but still bore evidence of the recent manicure.

The stewardess returned with my pillow and I thanked her, absent-mindedly. I continued staring at the book in my hand and I knew, even though I couldn't really see it anymore, that the woman next to me was still looking at me, waiting for an answer.

"It... it was left at my flat." I told her.

I placed the pillow on my shoulder and rested my head up against the cold inner side of the plane, grateful that I had the window-seat, and closed my eyes to indicate that the conversation was over. I could still feel her eyes on me a little longer, the un-answered questions burning in her mind, but I was exhausted. I tilted the seat back and crossed my arms on my chest, hugging the book. Its familiar smell of old paper and coffee calmed me down, the stress of the flight seemed to wash off me and soon I was asleep.

* * *

I woke up that day about six years ago to the sound of the front door closing. At least that's what I thought it was. It could as well have been my imagination, a dream. Most likely it was my flatmate, Annie, going out. I looked drowsily at my alarm clock on the bedside table. 6:50. It was odd, she wasn't the type to get up early. Not ever. She just didn't function that way. She was energetic enough the rest of the day, mornings just simply did not exist to her. She did try to discover them though. The first week of our living together that alarm of hers just went on and on and on. One day I had enough, went into her room and broke it. I literally picked it up and threw it at the wall so it smashed. She didn't wake up. I left it on the sofa table, wrecked, with a little note beside it: *Good afternoon Annie, Ed stopped by at lunchtime with some Chinese food. There are leftovers in the fridge for you. P.S. Your alarm's broken.* Ed lived across the hall from us. After that we took turns for a while in attempting to wake her up in the morning. Buying a new alarm clock seemed pointless. We rarely succeeded. In the end we gave up. Even though she never woke up before noon she seemed to do just fine in her studies.

I couldn't think why she'd be up and about so early, and on a Saturday too. It couldn't have been Ed either. He went to Glasgow for the weekend with the other Korean exchange students. They of course didn't call him Ed, they used his actual name, the one we couldn't remember or pronounce properly and therefore resorted to "Ed".

I felt way too tired to get out of bed, but the curiosity kept me from falling asleep again. I had to check. I put on my long sweater that was lying on the chair next to my bed. It was long enough so that I didn't have to put anything else on. I tiptoed on the cold floor out of the bedroom and then I remembered that tiptoeing around Annie was pointless. If she was asleep you could walk around with a jackhammer without disturbing her, if she was awake, well, what was the point?

The kitchen was empty, the dirty dishes I had left in the sink the night before were gone. It was spotless too, no plates, cups or packs of biscuits lying around like usual, just the faint aroma of the lemon dishwashing liquid. The living-room was just as deserted. I wasn't expecting anyone in there but something about it was giving me an uncomfortable feeling.

My schoolbooks looked as if they hadn't been moved or opened in weeks, rightfully. Ed's embroidered pillows were fluffed and arranged neatly on the sofa. His grandmother had sent them to him thinking it would help him feel closer to home. He refused to have them in his own apartment, said they didn't belong in a bachelor pad. He did however come over surprisingly often to fluff, hug and smell them. They had an odd spicy smell. Some of his things that he would leave lying around every time he came over were there too. Books on

chemistry, fancy fountain pens and his coffee cup were there on the sofa table. Finally I discovered what had been giving me unease. There was no sign of Annie. Of course I already saw that she wasn't there herself. But now I could tell that all her things were gone too: The pure-wool blanket that was always waiting for her on the right arm of the sofa, the glass horse statue, the bunny slippers she only wore while watching television and most of all, her purple guitar.

At this point the goose bumps had taken over my body. Her coat was gone from the peg by the door and none of her shoes were there either. Her coffee cup was nowhere to be found. She always refused to drink tea. I looked everywhere. The cupboard, the sink, the fridge, I even checked the trash to see if she had broken it like the two identical ones that came before it. It was empty. If she had broken it she had removed all evidence by taking out the trash. The door to her bedroom stood ajar, revealing a part of an empty white wall. There used to be a poster there, Pink Floyd, *The Wall*. We used to make lame jokes about it: *you've got The Wall on your wall* and other such poor attempts at humour. It was gone. I pushed the door open slowly and stopped dead in the doorway.

Empty. Everything Annie was gone, as if she had never been there. All that was left was the empty bed and desk that came with the room. Not minding that all I was wearing was a sweater I ran outside, down the hall, down two flights of stairs and out into the street. It was quiet. No sign of life anywhere. The world was asleep and I was alone. I ran back inside, got my phone and dialled her number. I waited.

"The number you are calling has been disconnected."

The next minutes went by in a blur. I went berserk: emptied every closet, every cupboard and every drawer I could find, looking for some kind of evidence of her. I even pulled the cushions off the sofa, revealing nothing but a disturbing amount of sand, candy wrappers and pulverized potato chips. Eventually I lay down on the floor, utterly exhausted. And then I saw it, that little paperback that she always carried around everywhere she went. It was lying on the floor under the couch. I couldn't imagine how she could have left it, I was pretty sure she even slept with it under her pillow. Yet there it was, deserted, left alone, like me. My very best friend and only soul mate had gone without a word, and all I had to my comfort was a little worn out book.

* * *

“Hey, pssst, sorry”

Someone was poking me softly on the shoulder as I came slowly out of my slumber.

“Really sorry, I just thought you might be hungry, the stewardess is just coming with her little trolley.”

It took me a while to realise where I was. How amazing that I actually managed to fall asleep.

“It’s ever so much better to land in Iceland with some food in your tummy, that way your first minutes there won’t be spent on just trying to find food and you can take it all in better.”

“Thanks.” For the first time in that flight I felt grateful for my talkative travel companion. I did feel hungry. Tired and hungry. I loosened the grip of the book that I had been clutching in my arms while sleeping.

“I had some great sushi last time I flew with them. There’s a menu there in the pocket in front of you. It’s not exactly a cheap selection but most of this is quite good. At least I’ve always been satisfied in the past.”

She chattered on about some article she read some years back while on a plane from London to Iceland. Without putting the book away, I took out the menu. She was right. It wasn’t cheap.

“Can I get you something?” The stewardess smiled politely at me. It was a well rehearsed smile, but it did not reach her eyes. They reminded me of Annie’s green eyes. I remembered how they used to sparkle when she laughed. My companion had stopped talking. I wasn’t sure if she had finished her story or if she just paused while the stewardess was passing by.

“Yes thank you, I’d like a croissant and a glass of water please.”

The automatic smile did not move while she handed me my order and took the payment. At least the water was free. It was delicious too, not a quality I usually connected with water, but it was true. I kept holding the book close to my body with my left hand while I ate. My companion stayed quiet while she ate her sushi but she would send me some curious glances between mouthfuls.

The silence lasted for about two minutes after she had finished her meal. I was just staring at the back of the seat in front of me. Part of me wanted to take a look out the window. Another part of me told me that if I did that I might regret it. How exactly I wasn’t sure. That’s the thing about irrational fears. They’re not rational.

“May I ask you a question?”

I almost burst out laughing. She hadn't been very hesitant about asking them before.

"Yeah, sure. I guess a few more won't hurt." I thought maybe her chattering and interrogating would take my mind of the whole flying through the air in a metal cylinder thing. She couldn't help being peculiar, but her being peculiar seemed to be helping.

"What's your name?"

The book slid from my hand and down to my lap as I turned to look at her. I somehow hadn't expected such an obvious and simple question.

"It's Davies, Emily Davies, but everyone calls me Em." And then I added "What's yours?" and felt to my surprise that I honestly wanted to know.

"Marion Husher. Pleased to meet you."

I shook her outstretched hand awkwardly. Airplanes were not designed for shaking hands, there simply wasn't enough room. At least not for people of my length, especially in economy class.

"Some people call me Hush as a joke because I chatter so much. I'm always like that you know. My mother started using that nickname for me almost as soon as I started talking. She used to say that I'd been born to fit my last name. Words have power you know, even though we don't always mean them to. And yet not saying them can be incredibly powerful too. It's all terribly interesting."

I picked the book up again. I liked to just hold it. Marion's curiosity at that point seemed to be completely focused on it.

"May I?"

I hesitated. I didn't like putting the book in the hands of strangers, even if they had funny names and a cheerful, distracting manner. But I tried to be nonchalant and casually handed it to her. She seemed to be holding back a sea of questions that were no doubt eating her from the inside. I wondered how long it would hold.

"If you can't read it, why do you have it with you?"

I knew that question would come, and yet I wasn't ready to answer it. So I stayed quiet for a while. How could I explain to a stranger that I had held on to a book for years that wasn't mine and I could not even understand? And not only that, but also took it with me wherever I went.

"I'm returning it." I finally answered.

"Oh, are you indeed. It says 'Annie' on the title page, that doesn't sound Icelandic. Is that the owner?"

"Yes." I put my hand out in front of her. "Can I have it back now please?"

She seemed surprised, but I couldn't help myself. It was like handing a piece of my soul into a stranger's hands, except it wasn't my soul, it felt more like it was a thousand year old vase and if it would break, my life would lose meaning, the value taken out of it. I clutched it back to my chest.

"I'm sorry, I'm overly protective of it I know. But I just don't think I could handle losing it a second time."

* * *

It was a sunny day, perfect for sitting outside a café, under a parasol and having ice-cream or tea. There was a faint aroma of flowers, coffee and hot asphalt in the air. It was nice and cool where I sat in the shade but the glare of the sun as it tried to reach my nose and my toes, resulted in me not noticing Ed approach.

"Em, how long are you going to carry that book around?"

He was now standing next to my table and had yet again caught me with the book.

"As long as I have to. She's going to want it back. I know she will be back for it"

"Em..."

I didn't like the look in Ed's eyes. There was pity in them.

"You going to have some coffee?" I put the book in my bag and closed it, leaving the book and the topic in darkness. This wasn't up for discussion. I wouldn't stop. Not until I'd handed it to her myself.

"Em really, you must..."

"How's the packing coming along? Need any help?" I asked him.

Ed sat down with me in the shade and sighed, but seemed to accept the change of subject for now.

"It's going all right. I'd really like to find some other place soon. It's uncomfortable packing and not knowing when you'll be able to unpack."

I put my bag on the ground next to the chair and picked up the menu.

"Have you told your parents yet?" I asked.

"Told them what? That I'm not going back home? That I have a Master's degree in chemistry but am going to work at a beauty salon while writing poetry in my free time and hanging out at queer places as my true flamboyant self? Not really, no. Somehow I don't think they're ready to hear it just yet."

“Good afternoon, can I take your order?” The waiter was young and good looking, probably no more than nineteen years old. Ed seemed quite pleased with the service already.

“Yes please, I’d like a salad and an iced-tea. If you could throw some strawberries in my salad that would be fantastic. Em? What are you going to have?”

“Just an Earl Grey for me thank you.”

The waiter took our menus and walked off with Ed’s eyes following him. As he disappeared inside the café those eyes focused back on me and the worried look returned.

“Have you had anything to eat today? You really don’t look well you know.”

“I’m fine, it’s just the heat, makes me tired. I hope for your sake that when you *do* move it won’t be this hot outside. It’s just horrible to have to carry a lot of heavy boxes in this heat.”

Ed’s look softened a bit. “Yeah, it’s certainly a scorcher.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “You know Ed, sometimes you just sound too British.”

He smiled. “I try.”

I kept laughing. I couldn’t help it. He bundled up his napkin and threw it in my face. As I caught it I glimpsed someone snatch my bag off the ground and run off with it.

“HEY!” I jumped up and ran after him. “Give that back!”

I could hear Ed shouting something behind me but I didn’t bother to look back and see if he was following. I had to get it back. I was soon too out of breath to shout. I kept running long after I had lost sight of the thief, just kept running because I didn’t know what else to do. I ran until I tripped and fell.

When I woke up I was at the hospital. They told me I had hit my head on the curb and been knocked out. I had a cut on my head that needed four stitches, a bad concussion and on top of that I had over-exerted myself. I didn’t care. The book was gone. I felt as if Annie had left all over again and the pain in my head and body was nothing compared to the pain in my heart.

* * *

“Well that book obviously means a lot to you. I had this leather wallet once. It used to belong to my mom. People would tell me all the time that I needed to get a new one because it was practically falling apart, but I just couldn’t let go. It did fall apart in the end. After that I decided to just have a picture of her in my wallet instead. Look, here she is. I still have her

wallet in a drawer at home, or what's left of it. Just can't throw it away even if I don't carry it around anymore. Is this Annie person a friend of yours? How did you lose it?"

The picture she showed me was an old black and white photograph. They looked almost identical, Marion and her mother. I could only imagine the flood of stories that would follow if I mentioned it.

"My bag was stolen with the book in it a couple of years ago." I told her.

She gasped.

"It was stolen! Is that why it's so worn and tattered? How did you get it back? I mean, it's a book, it's almost impossible, did they catch the thief?"

"No they never got him. Not that I know of. I at least never saw him again."

"Well then how did you get it back?" Her eyes were wide open in amazement.

"It sort of... came back on its own."

This seemed to go beyond exciting to her and her jaw dropped down in awe.

"Well how one ear..."

She was interrupted mid-sentence as the plane took a small dive. There were cries and gasps all around us and I could hear a woman start praying behind me. I grabbed the armrests of my seat so hard that my hands hurt. All the blood had left my head, my ears got stopped up and I broke out in cold sweat.

"This is your pilot speaking. We apologize for the sudden turbulence and assure you that there is no cause for concern. There was a slight glitch in the autopilot but it has been corrected. You have two highly trained and experienced pilots here at the wheel and should feel completely safe. We will do our best to keep the ride as smooth as possible but slight turbulence may be expected, so for added safety we recommend you stay in your seat and keep the seatbelt on. If you are in need of any assistance or would like some further information the cabin crew is at your service."

My stomach was now a fossil. I had a knot there before but I was positive it had turned into a rock. A heavy rock. I wondered if they would find it with a piece of croissant preserved inside at the bottom of the ocean or forced into the ground long after the plane had crashed. And I had been doing so well with keeping calm. Suddenly one of the stewardesses came on the announcement system.

"We will now go another round in the cabin with some free water and soda. While you wait we would like to point out the magazine in the pocket in front of you, featuring an article on the Gay Pride parade that will be held later today in downtown Reykjavik. Thank you."

“What did she just say?” The fossil softened as I tried to process what the woman had just said. I couldn’t imagine someone on British Airlines making such an announcement. I was pretty certain any of their staff would keep their stiff upper lip and that did not allow for utterances of phrases such as “gay pride”. Sure they might support it, but they would certainly never speak of it! They might be accused of being sentimental. But then again, perhaps my upbringing and my mother’s stiff upper lip were throwing me off track.

“Oh, you didn’t know? That’s why I’m heading over there. It’s such a lovely event, everyone so happy and supportive. It was there where I first fell in love for real... she had the most beautiful, red Suzuki GDX-R750, that’s a motorbike you know. She liked my chattering, wasn’t big on talking herself. Oh but it didn’t last. Yet, one can always dream.”

“No I didn’t.” But how appropriate, I thought.

* * *

“You’re a what?”

I had never seen my mother look so horrified. The face she put on when I told her as a kid that my Dad let me have ice-cream on Wednesdays didn’t even come close. It was almost as if she were a completely different person. I didn’t repeat myself. I knew very well she had heard me the first time. It was clear in her face.

For a while she just sat there, staring at me like someone had dumped an alien into her tidy little sitting room, like she wasn’t looking at her own daughter but an outsider, someone who did not belong in her home, or her heart. I didn’t dare move, just sat with my back straight on her cold leather sofa. Then she got up and turned away from me.

“There are still some dirty dishes in the kitchen. One cannot leave them lying there all day.”

She seemed to be talking to herself as if I wasn’t there anymore. As she was walking out of the living room on her way to the kitchen she paused by the little bookcase. There was a picture of me and her, taken at my graduation. She picked it up observing her own proud face. I always felt I looked more like a startled deer in that picture, surprised that I had actually managed to graduate and even more so that my mother would hug me in public, and in front of a camera too. She was really proud of me that day. There was no pride to be seen now.

“I knew it when I saw that *girl* that she would ruin you.” She wasn’t talking to me, the stranger in her living room. She was talking to her daughter in the picture, the solicitor-to-be.

“You should have just stayed with me instead of moving into that cursed flat.” She put the picture back on the shelf, face down on the wood. Her face was blank now. No smile, no frown, no tears. She disappeared into the kitchen leaving nothing but the rosy scent of her perfume behind her.

I really didn't know what to do. I had imagined she might not take it well, but I had never thought it would be like this, dismissed without as much as a word. I always knew my parents were snobbish, more than could be considered healthy even, but somehow I had always thought they would accept me as their daughter no matter what. And I had even thought that telling my mother would be infinitely easier than telling my dad. I wasn't so sure anymore.

* * *

“Well I do recommend it. It's a wonderful event, considering how small a country Iceland is this weekend is a great experience and the number of people that assemble in the centre of town for this is just...it's magnificent. It almost makes *me* speechless! And by now I bet you can imagine it takes a lot for that.”

Marion laughed. I attempted the same but it came out sounding a little hysterical.

“Oh don't worry about the plane dear. It will be just fine. The training these pilots get these days is so extensive, even if these things run mostly on autopilot now they still have to have hours upon hours of simulator training and such things every year. And they say if you're nervous about things it often helps to talk about something else, distract your mind you know? Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself? Or the book, you could tell me about the book. And I'll try to talk a little less.” She laughed again at her joke.

“Well, what do you want to know? I don't usually talk a lot about myself, I'm British”. I could feel every slight movement of the plane much clearer, was waiting for it to take another dive, the autopilot to break. Then there would be nothing but the pilots to keep us alive. Humans make mistakes all the time, we are flawed. I couldn't get the thought out of my head.

“Oh you could start simple: Do you have any sort of education? Where did you go to school?”

I took a deep breath. It felt odd talking about myself openly to someone I had only known for about two hours, and not even that long. But I also felt that I wanted to share, I wanted to talk about it all. I *needed* to talk about it all.

“Well, I went to Oxford Law and graduated, amazingly. I wasn’t all that interested in law, but it was what everyone expected. My family consists entirely of lawyers. My Dad is a barrister, my granddad and my uncles are solicitors. My mother wanted to be a solicitor too like her father but she got married before she graduated and quit to be a barrister’s wife. I guess that’s why she pushed extra hard for me to go to Oxford Law. She wanted me to finish what she started.” I could feel how Marion and I were changing places, she was still asking the questions but now it was I who did most of the talking.

“Wow, well your family must be very well set then, I mean, considering that you went to such a fancy school and if you need a lawyer you usually have to sell a kidney first. At least that’s how it is in the States.”

“Well we do alright. My Uncle’s company owns a flat on school campus. If any relative wishes to use it while studying law they get to live there for free. If there is none they rent it out cheap to promising law-students. I got it in my second year. That’s when I met Annie, the girl who owns this book. I felt the flat was too big for just me alone so I got a flatmate. She came to Oxford to do a Master’s in anthropology. She was a handful.”

The stewardess had now reached our seats and without asking, gave us both a glass of water. The plastered smile made me uneasy and I quickly looked away before she turned to the other side of the aisle.

“So is that when you got that book? Did she leave it at the apartment? Where did she get it?” Marion’s face was gleaming with interest.

“Yeah she left it there. I still can’t understand why, she told me it was the only thing she had from her father. She had never met him, but she took it *everywhere* she went. Then she just disappeared. No one knew where she had gone and I was no Sherlock Holmes.”

We both looked down at the book for a minute in wonder.

“Well it certainly sounds like she would want it back. But how did you find out where to find her? I’m assuming you know that she is in Iceland now since you are going there to return it.”

“It’s an educated guess. My friend Ed, he lived across the hall from us at Oxford, he sent me a link a few weeks ago to this Icelandic webpage. He had tried to google her name just to see if he’d find anything, and he did. It was the webpage of a small inn in Reykjavík and there was a short feature there with Annie’s name in it. We both knew about her connection with Iceland, what with the book and all. Her dad was Icelandic you see. And you see his name on the book here; it was in that webpage article too. Apparently she took over the management of that inn from him or something.”

By this time Marion was in total awe of my story. It felt quite odd to have someone practically in raptures over my personal life.

“Well you must have been pleased when you got it back, I can’t imagine how happy she will be. And that poor book, it’s been through a lot. How *did* you get it back?”

The pilot distracted us again through the announcement system:

“We are now beginning our descent to Keflavik Airport. Estimated landing time is in approximately thirty minutes. The weather in Keflavik is good and getting better. The wind has lessened over the last few hours and the cloud cover is receding. It should be nice and sunny later today. I thank you for flying with Icelandair and hope you enjoyed the trip.”

To my surprise I didn’t feel as nervous as before. I wasn’t comfortable either, but the conversation was helping so I turned my focus right back to that.

“I wasn’t just happy to get it back. Finding it saved my life.”

I imagine if it hadn’t been for the tight space in the airplane and the seat belt, Marion would have been sitting at the edge of her seat, bouncing with excitement.

“How so?”

“Well, it was right after I came out to my mother. I was having an extremely difficult time and I thought that talking to her about it would help me feel better. Turns out she wasn’t exactly the supportive type.”

I felt relieved that I could speak of it with such ease, only two months later. Marion was sitting with her hand on her chest seeming to express her heartfelt condolences but she didn’t interrupt.

“I wandered around after my conversation with her, not really knowing what to do. I thought about finding some tall building to jump off but it was too messy, I didn’t want to end up as a chalk sketch on the sidewalk. Ended up drifting into the library, I had a book in my bag that was due. Some kind of unfinished business thing, silly really. I guess I didn’t want to be the library book lady any more than the chalk sketch.”

Marion seemed somewhat shocked that I was making jokes about such things, but still she did not interrupt.

“Anyway, they had this table at the entrance with free books: some old ones from the library and some that people just brought from home and left there, for someone else to pick up and keep. I stopped there. It usually didn’t have many interesting ones. I think they cleared it regularly and recycled the ones that no one wanted.”

As I relived that day in my mind my fingers stroked the broken spine of Annie’s book. Funny what great powers something so small can have.

“And there I saw it,” I point at the torn cover of the book, “the corner of a little green paperback sticking out from under a big pile of old medical journals. At first I just stood there and stared. I didn’t believe it could be Annie’s book. Then I just took a deep breath, opened the book and there was her name, in red ink. Sure it was little more weathered then the last time I saw it but it sure was the right one.”

I opened the book and pointed at the red ink on the inside.

“That’s her handwriting. And I think I remember that pen too”

Marion just sat there, speechless, with her hand on her heart.

“I picked up my phone and called Ed right away. Of course he couldn’t understand a word I said, I was hysterical. I had to go over and show him. Luckily I had calmed down before I got there, I’m not sure he would have let me in otherwise. But then with the book back and Ed helping me laugh at myself I got ready to face the world again. A couple of days later I came out to my dad.”

* * *

It was one of those rare suppers with my dad. We didn’t see much of each other after the divorce. Actually we didn’t see much of each other before it either. His job took up most of his time and that was how he liked it. I don’t remember spending much time with him ever. On vacations it was usually just me and mum doing things together while dad worked. He often came with us on trips of course. We would go somewhere away to be a family as my mother used to put it, but he usually just stayed at the hotel and worked and did business over the phone. There wasn’t much bonding time for us back then. It hadn’t changed much. Mum finally gave up and left. I went with her simply because I knew her. I didn’t want to live alone with a stranger. That’s what my dad was to me back then: a stranger, with bushy eyebrows.

But once in a while after the divorce we met up for lunch or supper, just to stay in touch. He talked a bit about work, I talked about school. He asked me about my plans for the future, I asked him if he thought business would stay good and if his secretary still wore a purple pant suit, which he hated, but she was a good secretary, and she loved that pant suit. In between the tired conversation topics we just sat and ate. Quietly. If there ever was a strong silent type, my dad was it. As a barrister his services would have been a lot cheaper if he charged by the syllable, and I would probably not have gone to Oxford.

Sometimes we would have lunch at a fancy restaurant of some kind. But most of the time, like this time, I just came over to his house and his housekeeper made us a nice supper. This time it was roasted chicken with mashed sweet potatoes, boiled vegetables and something that smelled like garlic but looked like something I stepped in earlier that day outside the restaurant I was working at. But I knew better than to ask what it was. Gladys the matronly housekeeper would only have politely and respectfully told me to shut up and eat my food.

My dad lived alone and I believe he had a quiet life when he wasn't working. Yet his house was enormous. Seeing the size of his dinner table a stranger might assume he held bi-weekly dinner parties for a dozen and a half. The size of the dining room itself however made the table look almost normal sized. This created an even larger distance between us. He sat at the head of the table and I down by the middle. If I had sat at the other end not only would we have had to shout our conversations across, they would also probably have echoed off the walls around us. As it was, we could keep a superficial conversation going without having to look each other in the eye or raise our voices above a comfortable volume.

Gladys had the night off, some sort of family business. She didn't like talking about her personal life to us. She had brought the food out on the table and left us on our own. She would do the dishes in the morning she said. I knew that if I was going to tell my dad, I would have to tell him tonight. I had to get it off my chest. But talking to my dad about anything other than the weather forecast, law and the latest scandals of his world, such as which judge or lawyer wore the worst tie of that week, had never been easy.

"Could you pass me the potatoes?"

"Hmm?"

"The potatoes."

"Oh right, here you are dear."

I absentmindedly scooped some more mashed potatoes on top of the previous untouched mound on my plate while listening to the sound of my father chewing his dinner. The basic topics had already been covered, it didn't take long. Dad was quite occupied by his dinner. He had already finished a whole serving and was getting himself some more chicken when his eyes wandered over to my plate.

"You've barely touched your food. Not hungry? I thought you liked chicken."

I languidly rearranged the food on my plate. I did like chicken and it smelled delicious, but the unsaid words were keeping my appetite off.

"Dad, there's something I have to tell you."

He put down his knife and fork and looked at me, and my plate.

“Is everything all right?”

I couldn't look him in the face. The memory of the look on mum's face when I told her still stung. I felt the chicken on my plate might be more understanding. I could feel dad's eyes dig into the side of my head, wondering what it was that was bothering me. Finally I took one deep breath and just said it.

“Dad, I'm a lesbian.”

The chicken still looked the same on my plate. It obviously didn't care. I liked that. I didn't dare look up. I just sat there and waited for him to walk away. To erase me like my mother had done.

“Right. Well, would you like some dessert?”

I could feel my stomach accepting with a deep rumble before my brain had caught up.

“What?”

“Well, you have to eat something, if you don't feel like having some chicken then how about some dessert? I'm sure there's some chocolate ice-cream in the kitchen. I'll go get some.”

I sat frozen in my seat while dad disappeared into the kitchen. He didn't take any photographs down on the way and his face had not expressed any horror or shame. He went to find me some ice-cream. And he returned with the biggest bowl of ice-cream I had ever seen.

“Here you go. Do try and eat something, we can't have you walking around with an empty stomach. It's not healthy.”

It was like he had given me a big, warm, verbal hug. I couldn't utter a word. I just took the bowl and ate the ice-cream, tears running down my face. It was such a relief to find an ally in my own family: the ally I had expected to find in my mother, but hadn't. Such a heavy weight was lifted off my chest. I wouldn't have to hide anymore. My dad went back to his dinner and seemed pleased that I was eating. After a little while he got up and fetched a napkin which he placed next to my plate without a word, and then ever so casually he turned back to his dinner.

“So how's that new job going? Do you like waitressing?”

I had to take a moment to blow my nose and wipe my face before I could answer.

“Oh it's not bad. But I'm going on summer vacation at the end of the month, just bought a plane ticket to Iceland.”

“Oh well that's nice. Are you going to see Annie?”

“What?”

“Yes, I remember her telling me she was half Icelandic that time she came over with you for supper, remember? We had a long conversation about Icelandic last names, apparently Icelanders usually don’t have family names, but she told me her father had one, it was Long wasn’t it? Nice girl, very... energetic. The two of you were very close weren’t you?”

I was amazed. All this time, my dad had known me so well. He had listened and noticed. He knew me, he knew what I needed and more importantly, he understood.

“Yeah. I’m going to return her book.”

* * *

“Welcome to Iceland”

When I heard Marion’s words I realised I had been holding my breath. As I let it out I felt how extremely stiff I was in my seat. I leaned back, closed my eyes and took a few slow breaths, the tension sneaking off bit by bit through each one. I made it.

“See, it’s really not so bad is it? And now we are in Iceland. How wonderful.”

Marion chattered on as we waited to be let off the plane. I tried to listen but my mind was filling up with other thoughts. What if I couldn’t find her? What if she wasn’t there, or didn’t recognize me or even worse: what if she didn’t *want* to recognize me? Of course I had considered all those options before, but now they seemed to somehow weigh more on my mind.

“...Oh and they had this wonderful whole lamb, roasted on a spit over an open fire, oh it was delicious...”

All I had was the address of that guesthouse. What if it wasn’t actually her mentioned on that webpage? What if it was some other Annie Garrot-Long? I realised it was unlikely but there was still a possibility. The internet had plenty of wrong information: I had heard that some people believed Icelanders lived in igloos and I was quite certain a webpage existed somewhere that argued that this was the truth.

“...that was the *best* summer of my life...”

It was finally our turn to get off the plane and Marion and I walked together towards the luggage carousel. I hadn’t been to many airports but I was surprised by how small this one was. Then again Iceland didn’t exactly have a large population so perhaps it was understandable. As we were standing and waiting for our bags I realized that Marion was looking at me as though she was waiting for an answer of some sort. Awkward.

“I’m sorry, my mind was elsewhere. What were you saying?”

“Oh I can tell dear, you looked as if you were trying to do the multiplication table in your head but got stuck on four times seven.” Marion laughed. She didn’t know how close to the truth she was though. I couldn’t multiply to save my life. I laughed awkwardly with her and waited for her to repeat the question.

“I asked if you want a ride into the city. The bus is fine, but I have a rental car and would love some company.”

“Great, I’d love a ride, thanks.”

I would of course also have loved to take the bus and be left alone to my thoughts, but getting a free ride was very convenient for my budget. Plus she didn’t seem to mind much if I talked or not.

While she kept telling me stories about her trips to Iceland, crazy weather and weird foods, we got our bags and found the car-rental agent. I was a little relieved to have Marion along because she seemed to know her way around. I was born without a sense of direction. Small as the airport may have been, I would have managed to get lost without her.

Once we were in the car on our way to the city, Marion paused her own storytelling and turned her focus back to me.

“So how come you don’t like flying?”

I had been waiting for that question.

“It’s a number of things really, I’m very tall and the seats are small, it’s a metal cylinder flying through the air at considerable speed, the logic about what comes up must come down gives me discomfort. Basically to me every airplane is a crash waiting to happen.”

“Wow. Even *I* think that’s a little crazy. Have you always felt that way about flying? When is the last time you were on a plane?”

I thought about it for a while. I didn’t like talking about it. I had long talks as a kid with my shrink about my last plane trip, but perhaps telling a stranger wouldn’t be so bad.

“Well, no. Not really. I never loved them, but I didn’t start hating them until I was twelve.”

“What happened when you were twelve?” She really didn’t lose a beat with the questioning.

“I went on vacation with my parents. We went to the south of France. It was wonderful, we had a good time. Dad even came shopping with me and mum for a bit. I’m still not quite sure what happened or how. When we got on the plane we were a happy family, when we got off it they were getting divorced. Not exactly the best two hours of my childhood.”

I looked out the window. There was mossy lava all around us. It was beautiful.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

Marion went quiet for a while after this, considering my answer, perhaps trying to put herself in my situation. I never got the results from that one. Before long she started with the stories again. Talking about things she liked and disliked. I remember her talking about eating a singed head of lamb and fermented shark, but apart from that the drive into the city was mostly a blur. In my agitated state I was unable to follow her chattering properly. I might have answered her sometimes, but I couldn’t be sure.

Sooner than I had expected we found ourselves nearing the centre of Reykjavík. I took a note out of my pocket and showed Marion the address written on it along with the name of Annie’s guesthouse.

“Oh yeah, I know where that is. Stayed there once, lovely little place. I stay with a friend now. I can drop you off there, no problem. When I stayed there they always had a buffet on Saturdays, I really recommend it. Of course I don’t know if they still have the same cook, it was this young girl then, I believe she was part British. Her looks were clearly Icelandic though, beautiful girls here in Iceland. Everyone was so friendly. Iceland really is a wonderful place. Oh, here we are. I believe it’s that red house, there.”

I felt glued to the car seat. I was sure she was talking about Annie. If I didn’t find her in there the staff would certainly know where to find her. I was so close to my goal that I almost didn’t want it anymore. What if she didn’t recognize me?

“Are you all right dear? You look rather pale. I do hope you find your friend.” Marion opened her purse and pulled out a small card.

“Here, take my card, sorry about the picture and things, it’s from a joke stack my friend made for me. But the number is real and you can call me if you need any help or even if you just need someone to talk to. Oh and do head on over later today and see the parade. It gets bigger and better every year.”

I took her card. *Marion Husher – Travelling Linguist*. A lot of questions came to mind but I decided to save them for later.

“Thank you, I will, and thanks for the ride.” I stepped out of the car and got my bag from the boot. “Take care” we said to each other and then I waved as she drove away.

Before crossing the street and entering the small guesthouse I took a deep breath of incredibly fresh air. It filled my lungs not only with oxygen but with the smell of something new. I could feel that life was already different somehow. This was a good place to be.

Inside I was greeted by the empty reception. On my right there was a cosy dining room and I could hear voices coming from what I assumed was the kitchen. There was a bell on the reception desk and I rang it. The voices in the kitchen became clearer as a neatly dressed man came through the door, grinning. I could hear laughter too. I knew that laughter instantly: it was Annie's laughter.

"Hello, how may I help you?"

I stared at the door that closed behind him, unable to move, unable to speak.

"Miss?" The grin turned into a politely concerned look. I cleared my throat just to see if my voice was still there.

"Yes, erm, I believe I have a room booked for the weekend. Emily Davies."

I couldn't take my eyes off the door.

"Indeed you do miss. Fill this out please." He put a piece of paper and a pen on the desk but I didn't get a chance to look at it.

The door opened again and this time three women walked out, smiling and laughing. She was in the middle. She had changed, I could tell. Her hair was longer and not as dark, her hips were a little wider and her clothes were different. But it was her just the same. My Annie. My heart did not just jump at the sight of her, it somersaulted, the world turned upside down and back again.

"Annie."

Her name slipped of my tongue as a mere whisper and went unnoticed by the women. The receptionist however looked at me with interest. Annie was still talking to her friends. How I had missed that cheerful face. I took a step towards them and tried again.

"Annie?"

This time she moved her head around as if she wasn't sure if she had heard her name, but her attention was caught again right away by the giggling friends. With two more steps I was almost standing next to her. I could see the small upwards curve of the tip of her nose. I remembered how she hated it, but I always found it charming.

"Annie." This time my voice was clear, unhesitant. She stopped mid-sentence in her conversation and turned to look at me.

"Yes?"

For a second she looked confused and didn't seem to recognize me. But then it appeared. I saw it start in her eyes and move to her lips: her wonderful smile. I just knew, no matter what, I would carry the image of that smile with me to the grave.

"Em? Is that you? Oh my God!"

I felt surprised by her genuine joy of seeing me. Not one word since she took off in the middle of the night so long ago. And yet here she was, right in front of me, as real as the gravity that kept me firm on the ground while I felt like flying.

“Wha... what are you doing here? In Iceland!”

Before I knew it she embraced me as if nothing in the world could be more natural. Her hair tickled my nose. I had imagined this reunion many times on my way over and even before I decided to go. But not once had I thought of this scenario. Most of my predictions had involved her not recognizing me or walking away, or worse: me not finding her at all. I felt shy and horribly self-conscious. My voice failed me for a moment as I tried to come up with a logical answer to her question.

“I... You left your book.” I felt like disappearing into the ground. Was that really the best I could come up with? Sometimes I truly loathed myself.

“What?” Annie looked slightly confused. There was another look in her eyes that I couldn’t quite understand.

I pulled the battered book out of my bag and handed it to her awkwardly, not really knowing where to look as I did.

She took it slowly and carefully as if it was a long lost treasure. Her eyes were full of wonder and what I realised was love.

“Emily... did you come here, more than six years after I left without so much as saying goodbye, just to give me back my book?”

I didn’t know what to say, so I answered her the only way I knew how, the way that made me a failure as a solicitor: with the truth.

“Well... yes. I guess... in a way.”

She kept examining the book: the worn edges, the stained cover, the words on the back and some pages inside it.

“Did you read it?” She looked straight into my eyes but I couldn’t tell if she was angry about its deteriorated state.

“Well, no. It’s in Icelandic. I don’t know Icelandic.”

“Right.” The book kept turning in her hands. She looked at random pages and ran her fingers along the edges. Finally my heart slowed down enough for me to open my mouth and ask a question.

“Annie, what is it about?”

Her hands stopped moving. Her friends stood completely still, their curious glances moving between me, Annie, the book and each other. I ignored them and Annie didn’t seem

to notice they were still there. The book was now the centre of our universe. Finally she looked at me, but this time with a poker face.

“It’s about a girl who goes to a fancy university in England and when she falls in love with her sophisticated female flatmate she gets scared and confused and runs off without as much as a goodbye, leaving only one book behind her, hoping that someday her friend will find her and bring it back to her.”

A small plane flew low over the building, filling the otherwise hopeful silence with noise. The poker face stayed intact. I knew my face was showing every possible emotion I was capable of feeling. I hardly dared to ask, but I did anyway.

“Really?”

The poker face was broken by a twinkle in her eye and a teasing smile that spread across her face.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes...no... I’m not sure.”

She held the book to her chest with her left hand, and took mine into her right.

“I’m not sure either. I don’t actually know what it’s about. I’ve never read it”

“What?”

I couldn’t believe it.

“Well, you see I didn’t speak Icelandic back then. My dad wrote this book and sent me a copy. Mum and I were living in Germany at that time and she had never let me see him. I couldn’t read it. I came here to be with my dad. He died last year and left me this place.” She waved her hand gesturing at the inn. “But I can read it now.”

“So you really don’t know?”

Her eyes, as green as a field in summer, seemed glued to the gaze of mine. Still holding my hand she led me away from her two friends and the receptionist, ignoring them completely.

“No, I don’t. But I can read to you now and we can find out together. See the title of the book? It actually means *Working Title*. He printed it himself for me. Now I can share it with you”

I knew I didn’t have to answer. She just led me off. I had no clue of where we were going, and I didn’t care because I could feel her small hand around mine. I felt as if we were taking off from the ground.

“Hey, did you know that *stressed* spelled backwards is *desserts*?”

II. Exposition: The Intricate Process of Creative Writing

Introduction

When preparing for a journey a traveller will pack his bags with things he thinks will be useful or necessary for the trip: a change of clothing, a toothbrush, a map, some sun screen, an umbrella, a book to read etc. The truth however is that you can never know for sure which of these things you will need or use during your trip. The process of creative writing is in many ways similar to a journey. You may have an idea or a plan of what you are going to do: you have packed the idea, the potential resources, some useful vocabulary and a simple plot line perhaps. But in reality you don't know how these things will come together or what will become of them until the story is there in front of you, written down. Also, the result depends not only on the contents of the suitcase, but on the traveller. The writer and his background and experience are the main agents of the process.

A university is a paradise for an inexperienced creative mind with a thirst for knowledge. In my five years so far of university education I completed no less than a dozen courses on literature and literary theory, not only on British and American literature but also Icelandic and Japanese literature, leaving me with insight, knowledge and experience as well as an infinite amount of inspiration. Lucky for me some of these courses had some creative writing exercises and assignments in their syllabus. The longest one I finished was a five thousand word story which ended up bringing me here to this story and inspiring Em's relationship with her dad.

In the following exposition I recount my journey through and with the novella *Working Title*. I will expose the contents of my suitcase, starting by explaining the original idea and how it changed from that into what it is now. The second section takes a look at character development and its improving with the assistance of books on creative writing by successful authors such as Stephen King's *On Writing* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Kate Fox's anthropological study and various feedback from readers. The third section lists cultural, linguistic and any other research carried out for the sake of the story. Finally the last two sections discuss themes and lessons learned through the writing of this novella and essay.

From first idea to end result

Before I started writing I had some specific ideas of what I wanted the story to contain. As I continued writing scene after scene I became more and more grateful for the books some successful writers have written on the craft. Stephen King, for instance, in his book *On Writing* compares having an idea for a story to the discovery of a fossil, meaning that you don't create an idea, you find it, dig it out of your brain and the universe and clean it (160).

Regretfully, I had not grasped this theory when I started. I knew I wanted a main character that was coming to Iceland for the first time, I wanted him or her to be of British origin and I wanted to show that person's response to the country and its culture. To do this I was going to survey some foreign students at my university and ask them how they experienced Iceland, what about Iceland charmed them and what repelled them. I wanted to write a story that showed a difference in culture and how that could be experienced. In addition to this I wanted my character to be part of the LGBT society and I was going to do some reading about gay rights and culture in Great Britain. As if that wasn't enough I also wanted to weave in some of the things I learned from a class I took taught by one Sarah Moss about food and literature. I wasn't trying to find an idea, I was trying to create one.

Being overly ambitious gets you nowhere, and I found out fast that that was exactly where I was going. While I managed to write a promising first scene what followed it was below par to say the least. There was an idea there somewhere but I just kept digging up dirt. To give an example I wrote one scene with Em and Marion at a buffet in Iceland along with some other tourists. It was all Icelandic cooking and I thought it would help with displaying some cultural differences. I wrote a couple more scenes like that one, with some obscure purpose but they were all failures simply because (as I finally realised) they were not telling the reader anything about the character or moving the story along at all. I was still stuck at point A wanting to jump to point B. Yet somehow, through failed experiments I found the idea of what was going to happen.

How to tell the story was another choice I made right at the start. I followed Sol Stein's advice to "try the form that feels comfortable to you" (140). In regard to point of view what I use most frequently in my writing and am comfortable with is the first person narrative. Happily the first person point of view was the right fit for such a story. A novella is short and applying an omniscient point of view where you can see into the minds of various characters would simply take up too much space. Fitting more than one character's personal perceptions, opinions and feelings neatly into a novella is a job for a more experienced writer. The third

person point of view was not a good fit either as it creates a distance between the reader and the narrator. The first person point of view however “establishes the greatest immediate intimacy with the reader. It is an eyewitness account, highly subjective, and highly credible” (Stein 131). Without intimacy a reader would be less likely to turn the page to find out why Em cares so much about that book.

Another part of the decision of how to tell the story was that I wanted to write it in the present tense. While my supervisor advised against it as it is an unnatural way to tell a story I noted that Stephen King tells the aspiring writer to “try any goddamn thing you like no matter how boringly normal or outrageous. If it works, fine. If it doesn’t, toss it. Toss it even if you love it” (196). So I tried it and had people from my writing-circle as well as my supervisor read the story in that form and comment. No one condemned the attempt, but in the end it seemed to create too much of a contrast between the “now” scenes and the flashback scenes which were in the past tense. So I took the advice of my supervisor and Stephen King on the idea and tossed it for the sake of the reader.

The actual plotting was something that had no decided plan at the beginning and in fact seemed to develop almost entirely on its own out of the story of the nervous girl on the airplane. Of course I was aware of the basic ideas throughout the writing: every scene must have a purpose in the story and flashbacks should not outnumber the main story or dominate it (or in fact be used at all if it can be avoided, see for example Sol Stein’s chapter on flashbacks, pages 143-151). I found Anne Lamott’s statement that “[p]lot grows out of character” to be true (54). As I kept writing it became clear what incidents from Em’s past would have to be revealed to make the story move forward. Each flashback is triggered by the conversation between her and Marion, while Marion asks the questions the reader learns the facts. The only scene that was not just born through the story but actually plotted is the scene in which Em tells Marion about how she got the book back. Originally it was supposed to be three scenes, a flashback of the rediscovery of the book and two short scenes on each side of it. But with the other scenes roughly done there did not seem to be room left for three scenes or enough material to write two more effective scenes on the airplane. After re-reading Stein’s chapter, “How to Bring Background into the Foreground” (143-151), I decided to simply fuse them into one and incorporate the information of the intended flashback into the dialogue. Stephen King agrees with Lamott on the subject of plot, he believes that “plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible” (159). After mixing those three scenes into one King and Lamott’s points were proven to me as Em and Marion, after their long conversation, were well acquainted enough for Marion to offer Em a ride into the city, which up till then

had been an empty gap that I had not thought of how to bridge until Marion came out and offered it.

In the end some of the original ideas did stick through the whole process. Emily turned out to be a lesbian after all even though at first it wasn't even clear if she was male, female or a little bit of both. I also managed to portray Em's relationship with her father through their meal together but the politics of meals was discussed to great detail in that aforementioned class on food and literature. Instead of having Em's dad tell her and the reader that he loved her no matter what he was able to show it through the simple act of bringing her ice-cream at the crucial moment thus moving himself from the position of authority as the head of the household to the accommodating supportive father. Anne Lamott may be right in that "very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it" and it can't be helped but to agree with her that the only way to "get anything written is to write really, really shitty first drafts" (22).

Character development

As mentioned before, I started writing *Working Title* long before I knew who my characters were or what the story was really about. At the beginning that resulted in flat and uninteresting characters. After writing the first scene and having a few friends from my writing circle read it over I saw that they didn't understand my characters, they found them unbelievable or even just plain rude. That, especially in a protagonist, is a very bad thing. "Nothing is as important as a likable narrator" (Lamott 49) so I set out to get to know my characters better, who they were, what made them tick. I learned about their past, I found out who the owner of the book was, but the book turned out to be the central symbol of the story. I now know the players as I would know a close friend and Em, my main character, I know even better. However, most of what I know about them appears nowhere in the story. "This knowledge may not show up per se in what you write, but the point is that you need to find out as much as possible about the interior life of the people you are working with" (Lamott 45). Anne Lamott is absolutely right in this, a character with no past and no personality would never be interesting or make sense, it would be a dead character. Sol Stein sums this up neatly by saying that "if the people come alive, what they do becomes the story" (49). My knowing

my character better made it easier for me to portray them, to make them believable and even likable.

Marion's bluntness was something that people found unrealistic and just plain annoying at first. The solution was to simply let her explain herself. Changing her personality was out of the question as that would have also changed her function in the story. If considered a part of Vladimir Propp's seven "spheres of action" (qtd. in Barry 221), Marion would have to be the hero's helper. The reader does not know at the start that he is actually at the end of Em's story, she has already defeated the villains which are her mother and her own doubts and insecurities. What's more is that she is already on her way to complete her mission: to find her princess and give her the book. Marion helps her through the plane ride which Em fears, and gets her safely to her destination. Marion can also be classified as Lee Masterson's emotion type character. "The Emotion character is energetic, seemingly uncontrolled, disorganized, and driven by feelings – whether right or wrong" (Masterson). But the actual reason why Marion must be the helper and the emotion character, curious and blunt, is that it is her function in the story: to get Em to open up and talk so that the reader can find out what is actually going on in her life.

The creation of the main character Emily Davies or Em as she is called was a more difficult task. It is through her eyes that we experience the story: her story. Her character through the whole process was under a constant evolution progress. At first she seemed rude and readers found her overly abrasive. That had not been my plan; I wanted her to be honest, but not rude. I managed to soften her up by making her a little more tolerant towards Marion. But there was still something missing. Before the second complete rewrite of the story where I changed the present scenes and wrote them in the past tense, I re-read some of the chapters of Sol Stein's *Stein on Writing*. He helped me realise that I had done the classic beginner's mistake of forgetting that my narrator did not only have eyes to see and ears to hear, but also a nose to smell, a tongue to taste and fingers to touch (chapter 17, "How to Use All Six of Your Senses", pp. 160-166). By adding a little smell here and a touch there her story gained just a little more life, but only a little as I was afraid of overdoing it. The last push for Em's character was my reading Kate Fox's *Watching the English*, which is an anthropological study on the English that gave me a better understanding of her background and culture which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Research

Every story, in spite of the implication of creative writing being that you create a falsity, needs some amount of background reading. Even if you already know what it is you are talking about it is best, for the sake of plausibility, to make sure just in case. For instance I already knew some symptoms of autism but read on it online anyway, symptoms, treatments, how it develops over time etc., simply to clear my conscience and confirm my perception.

For Ed and his background I did very little except to ask acquaintances who had been to Korea what a pillow from there might smell like. The answer given was the same from each one: *Kimchi*. I suspected however that my narrator would not be very familiar with *Kimchi* and did not wish to distract the reader who might not know it, thus pulling the focus out of the story. Ed however was desperate to blend in to British society so for his vocabulary I picked up a small pocketbook containing a sort of short guide to Britain and the British. In there I found a list of popular words on weather and amongst them was the word “scorcher”, meaning “a hot day” (Battersby 36). So I gave Ed the line “it’s certainly a scorcher” to which Em responds by laughing at his effort. Having him comment on the weather seemed to be a logical choice as it is somewhat of a favourite as a topic in England, and as such, phrases connected to that would likely be the first thing an outsider might pick up. But his was not the only vocabulary that needed studying.

The biggest headache of all in background research was figuring out Em and her family. It was quite a relief to find Kate Fox’s book *Watching the English*. She describes everything with such insight and detail that it was almost as good as going to England and experiencing it for myself. Her most useful chapters for my story were on linguistic class codes and sense of humour. I knew Em’s family was upper-middle class, and her mother a bit of a social climber: pushy, demanding and always looking for something better. Not being a native speaker however I was afraid I might ruin the picture by using the wrong sort of vocabulary or manners.

Amongst the first things I read in Fox’s book was that “irony is the dominant ingredient in English humour, not just a piquant flavouring” (65). As I read on about humour, how the English dislike boasting and earnestness and use understatements wherever they can squeeze them in, I came to realise that I had been misunderstanding Em all along. I had almost entirely left out the fact that she had a sense of humour at all, and one very much like my own too. I had to rewrite a lot of her dialogue, especially where she was talking about herself to Marion as it displayed too much earnestness and was entirely lacking in irony or understatements.

The biggest vocabulary issue I had was with the profession of Em and her relatives. I made the mistake of calling them all lawyers at the start, which is a perfectly acceptable word, except that England has two kinds of lawyers: solicitors and barristers. So the next thing on my agenda was revising my knowledge of the British legal system from a course on British history and culture. What helped me decide on if they should be solicitors or barristers was Oakland's assertion that the "solicitor's branch is a middle-class profession" (151). This was a profession acceptable to most of them; an ambitious, successful solicitor could be upper-middle-class and do very well. But to establish the mother even better as a social climber I decided to have her marry a barrister. A barrister has much better prospects for promotions. Even though the marriage didn't work out it still made its point.

Last but not least I needed a resource for the pilot's announcements. As Anne Lamott says in her book *Bird by Bird* there is "an enormous amount of people out there with invaluable information to share with you, and all you have to do is pick up the phone. They love it when you do" (145). And that is what I did, I talked to a friend of mine who is a pilot and had her read through what I wrote and give me pointers about how to fix it and make it real. At first, when the plane takes a sudden dive I wanted the pilots to turn off the autopilot, but she pointed out that even though it was all right if needed for the story's sake, only a really dumb pilot would actually tell the passengers about it. I also came to the conclusion that it was too harsh and that something like that would start a general panic in an airplane, not just for my narrator, she needed a lot less to upset her, so I eventually tossed it, and made it a "slight glitch" as my friend suggested.

I admit that there are many things in the story I simply assumed or made up, hoping it would not turn out to be too distant from reality. But seeing as it is *fiction*, making things up or stretching reality is acceptable at times. For example, I don't know if a student of law, a student of chemistry and a student of anthropology would be likely to end up living in the same building on school campus at Oxford, especially with two of them being foreigners. I've never been to Oxford and have no idea what it's like, so in my story Oxford is simply a place imagined by me in a different version from what it may be in reality. It still stands for the same educational standards which is all that is needed here. Another thing I wanted to do a little research on in connection with this was literature with gay content, something I became interested in while writing a thesis on Japanese literature. Unlucky for the story I have no experience of coming out to family members and the feelings connected with that, but a writer's number one talent is the ability to imagine different situations. And that is enough because love is the same no matter the gender of the persons involved.

Themes

After two complete re-writes, the tossing of many useless scenes and too many cups of coffee I can look at the story for what it is underneath the surface and in between the lines. Whether we intend to or not, almost all texts have some sort of meaning, themes or symbolisms. Stephen King said that “symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create a sense of artificial profundity” (200). He is right, any theme or symbolism is there for the sake of the story, not the other way around. There are many things in there which could be interesting for a literary critic. We could start by mentioning sexuality as one. There are six characters in the story and as it turns out Em’s parents are the only straight ones amongst them. Another one might be the psychology of children whose parents have split up. Neither Em nor Annie really know their fathers at the beginning, the reader doesn’t see Annie getting to know hers, but knows that it happened. Both have also done everything in their power to keep their mothers happy at the cost of their own happiness.

The dominating theme however and one that spread through all the story and characters is one linked with the title of both the novella you have just read and Annie’s book. It is the theme of making your own life, your own story. This became especially clear to me after the recent and sudden loss of a very dear family member. His story suddenly ended, no more surprises there. But as for the rest of us, and for Annie, Em, Marion, Ed and everyone else there are still things happening, they are trying to make their lives what they want it to be. Life is a work in progress, you can give it a title now and think it’s going to turn out one way, but it’s only going to be a working title because the story hasn’t been finished yet. Even though the story of Em and Annie stops here on page twenty-nine doesn’t mean it is finished. Emily takes the leap of faith and goes to Iceland to find Annie, and succeeds even though she has no idea how it will turn out when she sets off. In fact most things go opposite of Em’s expectations, just like the story did while I wrote it.

Lessons learned

Writing a story from beginning to end is not so unlike writing a literature essay or any research essay. You start off with one idea of what you think you will discover and what your conclusion will be, but as you dig deeper things that you had never imagined appear and your

work takes on a different face than it had before, a clearer more detailed face. Every scar, every zit, every wrinkle appears as you look closer. A story also, just like an essay, is never really finished, ideas change, people change and you can never say everything that you want in the way you want, but you do your best to show what matters, what is important and then at one point you stop. Learning is an endless process and so is writing and living.

While I thoroughly enjoyed writing *Working Title* I also came to the conclusion that I am still not ready for writing longer works. Recently I watched an hour long recording of an evening with Ray Bradbury at the Sixth Annual Writer's Symposium by the Sea which was held in 2001. There he advised young beginning writers to write one short story every week for a year or even longer before even thinking about writing a novel. I could not have agreed more, and I think I should do just that: spend more time developing my skills through writing an endless amount of short stories. After all, writing is just like any other profession: if you want to be successful you need to work hard, learn and practice. But don't forget to enjoy it.

The biggest surprise I got was how much the novella had in common with the thesis I wrote a year earlier. It was a literature essay focusing mainly on a writer by the name of Yoshimoto Banana and the women in her writing. There I looked at things such as women and their independence, the absence of the father figure, the feminization of men and even lesbian and transsexual content. Stephen King said that "you undoubtedly have your own thoughts, interests, and concerns, and they have arisen, as mine have, from your experiences and adventures as a human being...and you should use them in your work" (208). I seem to have done that here without even meaning to. The writer can never escape his own self, "you will find that, if you continue to write fiction, every character you create is partly you" (King 190). I cannot deny it, nor do I care to. The story borrowed large chunks of me without me even noticing.

The two most basic things that I learned from my attempts with my original ideas were on the one hand: how important it is to have a good editor who is honest and encouraging at the same time. Without good supervision *Working Title* would not be what it is now. And on the other hand: that a novella is short. Very short. I've written quite a few short stories and have had some ideas for novels, but somehow I thought that an eight to ten thousand word novella would be long, that I'd have plenty of room for different scenes and information. I was wrong. In the end however, it wasn't about how much information I could fit in there. It was about writing a story that would keep people reading. If you don't have interesting characters, a person that people will turn the page for, you don't have a story.

Conclusion

So I am now at the end of my journey through *Working Title*. I did use some of the things I had prepared for it but I picked up new things along the way through books, supervisor's feedback and my own creative experimenting. I was happy to see that in spite of just being an amateur writer I have a lot in common with professionals who have already been published or even become extremely successful, like Stephen King for instance. I was particularly happy about his statement that "all writers *are* needy" (222). The best way to learn is by doing and as this is the longest creative writing project I have finished I sure learned a lot on the way. The most important lesson was to let the characters and their actions lead the story on instead of trying to fit the story into some pre-decided box. Perhaps after this experience I can call myself an intermediate writer.

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