



Saga of Survivors I

Hödur & Baldur

by Emil Hjörvar Petersen

Contact

emilhpetersen@gmail.com

www.emilhpetersen.com

These sample translations were funded by
the *Icelandic Literature Center*

Translation grants for publishers wishing to publish a work translated from Icelandic:

<http://www.islit.is/en/grants/translations-from-icelandic/>



MÍÐSTÖÐ ÍSLENSKRA BÓKMENNTA
ICELANDIC LITERATURE CENTER

Translated from Icelandic by Steingrímur Teague

CHAPTER ONE

Rejuvenation

In early September, in the year 2010 in the Second Common Era, or seven thousand and ten years after Ragnarök, no one was present to hand out the Apples of Youth.

Hödur bit into a bad apple. Feeling its juices rejuvenate muscle, skin and bone, this was his first positive experience since arriving in Iceland. A century had passed since he last set foot there, and, as in the past, he hoped that as few as possible had noticed his travels. He stood on a veranda outside a small, desolate shack; a poorly built refuge for the Aesir that had changed with every passing century, but was presently disguised as a fruit stand in the center of a village named Hveragerdi. Hödur considered himself bound to no place apart from this one.

The shack was open and empty. He briefly panicked, frantically sniffing the air and pawing the floor, but finally found a single apple, dented and caked with sticky dust. He had no way of knowing how long it had lain there. Decades would pass before Apples of Youth started decomposing, but unlike ordinary apples they went sour over time if left at room temperature. It seemed to Hödur that a fair amount of time had gone by. But it didn't matter. He needed youth.

Once a century, to extend his life, Hödur was forced to venture into the so-called civilized world. He often thought of it as a futile undertaking, not least because he felt he had no role to play in the world. Nevertheless, he couldn't bring himself to give up the tradition; he still harbored a faint hope that, some day, there might be a need for him. In which case he would have to be alive.

But something else about these compulsory rejuvenation trips also bothered him: he had trouble standing face to face with Nanna, who was usually the one handing out the apples. He

had always accepted his apple and walked off without any further effort at communication, his face glowing with self-consciousness on his way out. The less he knew of her travels or whereabouts the better, though he supposed she lived with her husband. All Hödur wanted to know was that, once every century, for six months at a time, she handed the apples out to the survivors. But on this cloudy afternoon, he couldn't sense Nanna's presence, neither inside the shack nor outside. He tried to suppress the bitterness, but it just redoubled at his efforts.

Hödur stroked his face. Slowly but steadily, his wrinkles smoothed out, and as he flexed his face and bunched his fists he felt his strength increasing. He realized that he was about to finish his apple by the shack, and not on his way back as he usually did. He felt a flicker of suspicion and uneasiness. Dropping the apple core, he closed the door and walked onto the gravel outside.

A plump man with a puffy face stood on the gravel patch, leaning up against a white pickup truck. He wore a chequered shirt, unwieldy rubber boots and a filthy baseball cap. His arms were tanned, his nose burnt. He scratched at his unsightly mustache compulsively, intermittently adjusting the cap. Hödur identified him solely from his labored breathing and faint halitosis.

The man pushed himself away from the car with one foot when he saw Hödur appear from out amongst trees and bushes.

"You look better," puffy face shouted, opening the car on the driver's side.

"I got younger ..." Hödur said distractedly. He paused when he was midway to the car. "But this time around, something was not right." He straightened his spine, feeling the rest of his decrepitude evaporate as his back joints popped.

"What do you mean?"

For a servant of the Aesir, this man was pretty ignorant, but Hödur tried not to let it bother him. "No one was there," he explained. "Do you know where Nanna is?" His voice

was clearer than before, and his breathing lighter. The same went for his mood and disposition. His agitation, though, more than made up for it.

The driver hemmed and hawed a few times, and finally said: “Don’t know, can’t place the name. Shouldn’t we get going to the guesthouse? I need to make two stops after that before we go back to Thorlákshöfn. Got to pick up supplies for the crew. Dwarves are useless on an empty stomach.”

“No. I have to walk to the guesthouse.” Hödur just barely managed to conceal his disapproval. “Didn’t you know?”

“You have to what?” the driver rumbled. “I didn’t know that. Damned strange, if you ask me. On this job, there’s always something new. Can’t say the boss is the most loose-lipped in the business. I’m sure no one will mind if you hitch a ride back with me.”

It was only to be expected. If the driver didn’t know the name of his boss’ wife, Hödur wasn’t surprised that he didn’t know the traditions of the rejuvenation either.

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” he said. “I have to walk.”

The driver got into the car and thought about it as he winched down the window. “Well, here’s the way it’s going to be, then.” He spoke quickly. “You make your way there on foot, I’ll run my errands and then pick you up. That should keep us on schedule. We can’t run late. The boss left clear instructions on when and where I should pick him up.”

“I’ll be seeing you, then.” Armed with his newfound youth, Hödur felt ready to tackle the hike ahead. He had to clear up one thing with this fellow, though. “I want you to take me straight to the ship, and before you pick up your boss I want you to ferry me back.”

“If you say so,” the driver said, nodding hesitantly. “I’m not in charge of anything, I guess.”

And with that, the pickup truck roared off.

CHAPTER TWO

Desert morning

Baldur awoke, covered in sweat. There was practically no oxygen left in the tent, and the smell was unbearable. He crawled out into the stifling morning, but was quick to stand up and grab his shoes from out of the tent; the sand was piping hot. The merchant family was awake and leisurely packing up the tents, seeing about breakfast and rekindling the fire, which had gone out during the night. The camp formed a semicircle around a husk of a tree standing in the middle of the desert. Two camels, loaded with packs, were lashed to the trunk. Only one day's journey remained before they would reach the Euphrates.

Baldur inhaled deeply and stared up into the sky as he stretched his limbs. The sky was light-blue and clear, the horizon rippling in the heat. He had forgotten to bring along sunscreen, so his white skin had burned for the first few days, but now it had regrown. He was tanned, his nose and ears peeling.

He turned to the tent again and peered inside. His fellow traveler snored.

"Wake up, Módi, they've started cooking," Baldur said loudly, snatched up his backpack, rummaged around in it and found a can of baked beans, half a loaf of dried bread and two brown bananas. Nothing he could cook. He caught himself envying the family, thinking of their steaming breakfast.

"But I was having such a pretty dream," Módi muttered from beneath the carpet, his morning voice bantering. "You were running through green fields and pastures, your glowing hair streaming. You threw your arms into the air, smiled from ear to ear and laughed."

"All right, then, two bananas for me," Baldur replied.

"Wait!" Módi rose quickly, his crumpled T-shirt hiked up to his chest so that his prominent gut spilled out. "Grow a sense of humor, already."

“Spare me this sight and get dressed.” Baldur shielded his eyes, but when he heard his friend sigh he added: “I’m sorry. I’ll try to improve my attitude. It’s just that I feel old age coming over me so quickly. There isn’t much time left, and I worry about how the hell we’re going to pull this one off.”

“You’re not alone in that. But it’ll all work out.” Módi let his heavy hand fall on the shoulder of his friend and cousin. Baldur knew it was meant to be comforting. Then, Módi stepped out of the tent, tied his blond hair into a ponytail and stroked his fiery-red beard to smooth it out. “Eat?”

They sat down with one banana each, on a blanket spread in front of the fire, careful not to get too close to the flames, as the sun was merciless and they couldn’t take much heat so early in the day. The sun’s rays pummeled the napes of their necks and their heads. Baldur had shoulder-length, light hair that was going considerably thin and gray, and so he wasted no time in donning a turban and wrapping its bottom section around his neck. Módi’s long, thick hair and beard offered protection enough for him.

Under normal circumstances, sun and heat wouldn’t affect Baldur’s body. That only happened when the years started to encroach upon him. However, he enjoyed feeling the temperature changes, as long as it was in moderation. After eating the Apples of Youth, he would be insensitive to pain, a condition that lasted almost ninety years. Tangible phenomena, in other words, were harmless to him, apart from one: Mistletoe. He could fall neither sick nor prey to any other physical infirmity. He never felt his body complain – never felt hunger, for instance. No matter how he might starve, his body would always renew itself. Baldur kept himself nourished because he enjoyed the taste of food, but also to maintain a reasonable physique and keep his mind from degenerating; things of the mind, such as mental health and emotions, these required sustenance. And age, age he could do nothing about, and now his

invulnerable body was beginning to fail. Wrinkles, spots, gray hairs, shortage of breath. The same applied to Módi; his red, bushy beard was peppered with grey.

They sat in the desert: decrepit, anxious, betrayed and uncertain of the future. If worse came to worse, this trip would be their last, so they willfully deceived themselves by doing their utmost to enjoy the morning with the merchant family, which greeted them, every morning, with smiles and friendliness.

Baldur managed a smile in return, but made no eye contact. Then he looked down and brushed sand off the blanket.

Bursts of laughter and shouting, mugs are slammed on wooden tables after each sip, the music of the lute and drums is fraught with tension.

Hödur sits at the back of the hall while the rest teams together, forming a tight circle around one of the long tables. They throw weapons, or any object close to hand, at a blond man dressed in white who stands on the table with open arms. The projectiles hit him but have no effect, fall to the floor as if hurled against a rock. The blond man smiles broadly and his laughter expresses delight in the attention, in life in general. To Hödur, it sounds like self-satisfied vanity.

Hödur hates this part of the feast. The same hullabaloo every time, and he can't take part in it. All he can do is drink his mead.

"Boring, isn't it?" whispers a serpentine voice in his ear. He starts.

"You know how to sneak up on people, Loki." Hödur tries to remain composed. "It's almost impossible to make out your footsteps."

Loki gives a muted laugh, one hand behind his back.

"Isn't it dreary to sit here and listen to these imbeciles? You should see Baldur's beaming smile. He thinks he's unbeatable. What a dolt."

"Careful," Hödur says, slightly tipsy from the mead. "I won't have you speak of my brother like this... even if he's.... even if he... I may not be the most beloved son, people don't notice me much, but I could snap your throat with one arm if it came to that."

"Hah, easy there," Loki whinnies. "I didn't mean it like that. Even if he? If he what? Snatched *her* away? Stole *her* from you?" He whispers the words, but places great emphasis on them. Fake contrition.

Hödur feels a narrow object pressed into his palm, rough and dry to the touch, and terminating in a sharp point. For reasons he doesn't understand, a chill runs through him and his face goes pale. There is evil in this thing. A foreboding of death. Hödur shakes his head. A word struggles to leave his lips, but he can only move them mutely: *No*.

"Don't be like that," Loki says, closing Hödur's palm. "Be a sport. You always sit here all by yourself while the others have all the fun. Show your brother what you're worth."

The shouting and laughter rise to a peak. Baldur laughs loudest of all. The women laugh, too. Everyone. Apart from Hödur, the blind Aesir.

"Throw, Hödur." Loki's voice turns insinuating.

Hödur gets to his feet, deathly pale, and grips the point of the javelin.

"Show us what you're capable of." Loki disappears into the shadows. "Throw..."

Blood trickles between his fingers when he opens his palm. Hödur listens, discerns Baldur's laughter, the sound of his feet on the table. Location, height and distance have been gauged. He closes his hand around the projectile and his muscles swell.