

## **Trek Log - Iceland – 2003**

**Tue Aug 19 - 2 pm**

I wonder what the first settlers thought when they saw the barren lava fields around Reykjavik. *"Oh boy, this is desolate, for sure."* They'd have had compelling reasons to leave Norway, though, so going back wouldn't have been appealing. Also, they must have been optimists, of a sort, anyway. *"Could be worse,"* I imagine them telling themselves. *"It's flat, I guess. Maybe some grass might grow and we could survive."*

My granddad, Whalley, must have had similar thoughts when he arrived in 1921 to work his friend's citrus farm. After his first wife died and he'd spent two years in prison during WW1 under threat of execution as a traitor because he believed war was wrong and refused to fight, he'd brought his new wife and eight year old son, my dad, from England to Texas on the Mexican border only to find the "citrus farm" was untouched brush. His response was to build a cabin, start clearing the land, and plant cotton for cash and vegetables for food.

We checked in at Snorri's and then got a bus to the Folk Museum on the edge of town. The buildings are relatively new compared to those in the equivalent museums in Norway and Sweden. Our guide told us about the 1842 church. Next to the pulpit on both sides of the aisle were pews facing forwards where the sinners had to face the congregation; sheep stealers and unwed mothers mostly. The pew on the left, the women's side, was much longer than the men's, presumably because unwed mothers were easier to identify than fathers. Surely, more of the sheep stealers were men.

The guide also showed us round the nearby farmhouse. Upstairs were some slippers made from fish skin. They only lasted a single day. New slippers were made every evening while someone told stories or read the bible aloud. Sheepskin shoes lasted longer, but still only three days or so because lava is so abrasive. The distance from one community to another used to be measured, not in miles, but shoes. If you know Olaf lives three shoes away, you know more than just the distance, you also know something about the intervening terrain.

One building was a harbor warehouse with an exhibit that illustrated a day in the life of a family in the 1950s. It was my first experience of finding things from my own childhood forming an entire museum exhibit - a mixed pleasure.

Now, we're back in central Reykjavik where we're hoping a large strong coffee and pecan pie in Mark's case and a large strong coffee and berry cheesecake in mine will overcome our lack of sleep on last night's overnight flight.

**9:40 pm**

We continued walking along the main shopping street, stopping at each of the bookshops, but there were fewer Icelandic novels in English translation than last time I was here.

Money has a very short half-life in Iceland. The \$250 that I changed at Keflavik has already shrunk to an almost imperceptible residue. I went to an ATM to replenish. It returned my card after the initial pleasantries, asked me to wait, and then went into an endless cycle of advertisements. I tried several times and eventually went to find a human teller. After the transaction, Mark noticed a coffee pot in a waiting area so we topped up our caffeine again and then walked to Hallgrimskirkja where we went up the bell tower to see the city below. Up there, the bells are extremely loud.

Back at Snorri's, we repacked our backpacks, removing everything we could persuade ourselves to leave at Snorri's until we return after the trek. Andy Gale arrived while we were packing. He's from Newcastle and seems cheerful and experienced. He's hiked in Alaska and British Columbia.

Downstairs in the lobby was a man who sounded just like Dick Phillips. I heard him when I went out to look for hardfiske. When I got back to the room, Dick, as he in fact proved to be, knocked on our door to answer any questions we might have. We chatted about all manner of things while waiting for Andy to return. He'd gone out to explore. Eventually, Mark fell asleep and Dick and I went for a meal at the low-key restaurant at the bus terminal.

Sheep's head with turnips was on the menu, so of course I ordered that since I've never had it before. It's the nose, primarily, halved vertically, and served cold. It's similar to pigs feet but with a mild muttoney taste, requiring much effort to eat and providing not a lot of reward. Dick had smoked lamb, which looked a much better choice.

Dick met Paul when Paul was 21 and leading a pack of adventure scouts. He had asked Dick to give them a lecture on Iceland. It turned out that Paul was the only one interested. After the lecture, he went on one of Dick's tours, then spent an entire summer exploring Iceland on his own. Dick needed a tour leader, so he invited Paul and he's been doing it ever since.

I mentioned to Dick that I'd been surprised to learn from the Arbaer museum guide that farmers in the 1870s were trading sheep for corrugated iron from Scotland. Dick said he'd also been surprised by its early use. He'd found it referenced in a novel by de Maupassant. He said it's now banned as a building material in England. Why, I asked? Because it's cheap and works better than tiles.

**Wed Aug 20, 9:45 am**

Our party comprises an English family from Birmingham, James and Cynthia and their daughters, Lucy and Jenny, as well as Andy from Nottingham, David, a Frenchman from Paris who lives in New York, Mark and me.

Andy works for Merlin, an English medical charity similar to Doctors Without Borders. He's just finished two years in Moscow treating TB with an intensive six-week program. Before that, he was in Tomsk. He was sent there because when he started seven years ago, it was in Mongolia. They figured if he could handle that, he'd be OK in Siberia. He says Mongolia is beautiful, and a third of its people still live as nomads. The best way to get there is fly to Beijing then take the 30-hour train ride that goes through the Great Wall.

I forgot to write yesterday that Dick's hostel at Fljotsdal has a turf roof that he made on top of a corrugated iron base. The corrugated iron started to rust and leak so he remade it with an intermediate layer of rubber. Now, it's fine, he says. That sounds a lot easier than the approach described in my book about building your own sauna.

Paul told me later that Dick went ahead with his idea of burning off the dead grass on the roof one year despite all of Paul and Judy's arguments. The specific problem turned out to be that the walls had been insulated with hay. They had to rip off quite a bit of the siding before they finally extinguished the smoldering fires inside the walls.

We're now driving in a small bus to Fljotsdal, where Dick will hand us over to Judy and she'll lead us to Paul, who's out where the last tour ended.

There were more trees around Reykjavik than I remembered. Mark had read that Iceland's re-forestation program is so intensive that they have the world's highest per capita tree planting rate. As he says, with such a small population, they probably have the highest per capita rate of many things.

**11 am**

Selfoss is surrounded by large flat pastures, and there are hot springs. The settlers who got this far must have been very pleased. Selfoss now produces most of Iceland's flowers as well as large quantities of cucumbers and tomatoes, Iceland's dominant fresh vegetables. The greenhouses are heated with water from the hot springs. They also grow bananas although as Dick says, they're not a crop for which Iceland is famous.

It's a sunny day, I had a good sleep, and I feel delighted to be back in Iceland.

**1:20 pm**

Judy took over at Fljotsdal and now we're heading for Elgja to meet Paul. On one side of the dirt road is a large field of barley, rather sparse and short but doing well. On the other side, there's just an expanse of pebbles with some moss and occasional tufts of

grass. Paul has told me they improve the soil enough to grow crops just by spraying fertilizer and seed from the air. That doesn't seem enough, but I guess he knows.

I'd gotten a bottle of Scotch for Paul and Judy at the New York duty free shop, hoping they like Scotch. Judy was very pleased.

The weather is forecast to be good for the next three days. There's no forecast beyond that, and even three days is ambitious in such a changeable climate.

I'd asked Dick about the shallow pitch of the roofs on most buildings. Doesn't the snow accumulate as it does in Connecticut? The wind doesn't give it a chance, he says.

### **8:40 pm**

We've arrived at the first hut, Sveinstindur. It's newly built but on an old stone foundation. It's very luxurious compared to the huts we stayed in last time.

I've started to learn about the others in our party. David is a lawyer who qualified in Paris and had the opportunity to transfer to New York. He just finished a year at Columbia qualifying to practice in New York. Lucy is studying Old English at Oxford. *"I didn't see the point of studying modern English," she says, "where I could just pick up the book and understand."*

Cynthia is mixing the skyr, which I think must be a first night tradition on Paul's tours.

### **Thu, Aug 21, 8:15 am**

It started to rain a few minutes before we got off the bus yesterday. We walked half an hour to the hut and it rained steadily all night. This morning is gray and windy, but dry.

More about our party - James is a contractor whose field is biology and archaeology. He works for a university and a publisher. Cynthia works for Sainsburys supermarket. Paul and Judy both went to Keele University. Earlier this year, they went to Finland to celebrate their hundredth birthday. Paul says he contributed a bit more than his fair share to the hundred.

Five Icelanders arrived at the hut last night, so it was quite crowded.

False optimism – I just went outside and found it's drizzling. Visibility is quite good, though. I do hope I haven't attracted the monsoon again.

The Sveinstindur hut overlooks a mud flat left behind by the hlaup. When the hlaup comes, it's sometimes accompanied by dense clouds of hydrogen sulfide. The mud it deposits is so fine that it takes many days to drain and dry. In fact, it almost always looks wet. When I came in just now, Paul asked if the tide had come in yet.

Judy says this area seems substantially greener than when she first saw it twenty years ago. Then, it was almost entirely dark gray. Now, green extends half way down the mountain sides. Judy first came here because; *"Paul said, 'if you really love me, you'll come with me to Iceland'."*

It was a long day on the bus yesterday, starting at 9. We got here at about 5:30 partly because the bus is slow but also because Dick proved to be a very slow food shopper. Judy had given him a list of supplies to procure. The spaghetti and sausage meatballs last night were very welcome.

### **10:20 am**

Dick first came here in the late '50s with the aim of being the first to cycle across Iceland. He succeeded on his third attempt in 1958. He'd been quite heavily equipped with an inflatable dinghy, rope and so forth and became somewhat famous when he succeeded. Then he got a letter from a Mr. Dahl, an astronomer who had cycled across Iceland on his own with just a pannier in 1933. At the time, he hadn't thought of his trip as anything particularly noteworthy.

Dick had the idea that since he enjoyed cycling here, perhaps others would, too, although not enough of them to support a business. He figured there'd be more walkers than cyclists, so he should also offer walking tours. By 1971, the business had developed to the point where he needed a separate leader for the walking tours, which is when Paul started.

Paul says the weather forecasts here really aren't very useful because they're so localized. James suggested it's probably best to keep watch on the farmers. If they're making hay, it's a good sign. However, there's little grass and no farmers up here. There's just a triangle of very irregular land that supports only a few patches of grass. There must have been very few sheep up here when the hut was used for its original purpose, shelter during the fall roundup.

Cynthia just spotted a large spider crawling down James' back and into his pants *"never to be seen again"* she said. James' usual calm was somewhat disturbed by that idea and he quickly went outside to shake it off before it could hide.

Now that I've typed and "published" my Himalaya 2003 and Iceland 2000 journals, I feel a bit inhibited about this one. I've told myself that I can edit it before anyone else sees it, and that it's good preparation for more serious publications in the future. [Note: In fact, I've done very little apart from fixing a few sentences where, when I started writing, I hadn't thought about how they'd end.]

### **5:20 pm**

We set off at 11:30 to climb Sveinstindur. It had stopped raining and grown steadily brighter. We just arrived back at the hut and the sun is now very bright. There was a magnificent view from the summit.

The rivers here have almost as much flow at this time of year as they do in the spring because they're fed by pressure melt from the glacier, not snow melt by the sun.

The big drama today was James losing his grip on his fleece sweater at the lunch stop on top of a steep hillside. He'd rolled it into a cylinder and it bounded end over end down the slope for a most impressive distance. It was more impressive even than the tire rolling the boys and I used to do at the abandoned sandpit after lunch at the diner on Saturdays. Anyone can roll a round object.

Cynthia and Andy entertained us with reminiscences about Enid Blyton's Famous Five including how they once caught a football-playing Nazi spy. They startled him and instead of saying "*gosh*", he said "*himmel*".

My Leatherman multitool just got its first outing on this trip. The door hinge screws came loose last night. They had Phillips heads, so a dinner knife wouldn't have worked.

Paul is much more talkative and responsive than he was on the 2000 trip. He talked about the first time he came here. He and his friend wanted to get to Laki, which involved a long hike and crossing a big river. Their packs very quickly proved to be too heavy for such a hike, so they decided to stop 100 yards from where the bus left them and eat a lot of the food. They set off again when their packs were lighter. The river was very wide and deep. They kept going and eventually tried to cross. Paul's friend lost his footing part way across and was swept fifty yards downstream. They camped again while he dried out and then went further upstream. They eventually got across when the water was down to waist deep. Dick had told me how impressed he was by this exploit.

Paul spends his time during the winter season working mornings at the library where Judy works and in the afternoons doing DIY projects that his friends are "*either too lazy, incompetent or rich to do for themselves*". He also plays squash five days a week and says that "*by the time I've cycled the eight miles each way, played, and had a drink, that's three hours gone*". He has no trouble staying busy.

The Nazi theme continues to reemerge as we exchange reminiscences. We think there may have been Nazis in some of the Rupert stories although I'm certain there were none in Thomas the Tank Engine. Andy thinks he remembers Mussolini appearing once, but that seems pretty improbable.

### **Fri Aug 22, 8 am**

It's a beautiful sunny day today. The sky is almost entirely blue with just a couple of tiny clouds far in the west and the air is completely still. Yesterday was very windy. In fact, it was hard to keep your balance on the windward side of Sveinstindur. That's why James' fleece went so far.

Paul told us the Northern Lights seem to be visible more often on windy nights even though they're way above the atmosphere. They were visible last night. They were

chiefly silvery white streaks, most of them like contrails but some in curtains. Mark's digital camera pickup up blue and purple colors that weren't visible to any of our eyes.

There was also a very bright planet low in the east. Venus perhaps since it was silver rather than red, but bright enough to be Mars, which is closer than it has been for an extremely long time. Two satellites appeared, also, apparently racing each other across the sky towards the north.

An Icelander joined us at the hut late last night. He apologized in advance, saying in a variation of Captain Oates' famous last words that he was going out and would not be back for quite a while. He was going upriver to collect water samples. Paul speculates it's research for possible hydro-electric projects. The damming so far has all been in areas where tourists don't go, but there's been much discussion recently about the potential in other areas.

Mark has been recording the funny dialog so I won't duplicate the effort except to note the hypothesis that Paul's cauliflower soup may have contributed to our very prompt sighting of the northern lights.

### **12:30 pm**

We've stopped at rapids surrounded by rock that, as Paul says, you can reach out and touch, gauge its temperature, and say with complete confidence it's been cooling for 220 years. This area was formed by the Laki eruption, which produced so much lava that it reached 600 feet deep where its flow was constricted by the river valley walls.

### **2:30 pm**

Lunch today is overlooking a turquoise lake with a mountain in the background. There are streaks of moss running down the scree opposite. The yellow green stripes are reflected in the lake and look like the northern lights.

More about Andy - he started as an English tutor for VSO. He took a class in teaching English because he wanted to do some sort of VSO work and stumbled across the actual VSO organization through a chance acquaintance. It's yet another demonstration that if you place yourself in the path of what you seek, it will most likely find you or at least, you'll notice as it passes by and be ready to follow.

### **7:15 pm**

We arrived at Skraelingar at about 5:30 pm, having set off at 11:11 am. It was about 15km from Sveinstindur. This hut is next to spectacularly odd formations of eldhraun in the midst of which, protected from the wind, is an abandoned hut. A small clear stream passes the hut and joins the main river, which is perhaps a hundred feet wide.

Today's hike was very good. It was sunny and warm enough to wear a T-shirt and shorts. We followed the river but climbed several hills and walked up a narrow little gorge. It was clear all day and there were magnificent views in every direction. The

Myrdalsjokull icecap was very clear in one direction and Hvannadalshnukur, the highest point in Iceland, was brilliant white in the other.

The place where we had lunch was very beautiful. It would be greatly revered in the Himalaya since it's both turquoise and appears striated. It could only be more holy if the reflections had convoluted snake-like lines.

Paul continues to be very informative. He even brought out a map unasked to show us our route.

Lucy is thinking about doing post-graduate studies in Iceland, Minnesota or Canada, but says the prospect is quite scary.

We had our first river crossing today. It wasn't much above ankle deep. My Five Ten rafting sandals with toe protection worked well, but the water is just as cold as I remembered.

This trip doesn't follow exactly the same route as the previous one. We're still to the east of where the other trip ended and won't reach the place where it did end until mid-day tomorrow. We will also cut off a large corner of the other route later, which will give us more time at Strutslaug.

Paul says arctic foxes are no longer very uncommon in the north west because the farmers have realized they don't in fact kill sheep. They're so small that even a healthy young lamb could overwhelm them. There are many birds in the north west that are the foxes' prey and you now see arctic foxes most days.

### **Sat Aug 23, 8 am**

This morning there's heavy gray cloud with misty droplets leaking down but with good visibility below cloud level. These are the conditions I remember from last time.

Andy got up in the night and saw northern lights in the south and west. The rest of the sky was obscured by cloud.

Last night, we had leek and potato soup followed by chili and rice, then stewed fruit and custard. Mark remembered a contest he'd read about when he was young where the prize was a visit to a water park that had Jello in place of water. That prompted James to remember that; *"someone told me about Mazola parties where people spread plastic on the floor and cover it with Mazola"*. That led to teasing for the rest of the evening and Mazola turning up in increasingly improbable circumstances. James has such an innocent air that it's impossible to imagine him really engaging in such activities.

### **7:30 pm**

The hut at Alftavatn has been completely rehabbed since I was last here. Only the stone walls remain. There's a high wooden roof that makes you think of a cathedral.



There are sleeping loft balconies at both ends and it looks as if there should be an organ. The lake is bigger, too. It's been dammed with loose rock, perhaps to be stocked with fish, but the lake shore is now flooded and the pretty little streams that used to meander there are under water.

Soon after we set off this morning, we had a small river to cross. It was about 15 feet wide and a foot or so deep, crossable by stepping on submerged stones. Overconfident, I slipped and fell full length, face down. It was less spectacular than the northern lights, but everyone agreed the splash was quite dramatic.

I dried out over the course of the day despite periodic spells of light rain. It struck me that just as in the Nordic region they have twenty or more words for different types of snow, there's an equal number of words in England for types of rain. Today, according to the Greig family, we experienced both light and heavy forms of drizzle, misting, and spotting.

We slid down the ash scree into the Elgja and worked our way along the valley bottom to the Olfaerafoss waterfall that was the end point of the previous trip. The valley was formed by a simultaneous eruption all along a long line. It's been partly filled since then by the Laki eruption.

After the waterfall, where we stopped for lunch, I recognized where we were although the scenes seem to be stored in random order in my memory. There was the volcanic arch, the turquoise lake and the narrow twenty to thirty foot deep canyon which had a relatively flatter and more gravelly bottom than last time and was easier to walk. I remembered the canyon as light brown but it's actually dark gray or black. It was sunny last time and drizzly today but I suspect that also my memory of the gorge has somehow become polluted with fragmentary canyon scenes in Arizona.

I'm in much better condition this time. I can feel my knees, but my muscles are fine otherwise and I don't feel tired after today's 16km hike. Two large mugs of tea have helped, no doubt.

There was an Icelandic couple in the hut last night. They were there when we arrived, sitting at the table cherubically repacking their picnic hamper. They looked to be in their '60s. They continued to nod and smile at us for a while and then went to bed very early. Andy went outside later and noticed their car registration was 666 AH. After that, I couldn't get Rosemary's baby out of my mind. Their smiles now seemed sinister.

#### **Sun Aug 24, 7:45 am**

Pea soup, marine spam with mashed potato, dried peas and sweet corn, followed by rice pudding last night.

"... and Bob's your uncle" said Andy at one point today. "*Is that the Bob we know?*" Cynthia replied.

Everyone is looking forward to the hot spring at Strutslaug this evening.

Mark's enthusiastic enjoyment of the hike is delightful. His knee was hurting badly last night. I hope it won't be too bad today.

As far as I can tell, none of my gear was damaged by my immersion in the river.

These new huts have a ventilator chimney with a turbine at the top that's driven by the wind. It sounds like a hamster on a wheel.

This morning there's quite a thick mist.

### **8:15 pm**

It's a relatively flat walk to Strutslaug, with much ascending and descending of watercourses, some of which contain water. I recognized particular places but there was quite a lot of snow last time so it looked different. There's less water than last time. The flat stony area between the hut and where the tents are was covered with little streams three years ago, very cold little streams, but it's dry now.

Several of the others have gone in the hot spring but I'm going to wait until after dinner, which will be ready in about half an hour.

James' work revolves around identification of plants. Lucy is at Oxford *"because that was the best place to study Old English"*. Jenny studies saxophone at a college in London. She told Mark she'd wanted to do many things, ranging from nursing to being an airline pilot but had decided saxophone was the most practical alternative.

Andy's prognathous jaw, large nose, craggy features and six foot height remind me of someone but I can't think who. Trying to work it out, I remembered Desperate Dan, the hero of a comic strip I enjoyed when I was a boy, but that was just an image surfaced by my mind in an attempt to get more information to refine its search.

Cynthia enjoys trying to embarrass her daughters. She was inventing titles for Biggles books this morning – *"Biggles Flies Undone"* and its sequel, *"Biggles Holds His Own"*. James also says some odd things at times. *"Why have a dog and bark yourself?"* said Cynthia. *"Why have a cat and pee on the floor yourself?"* James responded.

### **Mon Aug 25, 8:30 am**

Mark and I lay in the hot spring a long time last night while the sky slowly cleared and countless stars appeared. I saw two shooting stars but no northern lights. This morning, the sky is sunny and clear.

I was disappointed to discover at the end of yesterday's hike that my boots have developed, and therefore also my socks, the same appalling rank stench as on the last trek.

The hills and valley bottom are quite green here this time. The hills were covered with snow when I was here with Dan. The year after we were here, Paul made a bridge across the stream in place of the precarious arrangement of planks that bridged only two of the three channels. The bijou hut is exactly as it was. Since they were denied permission to rebuild, Paul is now considering extensive repairs instead. Their scope would include an amount of uphill avalanche protection that just might require the establishment of a structure that would be oddly reminiscent of the original hut.

Paul and Dick knew the members of the parish council in 1972 when the hut was built, but recently, the parish was combined with four others and they don't know the members of the new body. A fancy new hut was recently built on the other side of the valley that's accessible to vehicles. It was built by Utavisk, a charitable Icelandic hiking organization, but they keep it locked, which mountain huts are not supposed to be, and it's rumored that they didn't have building permission.

But now, it's time to trek to the hutlet for porridge and coffee.

### **11:30 am**

All my muscles feel normal and I don't feel tired, but I must have fallen hard on my right knee because it's a bit swollen and it feels as though it had been fallen on.

### **6:30 pm**

We made a day hike up Torfajökull and it was magnificent. Yesterday it was 60F all day and today must have been over 70F.

From the highest point up on the rhyolite we could see Sveinstindur far off to the west and the mountain with the banana shape on its side that's our destination way off in the east. On the way down, we walked across the ice. There was some ash and gravel on the surface that made it possible to stay upright but water was running over the surface and gushing down into corkscrew shaped holes, and the wind blowing over the ice was very cold.

Near the top on the way up, we stopped at a hot spring that most years makes tunnels under the ice. This year, there's much less snow than usual and there was a big hollow with striations of ash on the snow cliff, but only one tunnel halfway up the side of the hill that was much too dangerous to explore.

As soon as we got back to the campsite, I went straight to the hot pool. It had cooled quite a bit so I opened the hot tap by moving stones and diverting more of the hot water into the pool instead of the river.

After a whole day of hot sun, the river is much higher this evening. It's washing over the plank section and the large stone that forms a step to the ladder bridge, and it's quite close to the ladder itself.

I feel so lucky to be alive, healthy and here.

### **Tue Aug 26, 8:45 am**

It's another beautiful day, sunny, warm and with a gentle breeze. This is blissful.

Last night after a dinner of lentil soup, chicken supreme over rice, and chocolate blancmange, I went straight back to the hot spring. Everyone else came, too, at intervals, and left, also at intervals, until only Andy, Mark and I were left waiting for the northern lights. The sky grew slowly darker and clearer with a glow to the north over the icecap then that, too, faded. Mars was huge in the south east.

The lights began with what looked like a contrail in the north east. Then a curtain formed in the north west and its stripes coalesced into a few larger ones that moved quickly east. I thought I'd glimpsed a flash of green in the background but as soon as I looked closely, it wasn't there. More stripes of white formed in a leisurely way. Eventually, an arch formed overhead from horizon to horizon. It narrowed and intensified.

By now, I'd been in the pool for close to five hours and I was feeling quite wrinkly. The wind was cold as I walked back to the tent but I quickly warmed up in my sleeping bag and was soon asleep.

### **11:15 am**

On the way to Strutslaug, I saw a gaggle of geese fly past. In Connecticut, Canada Geese are the only ones I see, and they honk. These geese made a sound that was most distinctly "*gaggle, gaggle, gaggle*".

Paul was intrigued by Dick's slide show lecture to the troop of adventure scouts he was leading, so when school ended, he spent nine months working to accumulate enough money to spend the next three months hitch hiking and walking around Iceland with a friend. In those days, there were few cars and if you were standing by the side of the road when one passed, it would stop. His most unusual ride was in a car with a small box trailer. There was no room in the car so the driver said: "*jump in the trailer*". Paul flung in his backpack, climbed after it, and found himself on a bed of fulmars.

I'd forgotten that there's an Inner and an Outer Mongolia. I asked Andy in the hot spring last night if Mongolia had experienced the same crackdown by the Chinese as Tibet. Outer Mongolia was so named because it was too remote to be ruled effectively by the Chinese. After the Russian revolution, white Russians fled there and established a regime but then history becomes murky. Somehow, Outer Mongolia became a Russian satellite while Inner Mongolia remained part of China. Both are now part of China after the collapse of communism in Russia and most of the people reckon life was better under the Russians.

**5:15 pm**

Back to the bijou hut in time for tea. As Paul says, we're always back in time for tea.

We went up the other peak that overlooks Torfajökull today and again had extraordinary panoramic views. Landmannlaugar is brighter and lighter in color than its surroundings, which look a lot like the Badlands.

We walked across rhyolite plates that are just like a pile of crockery pieces we once saw in the American West that had been discarded by Indians. They crunch and tinkle as you walk over them. Some of the cliff faces here are very tall and almost vertical. It's amazing they stay upright.

The icecap has crevasses that run vertically in some places, horizontally in others. There are also distorted circles of ash that look like growth rings.

Paul hadn't been up there this year because on most tours it's been too misty. On one tour, one of the participants got too close to a hot spring, about a foot closer than Paul, and his leg broke through the crust. His calf was protected by gaiters and his upper leg by shorts, but his knee was briefly immersed. They immediately splashed it with cold water and put ice on it at the end of the day, but some blisters developed. The guy said he was OK, but there were more blisters in the morning and Paul decided to evacuate. He walked to Hvanngill and got the warden to drive as close as possible. When a doctor examined the guy, he said he was in fact OK, but the weather wasn't very good, so nobody minded that they'd ended the tour early.

I asked Paul about the first tour of the season. Usually, five of the ten days are over snow, but sometimes it's six or seven, and it's never less than four. Sometimes, it snows. As long as it doesn't, the snow is densely packed and the walking is easy, but fresh snow makes for slow going. Depending on how much sun there is, the rivers may be covered by ice and snow so you can cross without removing your boots, or they can be deep and fast flowing. He's only had to divert once because of an impassable river.

### **Wed Aug 27, 8 am**

I woke at 6 instantly ready for today's hike, then again at 7:45, thoroughly prepared to vegetate in my sleeping bag. One of the more advanced vegetables, I suppose, such as a cauliflower with some powers of cerebration. My thoughts so far today have not lodged in my memory. Presumably, they weren't worth preserving.

Replete with mushroom soup, couscous with tomato sauce, ground rice, and jam from Paul's rhubarb plantation, I sat in the hot pool for a couple of hours last night but it was more cloudy and there were only traces of the northern lights.

Over the meal last night, Paul and James exchanged fond reminiscences of exciting finds they'd made at garbage skips. There's a map that shows the location of every skip in South Iceland, a big advantage for Paul. His refrigerator came from a skip in Reykjavik

two years ago. James' hunting is more wide ranging, not just at skips. Firewood comes chiefly from tree limbs, some of which he doesn't burn because they remind him of where he found them, such as a wood filled with bluebells.

James wondered what Paul does with his vegetable garden while he's away in Iceland. Paul replied that anywhere he notices any small sign of plant life, he immediately covers with firewood. Where does he get that, James asked. It grows on trees, Paul said.

### **7:30 pm**

We're back at the Hvanngill hut where Dan got his first lessons in festering from Neil and Andrew. It was misty and rainy until mid-afternoon. It was close to noon before we set off after dismantling the tents, packing, having breakfast and whatnot.

I remembered quite a lot of today's walk although I'd suppressed memories of the river crossing and the wide plain with at least a dozen rivulets. They were all leapable or at least run throughable, though, so if you wore gaiters, you could keep your boots on and only wet their outside.

We went as fast as reasonably possible because it was a 15km walk with limited views. I'm pleased to find that my muscles aren't tired and my knee is OK.

### **Thurs Aug 28, 8:30 am**

It's misty again this morning.

Dinner last night was pasta soup, tortellini with tomato sauce, and fruit cocktail. We had cheese tortellini last time we were here which John Howarth enjoyed until he learned that it contained cheese. He's very allergic to it, so he immediately prepared and drank very salty water and went outside to throw up. After a while, I went out to make sure he was OK. He was, and we had our first conversation. The next day was the one when bad weather forced us to stay in the hut all day.

### **7:15 pm**

It was misty with intermittent rain all day today except at the Markarfljot waterfall where the sun shone brightly and there was a perfect rainbow over the fall.

I remembered most of today's hike except for the first part, leaving Hvanngill, when we were on the opposite side of the river from last time. That part was over a wide plain of black ash, followed by a plain of pebbles in ash.

Lunch was in what looked like an abandoned quarry but wasn't. There was a private hut, lupins growing profusely and a fulmar that hadn't yet learned to fly and now won't get the chance because they need an updraft to take off.

The second half of the afternoon was very wet and visibility was very poor. That must be part of the reason I have vivid memories of some places but not of entire routes. Only some areas were visible last time.

We're now in the first hut that we stayed in last time. I remember it as being very welcome after what in my unfit condition had seemed a pretty tough day's hike.

### **Fri Aug 29, 7:30 am**

David wanted to be a professional footballer and went to a special school but he had an injury that made it impossible and became a lawyer instead. He speaks excellent English. The Greig family were being silly yesterday afternoon, as Cynthia describes it, and I asked David if French families are ever silly. I expected not and he agreed. I commented that I couldn't imagine an American family being silly in the Greigs' Jane Austen way. David's response was; *"American girls are less mannered in their behavior than the English"*.

James used to work at the university but his fulltime job was eliminated and he was given a three day a week position instead. He does proof reading and copy editing for a magazine the other two days and can do most of his work from home.

Cynthia and James met through a common friend with whom James had first traveled to Iceland. Cynthia was 26 and James was five years older. As he would say, he still is. She had decided not to go to university and was working for the Civil Service, but then decided she would go to university after all because she wanted to be a teacher. She got her degree, meeting James' friend in the process, went on and got her teaching certificate, married James before starting to teach, and on their three day honeymoon, Lucy and Jenny were conceived, so she never did teach. However, she's now Chair of Governors at the school the girls attended. She says Lucy's love of Old Norse isn't really surprising since both she and James brought copies of the sagas to the marriage.

Andy is more of a puzzle. He worked at several other jobs before deciding to join VSO seven or eight years ago. He took a class in how to teach English to foreigners and was dispatched to Ulan Bator for two and a half years. His later assignments were to Tomsk and then Moscow. He recently decided to reestablish himself in England and buy a house, but wants not just to continue working in the not for profit sector but also perhaps work overseas again. He's deceptively well read in what he says is a fairly specialized way, however his knowledge of history, very broadly defined, is very diverse.

Lucy was entirely focused on getting to university and is greatly enjoying being independent but says that now she's there, she's realized she'll have to decide what to do next. She'd like to do something useful and has been researching VSO and other such organizations. She decided against doing a gap year before going to Oxford because she concluded that the organizations all seemed to place unprepared students in unsuitable positions that were either useless and boring or very dangerous.

Lucy's boot has been hurting her Achilles tendon for the last few days. She finished yesterday's hike in flip-flops. Cynthia said that after today, she'll never have to walk again. Paul said she could even wait for the bus, although it won't come until next July, the middle of next July, to be exact.

This morning is clear but not very bright.

Cynthia said she was once approached by a man who said he'd bought himself a blow-up doll. She felt somewhat concerned. Yes, the doll was made in Pakistan, the man continued - it blew itself up.

### **5:15 pm**

Today was a very easy day's hike to Fljotsdal. Paul has re-roofed the inside of the attic since I was here before. He used tongue and groove cedar that he'd found in a skip and it looks good.

The garden is filled with dark blue monks hood flowers and yellow flowers whose name I don't know. The rowan berries are so red that even I can see them clearly. Beside the door hang a pair of Paul's old walking boots filled with flowers.

We were greeted by the neighbors' dog, a white husky-like fellow filled with exuberant friendliness. He lay on my lap, covered my pants with white hairs, and licked my arms and neck with great enthusiasm.

### **Sat Aug 30, 10:30 am**

It was a fine evening, so Paul and Judy barbecued last night. Trout, hot dogs, peppers, onions, sweet potatoes, and potatoes baked in the ashes. Because I was the only one outside with Paul when he got the fire going, I got a "*real beer*". Also, Judy offered to put Mark's and my laundry in with Paul's, which is a very comforting prospect both for next week's trek and to avert the risk of George II's customs and immigration folks seizing me as a carrier of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

It was sunny and bright first thing today but cloud descended and we're now in mist. Visibility is very low. It's completely still, so there's no telling when the next weather change will come.

I just finished washing up, having thwarted James who always leaps up and does it. He swept the floor instead.

### **Noon**

There was a law against dogs in Reykjavik until recently. You can have one now, but the license is expensive and there are very strict leash and fouling laws.



Everyone except David and me has gone for a walk. It's a better day for the library, in my opinion.

#### **4 pm**

James is in the kitchen talking with Judy, reminding himself to buy Icelandic dish washing liquid before he goes home. He bought some on his last vacation and says it's an excellent little reminder. When the liquid is used up, it can be replaced from another bottle, so the memories can continue.

I found Paul's university thesis in the box files above the library. It was a study for his post-graduate degree of the strategic options for Dick Phillips' business. I asked what Dick's reaction had been. *"I think he read it"* Paul replied. *"The things he likes to do, he does very well, but what he doesn't like to do he doesn't do at all."*

I asked about the cycling tours. *"Well, there's a small population that wants to go on cycling tours to begin with, and at the time he started, there were only dirt roads here. The only people who wanted to come were his old buddies and it didn't take long before they'd all been. He thought there'd be a better market for walking tours."*

*"Dick doesn't like to change things, and he's not good at taking suggestions from others"* Paul went on. *"He does sometimes change things himself"* Judy commented, *"but then he forgets and goes back to the way it always was."*

Cynthia is reading an Insight Guide to Iceland, Andy had a sleep and is now reading, Lucy is alternating between reading and sleeping, and Jenny is sleeping with a book on her lap. Mark and David have gone back to bed. I've been dipping into Halldor Laxness novels that aren't in print in America.

#### **5 pm**

We just had excellent cake and tea.

*"I'd trust you with my life, Cynthia"* said Paul and then looked puzzled. *"Sorry, lice is what I meant to say. What a difference a single letter can make."*

#### **Midnight**

We had a remarkable meal this evening, starting with beautifully presented gravlax, a shot of brennivín, and napkins elegantly folded by Mark. Then roast leg of lamb, boiled potatoes and kale, stewed rhubarb with skyr, and cheese and biscuits, all lubricated by red and white wine, home-made beer, and more brennivín.

After dinner, for which Paul wore a tie, Judy and Jenny plaited Mark's hair with twenty Bo Derek style plaits. He looked great. It was a very happy evening, which nobody wanted to end.







**Sun Aug 31, 9:45 am**

"*Porridge Withdrawal*", a chance phrase of Mark's that would make a good book title.

We woke at 6:30 to get up and have breakfast with the others before they set off for Reykjavik. Everyone felt affectionate and refused to say "*good bye*" because the trek had come to feel like a family outing.

After a dull start, the day is turning sunny. Chapter 8 of Laxness' *Salka Valka* begins: "*Fine weather seemed to be something unknown in this place; the Creator was continually making all kinds of experiments with His sky. Frost and snow were followed by a storm, which collected all the snow in drifts. And when the snow was collected in drifts, the weather changed and a thaw set in, and the thaw melted all the drifts which had been formed with so much trouble. But all things considered, it had to be admitted that the Creator's favorite type of weather was rain.*"

I did go for a short walk late yesterday afternoon with James and Lucy but the clouds descended on our discussion of the unsuitability of pre-college education for people with their own ideas, my comment on how blessed I feel to be alive, and Lucy's response that she could trace the origin of her own such feeling to a precise time. She'd fallen from her bike, was injured quite badly, and was recovering at the moment when the realization came. James was partially lost in his thoughts during that part of the discussion. He looked pleased with them but didn't say what they were.

It was spotting with rain when we got back to the hostel, but Jenny remembered she'd carried her Frisbee and boomerang every day of the trek and we'd never used them, so Mark, Andy, James, Jenny, Lucy and I charged around in the long grass throwing the Frisbee with success and the boomerang with surprise. It didn't return to any of its throwers but did follow a highly erratic course. A spectacularly high and long throw by Mark ended with an unexpected last moment lunge into my chest.

### **Noon**

Mark has gone back to bed and I feel rather sleepy myself. Two Canadian girls are writing postcards and reading Lance Armstrong's book. They're cyclists. Three Canadian boys who arrived late last night just woke up and set off again, one with a gigantic backpack, one with a large backpack, and the other with a small fluorescent daypack and a sleeping bag. As surrogate warden in Paul's absence, I collected 1000 kronur from each of them and wished them a good trip to Bernes, their next stop.

Now back to "*Salka Valka*". Outside, the thick, dark gray cloud is spreading again in an aimless and unpleasant fashion.

### **1:15 pm**

I had forgotten to note James' observation that the best thing about America is the melodious sound of the telephones.

The original part of this farmhouse was built in 1898 and the larger part was added in 1912.

The farmer's dog next door is named Kolor, which is Icelandic for coal, because he's white. *"That's the level of both Icelandic jokes"* Paul said. *"The other one is, what do you do if you get lost in an Icelandic forest? The answer is, stand up"*.

The other members of our new party have just arrived. There's David and his son, Paul, an Irishman named John, and Edwin. I can't guess anyone's age any more. When Cynthia first introduced Lucy and Jenny, I thought they were younger than twenty. Anyway, David looks to be about 65 and Paul 25, but they may be younger. John might be 30 and Edwin 40, but they could easily be younger, too. Probably not older, though.

#### **4:30 pm**

The only thing I've been seriously tempted to do so far today I've succeeded in resisting; taking a nap. Paul has just brought in one of Judy's cakes and I certainly shan't resist that.

One day, Jenny, Lucy, Cynthia and Mark had made the lunchtime sandwiches. They were done up in bread bags, knotted at the end. *"Who made this knot?"* asked Paul, struggling to get it undone. *"If it's Gordian, it was probably me"* said Mark.

A superlative I hadn't encountered before, used by Lucy to describe a scholarship to study in Reykjavik, is *"uberjammy"*.

The phone just rang for David. *"Yes, yes, very good,"* he said. *"No, it's a bit hazy at the moment."* The truth is, it's drizzling and visibility is less than a couple of hundred feet. "Hazy" seems quite an understatement to me, but then we do have better weather in Connecticut, until December at least, so maybe I have higher expectations.

It's all a matter of perspective. I was thinking earlier that I call my current situation retirement rather than redundancy because I initiated it and I hope my assets are sufficient, but if I'd waited another year, I'd have to say I was unemployed because it wouldn't have been my choice to leave my job. The business failed.

#### **Mon Sep 1, 7:45 am**

*"As night follows day, so washing up follows dinner"* said Paul after the skyr that evidently is the traditional first night dessert.

Over coffee, Paul had described with uncharacteristically serious enthusiasm the tours he's led in the north west. The ones in May were by far his favorite of all the tours. They went in by boat, based themselves with everything they needed, did day hikes, and the boat returned two weeks later. In the meantime, they never saw another footprint that wasn't made by one of them.

I asked how arduous these tours are, wondering if they'd be practical for David and Ilana. The tours stopped because they didn't get enough bookings, so I was thinking about who else might come. *"It depends on the party"* Paul replied. *"One year it was very snowy but with very warm days when the ice thawed fast. There was a hillside we wanted to reach but what turned out to be a marsh between it and us. We spent all morning looking for a way across. You'd follow a possible path, turn back when you kept sinking knee deep into snow melt to try another route, and find yourself waist deep where you'd just been. Eventually, we decided it was just too dangerous."* He always did a varied hike the first day to gauge the likes and capabilities of each new party and that group was pretty intrepid.

Mark just came back upstairs after spending most of the night in the library. Edwin has an extremely powerful snore. I was tired enough to go back to sleep after experiencing it, but Mark had had a nap during the day.

It's seriously hazy this morning. Visibility is down to thirty feet through the large particulate matter in the air.

### **9:30 am**

John has just started a law practice in Dublin. He's having trouble leaving his cell phone turned off. Edwin went on a six-month assignment to Oman two and a half years ago and greatly enjoys the area. They commissioned and now maintain an "installation" which I guess must have to do with oil. They're just across the straits from Iran and he says it was very busy there during the war against Iraq. It's an area of mountains up to 8,000 feet, and fjords. Edwin started exploring at the "weekends" – he's one of four Brits who maintain a continuous over-lapping schedule – and that led to his trip here. John came with his family when he was ten. He's now 32 and came on the spur of the moment *"because Iceland had happy memories"*. Later, he said it had seemed a good idea at 3 in the morning after 15 pints.

*"Perhaps he was one of those people [for whom] the goal was worth more than the struggle"* seems a particularly Icelandic thought of Laxness'.

There's an Icelandic word for a father and son that Dick used to describe Mark and me to James, but I don't recall what it is. Paul will ask Margaret at the farm if we remember. Margaret originally came out here with Dick but then she took up with the farmer. She probably thought he was more stable, Paul explained.

### **12:30 pm**

Today, we're on an excursion in the second of Paul's Russian ex-military vans, a vehicle over whose course I'd say Paul has significant influence but not full control. Since it's now in Iceland, it has started asserting its independence.

**5:15 pm**

We drove to Seljansfoss (probably not really its name), just off Route 1 on the way to Thorsmork. It's a high waterfall that you can walk behind. Paul stayed with the car, explaining that he's allergic to tourists. Then we went further up the Thorsmork road on the opposite side of the valley from Fljotsdal and ate our sandwiches at the foot of a tongue of ice that comes down from Eyjafjallajokull. The sun came out and it was clear where we were, but nowhere else.

After lunch, we walked up the shallow slope at the foot of the glacier. There were deep potholes and crevasses which we negotiated with some unease. The ash blows across the ice and provides traction in most places. There are in some places cones of ice covered with cinders that look like a diorama of a mountain range.

Now that we're back at Fljotsdal, the weather has closed in again.

This morning I exchanged potted life histories with David. I always end mine by saying that I grew up in England, but this time I heard myself say it and suddenly realized it's not true. I only grew up after being long enough in America, quite recently, in fact, if indeed I can be said to have grown up. I certainly hope to continue growing up for many more years.

David is a geologist who taught in England, then Ireland, and then in Newfoundland for six years. He noticed that his students were all going into the oil industry and realized he knew nothing about that, so he joined BP and worked for them in Scotland for ten years until they pensioned him off in his '50s. He was very happy about that and when his son, Paul, whom he calls Robbie, was out of school, he moved to Germany because his wife is German. They live in the south east of Germany on the Swiss border where there's good walking in summer and skiing in winter.

Robbie studied zoology in college because his ambition was to work in TV on animal feature programs. There were no such positions available when he graduated but he was able to get an assignment working on a children's program called "Bob the Builder".

Earlier today, Mark told me this trip is the best thing he's ever done.

**9:50 pm**

Dinner was split pea soup, lamb chops with new potatoes and kale, followed by – canned steamed strawberry jam pudding! Paul said we were having that because I'd kept on about the puddings so.

David and I did the washing up, to build Brownie points while conditions are good, he said. I did it this morning and yesterday morning, also.

The clouds came down before it went dark and the wind got up. Now, it's raining.

## **Tue Sep 2, 8:45 am**

The only deep thought I've had so far this morning is to wonder if powerful snoring disqualifies one from service on submarines. Or is the sound insulation now good enough so that noise made by sailors doesn't travel outside the vessel? I'd ask Edwin because he was in the navy, but he's the major snorer in the party.

The installation Edwin works on is not oil, but radar. It's on an air base.

## **3:45 pm**

It's remarkable how much individuals' walks vary. I've read that you can recognize people by their walk even at a great distance or if they're heavily disguised. Andy's gait reminded me of Boris Karloff's first steps as Frankenstein's monster. He looked as if he'd only just learned how to walk, or hadn't done so for many years. David, on the other hand, had a graceful rolling gait with legs outspread although his feet would invariably land on the outside edge of paths and collapse the fragile sides. John on this trip walks slowly and places his feet with thunderous force and slow deliberation. The floor shakes.

We set off from Fljotsdal at 10:45, stopped for a brief lunch, and got here a few minutes ago. We took a couple of brief stops but kept going at a brisk pace for most of the five hours. The River Gilsa was much faster and muddier than when we came to Fljotsdal a few days ago. It was also deeper. Paul, Mark and I linked arms to cross the main channel.

When we got into the hut, everyone watched to see where Edwin chose to sleep so they could get as far away as possible. He went for a bunk in the middle, so I grabbed the one on the opposite side at the end next to the outside wall that catches the wind. I'm hoping the howling of the wind will drown out Edwin's snores.

I noticed the other day that my watch compass seemed to be fixated on ENE. It read ENE on both sides of E and continued to read ENE over a range of at least ninety degrees. Finally, I realized that we're close to the magnetic north and surrounded by deposits of magnetic material from volcanic eruptions.

It's been quite windy today, bringing clouds up the valley and a rapid succession of showers and sunny patches. The light against Eyjafjallsjokull was constantly changing, sometimes translucent and barred when there was a patch of clear sky above the cloud. The hillsides were sometimes gray, sometimes brilliantly contrasting yellow green against black and light brown. Very beautiful.

## **Wed Sep 3, 7:45 am**

This hut is known by the name Bolstadur.



After tea yesterday, Robbie wanted to climb the hill behind the hut, the one with the giant thumb, or banana. David, Mark, Paul and I joined him on the very steep ascent. There were fine views back along the valley on the way up and surprisingly good ones even from the summit despite the heavy cloud and rain that began half way up. It was cold and very windy, so the others soon descended. Mark and I stayed on for a few minutes and saw the very vivid start of a rainbow below the low cloud. When we got down to the valley floor, there was a magnificent rainbow with a complete arch.

The wind howled all night, hurling rain against the window, but this morning it's dry. The sky is still covered by cloud, however.

My right knee is again feeling as though I hurt it not very long ago. Mark's right calf was telling him he's an idiot for climbing the mountain yesterday but he ignored its complaints.

### **1:15 pm**

We set off unprecedentedly early this morning at 9:25. *"This group is very keen"* I observed to Mark. *"In the sense of enthusiastic, you mean, not sharp"* he replied.

I remembered the last night of the previous group at Fljotsdal. David, Andy, Mark and I were in our sleeping bags with the lights off. The Greigs were mostly in bed, also. Lucy came upstairs last and as she went through the door into their room I heard David quietly say *"Goodnight.. Harry Potter."* Lucy had told us several days before that she's often called Harry Potter and doesn't know if she's more cross about being named for a boy or a fourteen year old.

### **7:20 pm**

22km is a long way. Most of today was dry and there was even some sun, but the last two of the nine and a half hours' walk it rained, starting before our last river crossing when we were already cold and wet as well as tired. There were multiple streams of fast, knee deep, brown, very cold water. I really didn't enjoy it, to tell the truth.

To get to Thorsmork, we had to go back up the Markarfljot all the way to the bridge and part way along the track to Hvanngill, then all the way back down the other side of the Markarfljot until we were opposite Bolstadur, then a bit further to this hut complex.

The dwarf birches started just about opposite Bolstadur, and there's long grass, also.

The camp is at the end of the road up from Route 1 and it looks quite elaborate. John had a hot shower and pronounced it excellent. There's also a sauna, which he's now waiting to get into. As we arrived, there was a delicious aroma of hamburgers cooking on a grill for a large party of school children.

As we were walking this morning, Mark observed that his porridge tank was satisfactorily full. I noticed that my ability to transmute porridge into water was

unusually strong today. Such alchemical powers are not a welcome gift especially in an area of high winds.

#### **Thu Sep 4, 8:45 am**

It's a very windy morning again after a night of winds so strong that a heavy barbecue grill was toppled as well as a heavy wooden chair.

We're in a hut with a concrete floor that seems to double as a bus shelter. Paul, Mark and I went to another building last night to get mattresses. It took a long time to get to sleep, but once I was, I was gone all night. The others, they say, were less fortunate.

A heavy rain just came from nowhere, blasted the hut for five minutes, and just as suddenly stooped.

Last night, Robbie asked Paul if any of his parties had ever had serious trouble during a river crossing. *"Well, since we've made our last river crossing, I suppose I can tell you about the time we were coming back to Fljotsdal after and during very heavy rain (which just returned to this hut, by the way). Instead of the separate streams of the River Gilsa that we crossed, there was just seething brown water across the whole valley. The golden rule is that you don't take a party across unless you know you can get across yourself, so I did that. The water was only six inches deep or less most of the way, so I came back after finding a reasonable path, took the two lightest members of the party, one girl on each arm, which would have been quite romantic in other circumstances, and off we went with the others following. At least, I assumed they were, but I was concentrating hard and not really paying attention to them. We got across the first deep channel, walked about fifty yards down a gravel bank and started across the next deep channel when three bodies came floating down. They hadn't followed but had gone straight from the first channel to the second. Luckily, we were positioned to rescue them."*

I've been trying to remember what led James to mention the dance of the seven army blankets. I do remember that it was at the end of a hiking stop that James responded to Cynthia's struggle to adjust her backpack by commenting that chest straps are incompatible with lady bumps.

#### **4 pm**

By 11:30, we'd made sandwiches, packed and repacked our backpacks despite the fact that we're staying here today, agreed that the only forecast one could reliably make about the weather is that it would change, and exhausted every other opportunity for procrastination, so we set out for a walk.

The weather did change. The wind came from every direction over the next four hours, most of the time very fast. Sometimes, it was sunny while raining, but usually not. Sometimes, it was dry. The rain on the hilltops came at very high velocity.

We followed a path outbound, mostly, and passed a cave at the base of a rock formation that's known as the elves' church. We ate our sandwiches just over the brow of a hill over-looking a valley covered with dwarf birches. The way back was along the side of a wide river gorge whose sides we had to keep clambering up and down in order to get out of the river's path.

Back at the hut, I confirmed that the rain had soaked down my pants into my boots and it occurred to me that I could jam one of my poles into the window frame as a clothes drying line since the pole's length is adjustable. Now, most of the windows are filled with pole and rope clothes drying apparatus, and very damp clothes.

### **5:45 pm**

There's pretty much continuous rain, fluctuating in intensity, with raindrops blowing in every direction and some even reversing direction on the way down and blowing back skyward as if they'd been recalled by their maker for further elaboration.

This group is very different from the first one. John returned from today's walk after only about ten minutes while we slogged on. A smart move except that he then spent the entire day making phone calls and doing other things to pass the time that had nothing to do with being in Iceland. It's a complete mystery what Edwin thinks about. He occasionally asks a question that makes it obvious he either hasn't noticed his surroundings or failed to interpret what he saw. Robbie does notice the scenery and in a different group, he and David might be good company, but they don't seem to have anything to contribute to this group. Mark is continuing to try to inject some life and humor into the gathering, but these guys are just too heavy.

### **8:45 pm**

David and Robbie would be world champion slow packers, as in slow bicycle racers where the last to finish is the winner. I can't grasp their secret. It can't just be a matter of taking things out of the pack, moving them around and then putting them back? There must be some purpose to motivate so much activity over such a long time.

I may not find out, though, because not only is the weather getting steadily worse – there's heavier and heavier rain punctuated by hail – but the forecast for tomorrow is for continued storms. In that case, we won't climb out of Thorsmork and cross to Skogar because we'd see nothing and it would be a miserable hike. Instead, we'd get the bus to Hvollsvollir and go back to the hostel. We'll start the climb tomorrow, however, and see how the weather develops because the bus doesn't leave until 3:30 pm.

Tonight's meal started with an outstanding cauliflower and Stilton cheese soup and ended with canned sponge pudding. In the middle was curry over rice. Boy, those sponge puddings are good!

**10 pm**

We spent the last hour watching Paul expertly kill flies, but now there are none left.

#### **Fri Sep 5, 9:15 am**

I'm ready to return to a higher form of civilization, one that includes hot showers and no need to endure cold ones. However, we're going to set out up the hill and see what weather develops. It rained all night but the rain was slowing this morning. Heavy gray clouds continue to blow in low over the icecap bringing fresh supplies of very cold rain. My boots are still soaked as are yesterday's socks. I'll wear dry socks because I can't face putting the wet ones on, but they'll only stay dry for a few seconds. The group is more cheerful this morning as a result of last night's shared suffering and fly carnage.

I commented that the driving rain which just returned is preposterous. No it isn't, said Mark, it's rain.

#### **Sat Sep 6, 7:15 am**

I didn't update the journal last night because I did not want my account of the day to be intemperate.

It was a vile day!

At 10:30, the heavy rain stopped and Paul said we should set off. Obediently, we did. I would have waited the next several hours for the bus with no hesitation or subsequent regret.

We set off damply up the valley and the rain soon returned. We went round the headland along the hillside through the low damp birches beside the river that we saw yesterday. There was a bridge over the widest and most violent stream. We spent the next hour getting across the other streams and then walked up the valley. It didn't rain all the time, but it was unpleasant all the time.

We continued until we came to a hut that had a sign telling us the one we were making for was locked for the winter. John tried to get a cell phone signal so we could call. Paul had booked the hut, so maybe it wouldn't be locked, but we wanted to be sure. There was no signal. John said he'd rather do almost anything than re-cross the river, a remark that he later regretted. We were already so wet that it didn't seem worthwhile to turn back.

We began to climb and the wind grew stronger. The "*seemingly improbable ridge paths*" described in Dick's brochure were revealed to be improbable indeed.

The rain that had never stopped for long now turned to hail, then back to rain. Climbing became much harder because the path was slippery, the gradient severe, and the winds both very strong and very gusty.

I lost my good humor somewhere around this time.

After four hours walking, Paul stopped for lunch on the theoretically leeward side of a ridge. There was no shelter because the rain and hail blew down parallel with the steep slope. I was so cold that I almost didn't eat, but I realized I should and forced three damp sandwiches down.

We continued the ascent. There were occasional short breaks in the rain that made it possible to see how beautiful it must be in better weather. We traversed a wide, flat, stone-strewn hilltop and climbed further.

The temperature was a degree or two above freezing but it felt very much colder because of the wind chill.

After climbing further and tramping over an appealingly flat ashy area with very low visibility, we arrived at a seemingly innocuous glacier. It sloped away from us at only five degrees or so, but because it was raining and had been doing so for days, the ice was running with water and turned out to be extremely slippery.

Mark and I did quite well using our poles and followed Paul until we got close to the far side an hour later. I fell twice in the last ten feet and it was demoralizingly cold and agonizingly wet. Mark had also fallen before I tried to cross that last uphill section. We were both saved by Paul catching one of our poles and pulling us to safety.

Edwin was less fortunate, or more unfortunate to be more accurate. He followed the markers across the ice and they led downhill. They'd been positioned in normal conditions when there was some traction on the ice surface. Paul had followed a slightly uphill route well away from the markers because it's easier to keep your balance when you're climbing. As the slope increased, Edwin's grip became more problematic. Eventually, he slipped and slid forty or fifty feet into what turned out to be a six foot deep hole. Nobody saw him go.

Edwin was very matter of fact about the experience later and said that after a variety of abortive approaches he'd eventually worked out that he could lie down in the bottom of the hole and edge up by moving his shoulders and feet alternately, holding his body horizontal. He flung himself to the side when he reached the top and landed on the far side of the hole from where he slid in. Not long after that, Robbie, Mark and I spotted him while Paul was helping John. Robbie got one of Mark's poles far enough over the ice for Edwin to grab.

It wasn't very much further after that to the emergency hut that we at last reached at 5:30 after an extremely nasty seven hours.







I'd gotten my good humor back after a couple of hours during the walk and was now simply relieved to get my cold wet clothes off. We went to bed early but I couldn't get to sleep. At 1:40 am, I heard a whoop outside and then a hammering began at the unlocked outside door. The banging and shouting went on and on, and my reaction was much like the porter's in Macbeth. Three travelers had gotten lost and were very loud in their jubilation at reaching the hut. They continued to bang about and shine their flashlights until they were at least quieted by the two Swedes who had arrived soon after us last night.

The Swedes are brothers, one of whom now lives in Copenhagen and was an exchange student for a year in Boston ten years ago. The daughter of his host family was getting married and he was invited to attend. The brothers decided to stop in Iceland on their way back from Boston for a few days hiking even though they had no equipment. They were very happy indeed with the propane heater in the hut.

This hut is much better than most of those we stayed in on my first trip despite the fact that it's only an emergency one. It's an A-frame with a sleeping loft and it could house several dozen people. The regular hut that we'd been aiming for is quite close, but David had gone ahead and hadn't noticed it as he passed by. Having arrived here, we certainly weren't going anywhere else last night.

**7:40 pm**

We set off through the blowing cloud toward Skogar this morning. My gloves were still soaked so I hung them outside my pack under the rain cover and tried to ignore the

cold in my hands. I used poles because the ground was very uneven and my knees were still tired, so I couldn't warm my hands in my pockets.

It started to rain, but after not very long we'd lost enough altitude to get below the clouds, and soon the rain stopped. A couple of hours later, the sun came out and we had spectacular views of the many waterfalls down the Skogar valley, twenty three altogether, I think. Paul stopped to look at them all and so did Mark and I, but the others were intent on getting as quickly as possible to the bus stop and by-passed most of the views.

We caught the Reykjavik bus at Skogar, Paul got off at Hvollsvollir and we retrieved the stuff we'd left in his van, he blew us a kiss as the bus pulled out, and we reached Reykjavik at about 5.

I wanted to see what the bus terminal restaurant had to offer and Mark and I both wanted to avoid going out with the others, so we said our au revoirs there. There was roast leg of lamb on the menu and the sample looked excellent.

We checked in at Snorri's, went to the supermarket to buy food for the next couple of days – bread, liver paste, cheese, chocolate cake, and, of course, skyr - then returned to the bus terminal where Mark had what he said was an excellent hamburger and I found the roast lamb was even better than it looked.

Now for a shower – Mark's already in there – and then I hope to catch up on sleep.

At one point on the trek, I told Mark the rain had dampened my enthusiasm. Several minutes later, he laughed, which reminded us of Cynthia's question; "*How do you make James laugh on Sunday?*" The answer is; "*Tell him a joke on Wednesday.*"

### **Sun Sep 7, 8:30 am**

An excellent sleep, then breakfast. I was first up and sat by the window in the breakfast lounge. It rained overnight and it's gray and overcast now. In the window box are purple trumpet shaped flowers. As I sipped my coffee, I was suddenly flooded again with the joy of being alive in this beautiful world.

On the table is an application for employment at Ruby Tuesday. Ms. Selviadottir wants to work as a waitress, or a cleaner, or in the kitchen, starting as soon as possible. She's looking for a job because she; "*had to move within Iceland*". I tried to see if I could think of any men whose name is "...sson" of their mother's name. If the father is unknown, I suppose that must be how the name originates.

Mark joined me. He says that in some modern families, they alternate use of the father's and mother's names. He'd been thinking that Mark Martinsson would be good, but Mark Felicitysson would sound a bit odd.



Edwin came in looking quite sprightly. He went out with John and Robbie last night *"and one thing led to another"* but he bailed out at midnight. Robbie came back at about 6 and John some time before that, but John is fast asleep now and has already missed his early morning flight.

I overheard two people at one of the other tables discussing the books they've published. I asked what their books are about. The woman said hers is poetry. She'd written poetry all her life and a series of things happened that led her to publish her first volume very recently. She goes round Europe training people in financial auditing and *"suddenly people saw, oh, she has feelings, too"*. The man's book is a history of a boy growing up on a farm in Iceland sixty years ago. It's published in German and Icelandic, but not English. She writes three pages every morning, whatever comes into her head because; *"it gets rid of the trivia and helps you get to a deeper level"*. I said I've been doing the same and it's a better alternative for me than meditation.

### **5 pm**

John Cucullan once described himself as having had *"a hard day luring small children into the sauna with lollipops."* It was when he abandoned the day hike after ten minutes because of the rain. As we walked up Snorrabraut today, I saw the flashing lights of a police car parked near Snorri's. *"Ah, John's ride to the airport is there"* I said. *"Put DOWN the lollipops,"* said Mark. *"Step AWAY from the child. No, you can NOT have a Guinness."*

We spent a hard day touring the flea market, bookstores and Icelandic wool shops as well as wandering around the old town and the harbor area. There's still at least one used bookstore that looks promising but it was closed today.

### **10 pm**

Later, we saw flashing blue lights at the airport. *"Perhaps he never got further than the bar,"* said Mark. *"Put down the lollipop,"* we said in unison.

Back at Snorri's, we shared a large tub of skyr with great satisfaction.

Earlier, we'd gone to see the lake and then the bus terminal to get the schedule for the Golden Circle tour that we want to do tomorrow. They didn't have a schedule so we ate instead. The "Danish pork steak" that I had was roast pork with crackling of a delicious unhealthiness that's unobtainable in New England. Mark had a hamburger which he said was every bit as good as the one he remembered from yesterday.

Half of the auditor/poet's poems come in English, she said, and the others in Norwegian. They come in whatever language they must and she couldn't get them to come in the other language if she tried. She can read Icelandic with very little problem because it's so similar to Norwegian but can't understand spoken Icelandic because it sounds totally different.

## **Mon Sep 8, 7 am**

Magnus, the proprietor's son, just arranged for us to be picked up at 8:30 for the Golden Circle tour. It rained overnight but the sky now has only thin clouds and some sun is breaking through. Again, I feel very happy and content. It's been great fun being with Mark and I'm very happy that he's enjoyed Iceland so much. I do hope he gets the chance to travel more – makes the chance, rather.

Outside the flea market yesterday sat a man with two very friendly dogs. He was surrounded by delighted, dog-starved Icelanders. The dogs were also delighted.

Yesterday evening, we went to see the sculpture of a Viking longboat that looks as if it was made of whale bones. It overlooks the harbor and is made of stainless steel. We both liked it. It looks almost organic and as if it very much wants to go to sea.

Listening to people in the kitchen communicating in slightly halting English, it struck me that the great increase in travel in the past forty years has been a driving force behind the great increase in English speaking. A universal language became necessary. People are driven to communicate. It's much more than just the need to buy what's necessary to survive - we must exchange experiences. But what's the origin of the travel? Why do so many people choose to live in countries other than where they were born?

The poet, Eli Margrete Skjorestad Stolsvik, just brought a copy of her book for us to look at. She met the man who supported her through its publication at Geysir – he lives in Italy – so she says; *"Good things happen at Geysir."*

## **9:30 am**

The arctic lupin is planted here because it has deep roots that help to stabilize the soil. Erosion by wind is the biggest threat to the soil now. Grazing and wood cutting were a major factor in reducing the vegetation cover from maybe a quarter of Iceland's surface at one time to only a couple of percent now, but climate change was the biggest factor. It was several degrees warmer when the settlers came.

The lava plain we're now driving through is post-glacial, a jumble of rocks, but the hills in the distance were formed by volcanic activity under the ice.

## **10 am**

Our first opportunity for retail therapy as Paul calls it was at the Garden of Eden, a greenhouse store in Hveragerdi. I bought a postcard of the northern lights since I have no photographs of them.

Urbanization did not begin in Iceland until a hundred years ago when mechanization was introduced to the fishing industry.

There are now four to five thousand farmers who practice heavily subsidized mixed farming of sheep, cattle and horses. Iceland is more than self-sufficient in meat and dairy products.

The commonest blood group in Iceland is O, as in Ireland and Scotland. It strikes me that all three peoples have a very ambivalent attitude toward society. There's a strong tradition of hospitality in all three countries and much festering in bars, but also much going out alone among the hills. In this area outside Selfoss, there are throngs of summer houses where people from Reykjavik come to get away from it all but not, apparently, each other. I wonder if the need to be alone has atrophied? I also wonder about my own blood type. Bars felt familiar to me from the start, as if I'd known them in a previous life, and I've always had a strong non-rational desire to be up in the hills and away from people other than a very few who are compatible.

The only joke Cucullan told was on this theme. A Finn and a Swede were drinking in a bar. They were most of the way through a bottle of schnapps when the Swede said "*Scholl. Cheers.*" The silence returned until the Finn raised his head and said; "*Are we talking or are we drinking?*"

### **12:30 pm**

Gullfoss is quite different on a sunny day. It's very beautiful today but in an odd way, it was even more so in the driving rain when I was here with Dan. There was a much greater sense of the vast power of the water then. Today, you're much more aware of the white sparkle of the breaking water and the high, drifting spray with its rainbow.

### **2:15 pm**

"*Watch the wind direction,*" said our tour guide, so we were careful when we chose our bench to observe Strokkur erupt while we ate our sandwiches. However, the wind changed direction at the last moment and we were drenched by the falling spray. I was relieved to find the water was cold after its sixty foot ascent and descent.

Geysir is also active again after the recent earthquakes. It was erupting as we drove up. I hadn't realized that Strokkur didn't just spontaneously take over when Geysir stopped erupting. It was bored out to a depth of forty meters before it became active again.

### **2:30 pm**

Most of my trekking gear worked well on this trip, the fleece undershirts especially so, and I didn't bring anything superfluous, but I do need gloves that don't get soaked when it rains.

**3:45 pm**

Thingvellir, too, looks much different on a sunny day, in this case very beautiful and much better than when it's raining. I couldn't see much at all last time I was here. The lake was invisible. I did correctly identify Speaker's Rock. I checked with our guide.

The table mountains were formed when lava flowed under the ice and there was no explosion. In that case, the mountain top is flat.

**8 pm**

Back in Reykjavik, we just had time to go to the two used bookstores. The Hitler photographs were gone from the first but the collection of books is even better than I remembered. If only I could read Icelandic! There were very few English books. The second store had even fewer. "*I threw them all out,*" the proprietor explained, "*nobody bought them.*" Of course, it doesn't make much sense to look for Icelandic books translated into English in Iceland. I wouldn't have expected so many Icelandic translations of English and American books, though, when so many Icelanders speak excellent English, and there are so few Icelanders to buy books, anyway.

We sat outside at a sidewalk café downtown and had coffee, which came with a side glass of sparkling water. I've never seen that before. It was good. Then we went back to the bus station restaurant where I was pleased to find Icelandic stew on the menu. It turns out to consist of chunks of lamb and slices of hot dog with bits of potato, all in a caramelized tomato paste, with a fried egg on top. It had been cooked for a very long time, probably in a crock-pot, and was very soothing. It would be a powerful restorative on a cold, rainy, windy day. Well, it would make you feel soothed at any rate even if you wouldn't want to go outside again.

**Tue Sep 9, 7:15 am**

I'm fascinated by how quickly John was transformed into a mythical figure. Something about him immediately made both of us want to stay away from him, an emanation that was not apparent to any of the regular senses. His only physical oddity was his exceptionally heavy tread - he seemed to be trying to crush the surface beneath him. Then he made the joke about luring children into the sauna with lollipops and now there was enough raw material. Very quickly, he became Cucullan. Cucullan very soon attracted the attention of the police who with megaphones told him to "*put DOWN the lollipops*". He was evidently in a rapid growth stage at this time and the police already saw the need to keep him at a distance. By the time we stopped at the café yesterday. Cucullan had begun to rampage. The roar which some would say came from the Harley motorbikes cruising around was revealed to us as the rampaging cry of Cucullan.

Snorri's proprietor just came to the breakfast area and greeted us all. "*How are you?*" she asked Eli, the poet. "*I'm fine,*" she replied. "*I'm always fine.*" "*Would you like to read the paper?*" asked the proprietor. "*Well, I could understand it although I can't understand the evening news*" she replied. "*Oh, you're clever. You could understand*

*soon enough. I was in Sweden and only spoke Icelandic but I needed a job. There was a cleaning job and they said; 'come back in two weeks. If you can understand and talk, you can have the job.' So I did."*

Eli and the proprietor are kindred spirits. The proprietor has operated Snorri's alone for many years while also caring for her invalid husband. Magnus only recently joined her. Eli has three children, 28 to 20 years old. *"I can say I have been married for 25 years,"* she says, *"but I raised the children mostly on my own."* I asked how they feel about her going on a two-week walking trip in the mountains on her own, publishing poetry and so on after a life teaching financial auditing. *"Oh, they understand my values,"* she said, *"although my daughter who is twenty says; 'Why must you go off by yourself for two weeks? Why can't you be a mom?'"*

Eli explained two of her poems and how pleased she was that her illustrator had understood them. One illustration shows a slightly smiling face closely enclosed in a rectangular frame. That poem is about being boxed in by the expectations of others. The other illustration shows two faces, each in its own rectangle, the smaller one below with a gray face. That poem is about the death of a very close friend. Although he's dead, he's still there somehow and still connected.

Eli just went off to work after shaking Mark and me by the hand and encouraging Mark to keep writing.

Today, the sky is cloudless. We have to pack so that we're ready to fly home, but I think we must also go outside for a walk as soon as possible.

**8:30 am**

I told Mark a little about the book I'm contemplating writing and that I can't write poetry because it turns out to be simply clever, not intimate. *"Well, you can write saga poetry, then,"* he replied, *"that's clever."* It occurs to me that not only is he right, but I could also cast the book as a saga. That feels like a very good idea.

As I was waking this morning, I remembered how I always tried to build bigger Meccano models than I had pieces to work with and, in fact, in general I always attempted bigger things than I was equipped to realize. It struck me that marrying Felicity came from that same impulse. Growing up together would challenge me more than I could imagine and was such a compelling prospect that it never occurred to me to question what felt like destiny. After self-destructing under the overall load of stresses that I'd taken on and escaping to America, I felt a bit more realistic and grew just enough to be at least minimally equipped to start over again. I wonder how many marriages break up not because of incompatibility, as the explanation usually goes, but because the couple chose each other well but were then unable to sustain what they'd attempted.

**1:15 pm**

We're on the Flybus to the airport. My bag proved to be extraordinarily heavy because I'd bought more books than I thought, so we carried it to the bus terminal between us,

left it there, and then went in search of a Bonus T-shirt for Mark. The O in Bonus is a very chubby pig, which he thought Ryan would enjoy. They didn't sell them at the supermarket we went to but a helpful assistant who was intrigued by the request suggested we could try at their head office. We didn't have time to do that, so Mark got some Bonus coffee and a Bonus shopping bag instead.

It's such a beautiful day that neither of us wants to leave.

**4:30 pm**

"Anything to declare?" Says Mark: *"Yeah, ma bag's heavy, man."*

**5:50 pm**

The only incident on the flight so far – it's now ten minutes to touchdown in New York – was the woman next to me tipping coffee on my leg. She's Scottish. Her son and daughter live in Brewster, NY, and just had their second child so she's on her way to look after the first one. I hope she's more careful with hot liquids around the kid. It was quite painful.

Mark is intently reading "The Snow Leopard". I thought he'd enjoy it. I re-read from the beginning a thriller I'd read most of on the flight to Iceland. I'd forgotten almost everything about it. I've gotten three quarters of the way through the book on each flight.

It looks like summer over New York and the pilot says it's 75F. Sounds good.

## **Wed Sep 10**

The driver who brought me home last night is fascinated by philosophy and psychology. An idea of his is that the fact that the human brain isn't fully mature until we're fourteen yet our personalities, values and world view are all formed very much earlier means that our thoughts and behavior are governed by a mix of incomplete and misperceived data that was processed by an immature mind. That, he thinks, poses a major problem.

He also noted that he had never felt mature enough to get married but recently realized that he's 49 years old and has lost most of his hair. *"I looked up,"* he said, *"and thought, where is everybody?"*

He's a very contented fellow, however, which he attributes to EST training. It led to a breakthrough in his thinking, a sudden enlightenment which he wanted everyone to experience when he was in the first flush of his excitement. *"But most people thought I was just being a pain in the ass,"* he discovered. He described his experience as a sudden restructuring. Everything suddenly fell into place. *"Things are simply what they are,"* he said, *"not what you think they are."*