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1956

6 August

The grey hat flew out to sea.

Kristján had stepped out of the wheelhouse to admire the view over Faxaflói bay and watch the island approaching, low and green against the backdrop of mountains. When the squall hit the little fishing smack, he had reacted fast, but not fast enough, grabbing for his hat only to snatch at thin air. Though he'd have never admitted it aloud, he thought that it could have been worse: the hat, a Christmas present from his fiancée, hadn't really suited him. Now he would have an excuse to buy a new one.

It meant he would be bareheaded for his visit to the little island of Videy, just off the coast near Reykjavík, but what did that matter, when the whole thing was bound to be a waste of time anyway? Still only in his twenties, Kristján wasn't usually entrusted with anything important, but he was on duty this August bank-holiday weekend as his superior officer was away.

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It felt as if the brief Icelandic summer was already over that August morning on the boat, with no shelter from the wind and the sun hidden by cloud. As there was no regular ferry service to the island, Kristján had had to improvise and do a deal with an old fisherman he knew.

‘Almost there, Kristján,’ the captain called from the wheelhouse, his voice hoarse.

Kristján nodded, though there was no one to see, and did up another button on his overcoat to keep out the cold. If nothing else, at least the trip made for a change of scene, he thought, trying to look on the bright side.

A woman, probably in her early thirties, was standing by the jetty to meet him. Kristján had asked his fisherman friend to come back for him in an hour and a half. By the time he got back to town, the whole morning would have been spent on this visit.

The woman held out her hand. ‘I’m Ólöf Blöndal. Welcome to Videy.’ Her face was grave and she didn’t smile.

‘How do you do?’ The name’s Kristján,’ he said. There was something slightly off about Ólöf’s manner, he thought. She looked a little shifty, yet at the same time he could have sworn she was relieved to see him.

‘It’s this way,’ she said diffidently, and set off up the grassy slope from the jetty. He followed, noting that she had short red hair and was wearing a thick woollen jumper.

Two striking white buildings with red roofs came into view between the island’s twin green hills: the old Danish colonial mansion and the little church beside it. As they drew closer, Kristján noticed how dilapidated they looked, the paint peeling from their walls and window frames.

Beyond them he noticed some tumbledown outbuildings, one of which looked like a cow shed; relics of the days when there was still a farm here. Halfway there, Ólöf stopped, turned and said: 'We're not actually going there. My husband's at home – we live nearby.'

Kristján nodded. 'Does nobody—'

She interrupted: 'We have keys to the mansion, but no one lives there. It's a bit run-down but in pretty good nick considering its age. It's two hundred years old, you know – the oldest stone building in Iceland.'

'This girl, Lára—'

Again she cut him off: 'It's best you speak to my husband.'

Kristján walked along beside her, neither of them saying a word. There was a blustery breeze blowing on the island, but it was warmer than it had been on the crossing, despite the lack of sun. After they had been walking for a couple of minutes, he asked: 'Excuse me, but you said you live here, you and your husband?'

'We moved here in the spring to a house that belongs to my family. We spent last summer here too. It's . . .' She paused. 'There's nowhere quite like it.'

Kristján didn't doubt it; the island was certainly a picturesque spot, its green meadows surrounded by the blue waters of the bay and set against the great hulk of Mount Esja, but Ólöf's words lacked conviction to his ears.

She went on awkwardly: 'It's not far to our house. It's more or less halfway between the mansion and the old school.'

As they walked, he let his mind wander. Being in the

open air agreed with him, but he would rather have been spending this late summer's day doing something quite different. In recent years he and a couple of old friends had taken up mountaineering in their spare time, inspired by the news three years earlier of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's conquest of Everest. While Kristján had no hope of ever achieving those heights, he was making good progress. Only a few days ago news had come in that the north Icelandic peak of Hraundrangi in Öxnadalur had been climbed for the first time. Kristján was acquainted with the two Icelanders who had made the ascent along with an American. What he wouldn't have given to be there right now, rather than here in the tame environs of Videy.

Still, gentle though the terrain was, he was careful where he set his feet as he picked his way over the tussocky ground. He remembered how his mother used to laugh and say that Icelandic men always walked as if they were stepping over tussocks, even when the ground was perfectly flat. But his main concern was to leave here without twisting or spraining an ankle – or dirtying his suit, for that matter. He owned three suits: the light grey one he was wearing now was the newest; the pinstripe was looking a little threadbare these days; and the black one he saved mainly for formal occasions like funerals.

An old wooden house appeared ahead, its black paint flaking. It had obviously seen better days. At that moment an Arctic tern swooped over Kristján's head and he made a grab for his hat to ward the bird off, only to remember

belatedly that the hat was now floating somewhere in Faxaflói bay.

‘Don’t worry,’ Ólöf said. ‘The breeding season’s over, so it won’t attack you.’ Her tone was momentarily lighter, as if she had forgotten that she was in the company of a policeman on duty.

Her husband didn’t come outside to greet them. Noting this, Kristján wondered why it was Ólöf who had been sent to meet him off the boat. Was this the way the couple normally did things, or could there be something else behind it?

‘Come in,’ Ólöf said, rather curtly, once they reached the house.

Kristján entered a hall that turned out to be part of the sitting room. It was warm inside; almost uncomfortably so for the time of year.

‘Óttar?’ Ólöf called. ‘Óttar, he’s here.’

Kristján heard a noise upstairs, then footsteps boomed through the old wooden house. Without saying another word, Ólöf walked into the sitting room and pulled out a chair from a large oak table, indicating that Kristján should take a seat.

He did so and waited. She sat down as well.

‘Good morning,’ said the man who had come down the stairs. ‘I’m Óttar. I take it you’re Kristján?’

‘I am, indeed. Thank you very much for agreeing to meet me. I only managed to explain briefly over the phone, but the thing is, we’re worried about Lára.’

‘She decided to leave,’ Óttar said flatly. ‘She gave up on her position here. I don’t know why. We were so pleased

with her at the beginning of the summer; she seemed hard-working and conscientious. Still, young people today . . .' His face was expressionless as he produced this speech. Kristján shot a glance at Ólöf, who dropped her gaze.

'How old was she again?' Kristján asked, though he already knew the answer.

'Fifteen,' Ólöf answered quietly.

'Fifteen,' Kristján repeated. 'And she'd decided to go back to Reykjavík, you say? Back home?'

'Yes,' Óttar replied.

'When?'

'On Friday. Friday morning. Naturally, I objected. We had an agreement that she would stay the entire summer as our help, but there was no talking any sense into her.'

Kristján glanced at Ólöf again. She was sitting unmoving, staring down at her hands.

'As I mentioned on the phone, no one's seen or heard from her in Reykjavík . . .' Kristján left the words dangling as he watched their reactions. Ólöf didn't raise her eyes; Óttar's face remained impassive.

'Maybe I should have put it differently: did you see her leave on Friday?'

'We can't see the jetty from here,' Óttar replied. 'And it was hardly my job to give the girl a send-off. If people want to leave, that's their business, as far as I'm concerned.'

'What about you, Ólöf? Did you see her go?'

Ólöf shook her head. 'I didn't see anything,' she said, her words ringing a little hollow.

'How was she intending to get back to town?'

‘I have absolutely no idea. She said someone would be coming for her – some friend or relative, I assume. I don’t keep an eye on the boat traffic.’

‘Do you have a boat of your own?’ Kristján asked.

‘Yes, of course,’ Óttar said. ‘But the girl didn’t ask for a lift back to shore and, quite frankly, after the way she’d inconvenienced us, I wasn’t inclined to offer her one. Besides, as I said, she told me she’d made her own arrangements.’

‘Are you sure she left?’

‘What kind of question is that?’ Óttar asked, bristling. ‘Of course we’re sure. She said goodbye and we haven’t seen her since.’

Kristján looked at Ólöf, waiting for her to answer. She was silent at first, then said: ‘Yes, she’s definitely gone. She took her belongings with her.’

‘Her parents used to hear from her regularly,’ Kristján said, ‘so when she didn’t ring at the weekend, they started to get worried. Haven’t they been in touch with you?’

‘Yes, they have,’ Óttar replied. ‘And I told them the same as I’m telling you. I simply can’t understand why you’ve put yourself to the trouble of coming all the way out here. We could have answered your questions over the phone. You can see for yourself that the girl has gone.’

‘I’d need to take a walk around the island to be sure on that point. Videy’s quite large, isn’t it?’

‘Three kilometres from end to end,’ Óttar said.

‘The biggest island in the bay,’ Ólöf added.

‘And I expect there are plenty of hiding places?’

‘Well,’ Ólöf said, ‘there’s our house, and the mansion, of course. And the church. The old school too. And . . .?’

‘I don’t think we need to list all the buildings on the island, Ólöf,’ Óttar intervened. ‘Let the man do as he likes if he feels obliged to make sure. Though I can’t imagine why on earth he thinks Lára would have been hiding on the island for the whole weekend.’

‘How was she?’ Kristján asked.

‘How do you mean?’ Óttar countered.

‘Was she in low spirits? Is there any reason to believe she might have been hiding something? Keeping a secret from you?’

Óttar opened his mouth to answer, then seemed to think better of it. After a lengthy pause, he said: ‘There was nothing wrong with the girl. She was simply bored of being here with us. Well, good riddance, I say. We’ll be more careful about choosing our help next summer.’

‘I see. At any rate, she hasn’t turned up at her parents’ place. Which raises questions, that’s all. Of course, it’s always possible she left here on Friday and—’

Óttar interrupted: ‘Possible? I’m telling you, she left, and anything that may have happened afterwards has nothing to do with us. There’s been no news of a boat going down, so it stands to reason she must be somewhere.’

‘No, I’m sure we’d have heard if something like that had happened,’ Kristján said. ‘The trouble is, there are no reports of any boats coming out here on Friday, though that doesn’t rule out the possibility that someone came and picked her up. Did she live here in the house with you?’

‘Where else would she have lived?’ Óttar asked impatiently.

‘Could I see her room?’

Óttar shrugged. ‘It’s upstairs. But there’s nothing to see.’ He showed no signs of budging, but Ólöf rose to her feet.

‘I’ll take you up,’ she said, her tone a touch friendlier than her husband’s.

Every stair creaked in the old wooden house. The guestroom was small but reasonably cosy, with a sloping ceiling, a bookcase and a dormer window with a view of the sea.

‘Did she bring the books with her?’ Kristján asked.

‘Oh, no, those are ours. We put books in all the rooms. It creates a nice atmosphere. My husband collects them. He’s a barrister, as you’re probably aware. Quite well known, actually.’

Kristján was indeed familiar with the name. He nodded.

‘Óttar wanted to cut down on his legal practice and devote himself to academic work for a while. We’re planning to try and live here more or less in the summers. It’s good to be near . . .’ She trailed off, looking away.

‘Did she take all her belongings with her?’ Kristján asked.

‘All of them, yes,’ Ólöf said. ‘There’s nothing here.’

‘Did she say anything to you?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Lára. Before she left?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘How did she explain her decision?’

Ólöf hesitated. ‘She didn’t explain,’ she said eventually. ‘She, er, she just left.’

‘She must have said something before she left. According to your husband, she told you she was leaving.’

‘Oh yes, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. She just said she wanted to give up her position early. She asked our permission. Naturally, we granted it, but we weren’t happy.’

‘Aren’t you worried about her?’

‘Worried? Er, no, we’ve only just learned that she hasn’t turned up at home. But I’m sure she’s fine.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘Shall we go back down?’

Kristján nodded and followed Ólöf down the narrow, creaking staircase.

When they entered the sitting room, Óttar was nowhere to be seen. Kristján looked around, then jumped when Óttar coughed behind him. He spun round, his heart beating uncomfortably fast.

‘You’re wanted on the telephone.’

‘What?’ Kristján exclaimed.

‘Telephone. For you,’ Óttar repeated, as though nothing could be more natural. ‘In here – in my study.’

‘Oh?’ Puzzled, Kristján followed Óttar into the book-lined room. His eye fell on a shelf of volumes containing Supreme Court judgements. On the desk he saw a black telephone with the receiver lying beside it. There was a noticeable smell of mildew in the room. It seemed the house was as dilapidated indoors as it had looked from the outside.

‘Who’s trying to get hold of me?’ Kristján asked.

‘Someone from the police, of course,’ Óttar replied.

Kristján raised the receiver to his ear. Feeling nervous, he shifted from foot to foot, noticing, as he did so, that the floorboards emitted a hollow boom. There must be a damp cellar under there. He reflected that he wouldn’t want to live in an old wooden house like this.

‘Kristján Kristjánsson speaking,’ he said into the receiver.

‘Kristján, hello. Eiríkur here.’ Kristján knew instantly who it was. The man was two rungs higher than him in the police: his boss’s boss.

‘Hello . . .’ he replied diffidently.

‘Óttar got in touch. He’d like an explanation for the rather odd questions you’ve been asking him and his wife.’

‘They were purely routine questions. I’m investigating the disappearance of a girl, a fifteen-year-old, who hasn’t been seen for several days . . .’

‘A girl who ran away from home, in other words?’

‘Well, we can’t be quite sure of that. She was in service here on Videy. Her parents are worr—’ He didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence.

‘There’s no call to cause Óttar and Ólöf any unnecessary inconvenience over this. You’ve gone to the trouble of visiting the island in person?’

Kristján wanted to protest, to try to explain, but reflected that it probably wouldn’t do any good. ‘Actually, I was about to leave. My visit here was just ending.’

‘Excellent. Give Óttar my regards, would you? And Ólöf Blöndal too. You’ll do that for me?’

Eiríkur hung up.

Kristján replaced the receiver carefully, trying to act as if everything was fine.

‘Nothing urgent,’ he told Óttar.

Ólöf was standing in the sitting room when they emerged from the study.

‘Well, I think that’s all for now. Unless you happen to have remembered anything else?’ Kristján looked at the couple in turn.

‘Nothing else,’ Óttar replied.

‘Then we’ll just have to hope the girl turns up,’ Kristján said.

Óttar answered for both of them again. ‘She’s bound to. I assume we won’t be receiving any more visits like this.’

‘Just one more thing,’ Kristján said. ‘The boat won’t be back to fetch me for a while yet. Would you mind if I took a stroll around the place while I’m waiting?’

‘Do as you please,’ Óttar said. ‘We don’t own the island.’

‘I think I’ll go for a short walk, then. Thank you very much for your time.’

Kristján set out for the schoolhouse Ólöf had mentioned, at the eastern end of the island, the sole remnant of a village that had been abandoned during the Second World War. As he made his way along the grassy path, he was struck by the solitude. In the Middle Ages, Videy had been the site of a wealthy monastery; later, it had become the seat of governors, but nowadays the only inhabitants apart from Óttar and Ólöf were the seabirds screeching from the shore. The walk took him longer than expected.

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When he reached it, the schoolhouse, a wooden, two-storey building, turned out to be empty of course, with no sign that Lára had ever been there. He started off back towards the place where he'd been put ashore, pausing on the way to try the door of the small eighteenth-century stone mansion, but he found it locked. He remembered Ólöf mentioning that they had a set of keys but he couldn't face bothering the couple again to ask if he could borrow them. He pondered what to do. Videy was split almost in two by a narrow isthmus, the Eid, and Kristján toyed with the idea of walking across it to explore the northern half of the island but realized he didn't have time on this trip.

Anxious not to keep the boat waiting, Kristján walked briskly back in the direction of the jetty. There was a fine view of Reykjavík across the narrow sound. The town was fast developing into a city, new neighbourhoods springing up on every side and the ambitious modern church beginning to take shape on top of the hill. In the event, he reached the jetty early. The boat hadn't arrived yet, so he would have a chance to go back and take a quick look inside the island's little church, which he guessed would be unlocked. Although he was pretty sure he wouldn't find the lost girl there, he wanted to check anyway.

Despite its tiny size and stale air, the interior was surprisingly attractive, featuring an unusually high wooden pulpit painted in blue and green, and similarly colourful pews. It occurred to Kristján that this might be a good place to get married to Guðrún, though it was bound to be a palaver

having to ferry the wedding guests to and fro. He would bear it in mind as a possibility. He and Guðrún had been engaged for six months now and were beginning to discuss their future, marriage and children. They lived in the west end of Reykjavík, where Guðrún had recently started work in a grocery store. Yes, maybe one fine day they would find themselves standing before the altar in here . . .

There weren't many hiding places in the small church, and, from the musty smell, he guessed the door hadn't been opened in a while. It could do with an airing. Having checked behind the pulpit and under the pews, Kristján stepped outside again and gratefully filled his lungs with fresh air. His gaze wandered to the churchyard. Just then, his thoughts were interrupted by the faint throb of an engine. Looking out across the water, he spotted the fishing boat in the distance, making steady progress towards the island.

Kristján walked slowly down to the jetty, trying to relax and enjoy the moment, despite having received what almost amounted to a dressing-down from his superior, Eiríkur. Completely undeserved, of course. Kristján was only trying to do his job, but people like Óttar and Ólöf had influential friends. He told himself there was no point letting it get to him.

Reaching the jetty ahead of the boat, he stood and waited. The sun was breaking free of the clouds now and the blustery wind that had greeted him was dying down to a gentle breeze. He gazed out across the bay, feeling a faint regret, after all, for the hat that had been snatched away.

His thoughts returned to the missing girl. She was

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probably holed up safe somewhere and her parents were making a fuss about nothing. It occurred to him that he didn't know what she looked like. He would have to ask for a photograph of her if she didn't turn up.

Yes, more likely than not she would be found safe and sound, and this would be his last trip to Videy for the foreseeable future. But as the old fishing smack came to rest against the jetty, Kristján had a powerful intuition that the case was far from closed.

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1966

8 August

The woman was sitting at one of the little tables in Café Mokka, reading a newspaper. In front of her was half a waffle with cream and jam, and a cooling cup of coffee. On the wall beside her there was a print depicting a nuclear mushroom cloud and the terrified faces of children. But none of these attracted her attention, so absorbed was she in that day's copy of *Vísir* with its news of an unsolved crime.

**DETECTIVE KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON:
LÁRA'S DISAPPEARANCE STILL CASTS
A LONG SHADOW**

Ten years ago, Kristján Kristjánsson was the first police officer on the scene when Lára Marteinsdóttir went missing. The experienced detective told our reporter that Lára's disappearance still casts a long shadow over the nation. Lára was

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working as a maid at the home of the Supreme Court barrister Óttar Óskarsson and his wife, Ólöf Blöndal, on the island of Videy when she vanished without a trace. Only fifteen years old at the time, Lára was described as a lovely girl, well liked by everyone who knew her. Ten years later the mystery of what happened to Lára remains unsolved. As Kristján Kristjánsson explained to *Vísir*, the police pursued various lines of inquiry at the time, none of which produced any results. They never discovered who could have given Lára a lift to Reykjavík in their boat, and no physical remains have ever been found that could be linked to the missing girl. At one time there was talk of requesting help from foreign police agencies but in recent years there have been no new developments. It is as if Lára has vanished off the face of the earth.

Accompanying the report was a grainy photo of a pretty teenage girl with dark hair and eyebrows, wearing a velvet dress with a high collar. There was a photo of Kristján Kristjánsson too, with horn-rimmed glasses and a receding hairline. His expression was simultaneously kind and careworn, as if he were exhausted by the search for Lára. The woman stared at the two photos for a while before closing the paper and rising to her feet without finishing her coffee or waffle. She was filled with a creeping sense of unease, as always when she heard Lára's name, and had completely lost her appetite. She would have to distract herself by thinking about something else.

Leaving the paper on the table, she walked quickly out of the café onto Skólavörðustígur, where a chilly wind was sweeping along the pavement and the scaffolding for

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the imposing new Hallgrímskirkja church dominated the view at the top of the hill.

Kristján Kristjánsson, meanwhile, was sitting in the old police station on Pósthússtræti, in the very centre of Reykjavík, also reading a copy of *Vísir*.

He hadn't yet moved to the brand-new police headquarters on Hverfisgata but was looking forward to working in an up-to-date building with all mod cons. Even better, it would take him almost no time at all to walk to work in future from his home on Stangarholt. And he would probably be given his own office too. For a moment his thoughts continued along this pleasant path before returning to what he'd been reading.

What did happen to Lára? Could some unknown person have taken her in his boat from Videy to Reykjavík? Did she vanish in the sea along with all her luggage? Or did she make it to Reykjavík, only to fall victim to some unscrupulous individual there? Or could she have staged her own disappearance and still be alive today, on the other side of the globe perhaps, with a new name and family? Might some of our readers even know the fate of the girl in the picture?

Kristján sighed. The reporter's speculation got on his nerves. He felt it trivialized the seriousness of the fact that a young girl who had never hurt a soul had disappeared, and, he feared, suffered some terrible fate. But what could you say in an interview like that? Except that you had done your best.

Was it true, though? Had he done his best?

Rising abruptly to his feet, he went over to the window. It was a raw sort of day, hinting that autumn was coming early this year, an ominous wind blowing down Austurstræti and the faces of the passers-by pinched from battling against the gale as they ran their errands in the nearby shops and bank. That August had been unusually cold and stormy, and, with the sun hidden behind the clouds, the grey buildings and the street outside looked bleak.

Kristján's thoughts travelled ten years back in time, to August 1956. To the days when he had first got an inkling, then still a relatively new recruit to the police, that there were powerful forces out to influence the investigation. To the moment when the phone had rung in Óttar's study and Eiríkur, one of the most senior figures in the force, had told him that the case didn't merit any particular attention. Kristján had gone back to town, feeling chastened by the reprimand, since he believed he had only been doing his duty, as any conscientious policeman would. But what could you say to your superior officer in a situation like that? It was a question Kristján had returned to repeatedly over the past decade, though he had never discussed it with anyone else apart from his wife, who had shrugged and said that he shouldn't dwell on it; he simply needed to move on. Then there was Högni. Kristján was all too aware that he hadn't pursued the tip about him either . . . But there had been no appetite at the time for importuning prominent members of society with uncomfortable questions.

Of course the case hadn't been closed that August day on Videy, far from it.

When Lára didn't come home, she had been reported missing on the radio and in the papers. The girl's disappearance had caused a stir, as it wasn't every day that a young girl vanished in Iceland. Her large, dark eyes in the photo that was circulated in the papers had seemed to speak to the public, as if Lára were in possession of some terrible secret. There was intense pressure on the police to find the girl, and the responsibility for that lay with Kristján, but he had failed in his duty.

Kristján had worked on the investigation with a number of other officers. Together with a colleague, he had visited Lára's parents in Grjótathorp, a tangle of old wooden houses and narrow streets climbing the hillside from the centre of town. They had started to get worried as soon as they didn't receive their regular phone call from their daughter the weekend she went missing.

'She always rang us,' her mother had said. Mother and daughter were extraordinarily alike, to judge from the picture of Lára in the papers. 'She's a homebody and has always confided in us. Then she got it into her head that she wanted to work as a maid over the summer, so she applied for a position with the couple on Videy and got the job. Not that I was surprised – seeing as she's so hard-working and presentable.'

Lára's father was a little older than her mother. Both were teachers and Lára was their only child. The girl's room had been spick and span, containing a white metal bedstead covered in a colourful quilt that Lára had

crocheted herself in her needlework classes at school. She had good taste in colours, Kristján had thought to himself at the time. Strange how these unimportant details remained with him a decade later. The wardrobe had been full of clothes that she hadn't taken with her to Videy, winter garments mostly, but also the velvet dress she was wearing in the black-and-white photo, which turned out to be green.

Against one wall were a simple dressing table and chair, both of which looked home-made, and in the drawer were some postcards from a cousin of Lára's who lived in Copenhagen. The bookcase had contained a Bible and several novels, including works by Halldór Laxness, the Icelander who had recently been crowned winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Nothing in the room had provided any clues about Lára's fate. Kristján had found a diary behind the novels in the bookcase, but it had turned out to be for the school year of 1954–5. Inside, he'd read in Lára's careful handwriting her descriptions of the main meals she had eaten each day, as well as comments about her classmates at Austurbær School, particularly the good-looking boys.

Kristján had asked Lára's mother if the girl had been in the habit of keeping a diary and the woman had said that she had, adding that she'd encouraged her daughter to write about her life on the island. 'It was supposed to be an adventure,' the mother had continued. 'My Lára hasn't led a particularly eventful life. She's planning to take her school-leaving exams and had been working as a shop assistant at a dairy in her free time. The job on Videy was

a chance for her to have an adventure and perhaps grow up a bit.' The mother's eyes had filled with tears as she said these last words. 'As far as I'm concerned, she'd have done much better not to go. Only fifteen, and now . . .' From what Kristján could remember, the woman never did finish the sentence.

He also recalled asking if there was any chance that Lára could have been planning to meet someone in Reykjavík that fateful weekend. The girl's father had replied that his daughter didn't have a boyfriend. 'Lára's always been close to us. I can't imagine her coming to Reykjavík without letting us know.'

Kristján could think of countless examples of young people who had their own reasons for not confiding in their parents about what they were up to. But, as it turned out, none of Lára's girlfriends had been able to give the police any information about possible boyfriends or other men in her life who she could conceivably have run away with.

According to Lára's parents, she had made the acquaintance of Óttar and Ólöf, the couple living on Videy, through a girl who'd been in service there the previous summer. It had occurred to Kristján that it might be worth talking to the girl in question, but it hadn't been a priority. After all, he'd reasoned, what could she know about Lára's fate?

Lára had telephoned her parents every week and sounded happy with her life. Admittedly, she would never have complained in her employers' hearing, but her parents agreed that she had sounded contented. She had taken a boat out to the island at the beginning of May

with the intention of staying until the end of August. Then, according to Óttar and Ólöf, she'd unexpectedly announced that she wasn't going to see out her contract. Lára's mother had shaken her head over this: 'I can assure you, it's most unlike Lára not to finish something. She always turned up punctually to work at the dairy and would never have wanted it said of her that she was the type to quit.'

Kristján snapped out of his reverie to find himself still standing by the window in the police station. He finished the cold coffee in his cup, grimacing at the bitter taste. Lára's story continued to haunt him. He had no intention of closing the case, although it had happened a long time ago and all the clues had probably disappeared by now. The grief in her parents' eyes had been so piercing that he felt he would do anything he could to alleviate their suffering.

At the time it had been considered most likely that Lára had accepted a lift on somebody's boat and that her fate had been sealed, either on the way back to shore or later in Reykjavík. He supposed it had been the most convenient explanation: an unknown villain, a terrible crime that would never be solved.

Yet Kristján couldn't help wondering if they wouldn't have done better to focus their attention on Videy. Of course, they had searched the island at the time, without finding any sign of the girl. And Óttar and Ólöf had stuck to their story: that Lára had decided to give up her position and return to Reykjavík. But he was aware that the police could have conducted a more thorough search and subjected Óttar and Ólöf to far more rigorous questioning.

REYKJAVÍK

The police had put out an appeal to anyone who could have given Lára a lift in their boat that weekend, but no one had come forward. Nor had the harbourmaster in Reykjavík been able to provide any useful information about vessels sailing between Videy and the mainland that Friday. Since the island was only a bit over four kilometres from the shore at the nearest point, it would have been possible to take a small vessel out there without attracting attention, and the boat wouldn't necessarily have put in at Reykjavík on the way back. The police's inquiries had drawn a blank. Search parties had been sent out to comb the beaches but no sign of a body or any of Lára's belongings had ever been found. The girl had simply vanished into thin air.

No wonder the case had caught the popular imagination. Nothing could be found to discredit Lára; she'd had no secrets and seemed to have been a girl anyone could identify with; a girl who had simply wanted a change of scene. A girl who had left her family home for the summer in the hope of gaining a bit of maturity and independence, and performed her duties conscientiously, right up until she had decided to quit her job early – if that claim was true.

Her departure from Videy was a genuine mystery – unless, of course, she had never left the island at all.