

**RESTORING A LIFE ON THE MARGINS. HOW MY GRANDFATHER'S DIARIES  
FROM HIS TIME IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT HAVE BEEN USED IN PURSUIT  
OF POST-MORTEM JUSTICE, AND WHY ICELAND HAS MORE TO RECKON  
WITH THAN JUST OUR TARNISHED NAME**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This M.A. thesis examines the ongoing state-directed initiative to achieve a posthumous exoneration for my grandfather, Tryggvi Rúnar Leifsson, who in 1975 was wrongfully accused, and later convicted, of involvement in the disappearance of one Guðmundur Einarsson. Diaries he wrote during his exceptionally long detention in solitary confinement before his conviction anchor the essay. I discuss how these texts were received by the Icelandic public after my grandfather's death in 2009—they came out two years later—and how forensic psychologists and legal professionals have used them to access the diarist's (innocent) persona. I also provide my own introduction of their contents.

The original prosecution against my grandfather in the 1970s built on no hard evidence; neither body nor murder weapon ever materialized, most remarkably. Crucial to achieving a guilty verdict was a prejudiced assessment of his (criminal) character. My essay highlights how portions of that same assessment have been repurposed in the current-day pursuit of his exoneration. As a national scandal is made and remade, I take a stand with my namesake against the violent deformities inflicted by plastic psychology.

## LAY SUMMARY

This M.A. thesis examines the ongoing state-directed initiative to achieve a posthumous exoneration for my grandfather, Tryggvi Rúnar Leifsson, who in 1975 was wrongfully accused, and later convicted, of involvement in the disappearance of one Guðmundur Einarsson. Diaries my grandfather wrote during his exceptionally long detention in solitary confinement before his conviction anchor the essay. I discuss how these texts were received by the Icelandic public after my grandfather's death in 2009—they came out two years later—and how forensic psychologists and legal professionals have used them to access the diarist's persona. I also provide my own introduction of their contents. My essay highlights how portions of my grandfather's psychological assessment from the 1970s have been repurposed in the current-day pursuit of his exoneration.

## PREFACE

This thesis is entirely the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Tryggvi Rúnar Brynjarsson.

All translations from Icelandic are mine, unless otherwise noted.

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*Fyrir afa*



## WOUNDS REOPENED

A series of chance circumstances determined the survival—and eventually also the exposé—of three of my grandfather’s diaries, written in the midst of an experience that has since come to be regarded as one of the most severe violations of an individual’s rights in Icelandic history.

On December 23, 1975, Icelandic police took a 24-year-old Tryggvi Rúnar Leifsson—my grandfather—into custody on a vague allegation of involvement in a fight that had led to the death of one Guðmundur Einarsson, a boy of 18 years, in January 1974. Police subsequently held him in solitary confinement without a conviction for 627 days: a longer duration, apparently, than any citizen in any society professing to liberal rule of law has ever been subjected to in peacetime (which excludes non-citizens such as suspected terrorists in U.S. military prisons).<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, it has become commonplace to call the treatment he endured at the hands of the law’s custodians in his tiny cell at Reykjavík’s Síðumúli prison “torture”, for at least it involved the breakdown of his mental defenses through the creation of an intense atmosphere of psychic terror, physical suffering, and spiritual despair—all for the purpose of attaining from him a confession. And while that operation of procurement (which was part of a more extensive operation, involving more suspects) proved an immediate success, if only in that it provided the sole basis for his eventual conviction,<sup>2</sup> it also set off a legal catastrophe and justice drama of such

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<sup>1</sup> The first authority figure to define this feat as record-breaking was Gísli Guðjónsson, an esteemed professor in forensic psychology “who has worked on psychological assessments in over 1000 criminal cases around the world”, and “knows of no other case where defendants have been detained for so long in solitary confinement.” In Arndís Soffía Sigurðardóttir et al, Commission report on the cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur to the Interior Minister (March 21, 2013), p. 449.

<sup>2</sup> In 1978, my grandfather received a sentence of 16 years in Reykjavík’s district court, which Iceland’s Supreme Court then shortened to 13 years in 1980.

proportions that the legitimacy of the island-nation's judicial apparatus has for a while now appeared decisively compromised from it.

Indeed, Icelanders still find themselves struggling, four decades after the event, to overcome the scandalous case (or cases) of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur.<sup>3</sup> As of February 2017, these stand to be reopened by Iceland's Supreme Court, where some bureaucrat will almost certainly say the word to officially clear the grotesque stamp sullyng our regal Viking name. This could happen any day now.

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Grim, isn't it, that my grandfather doesn't get to live to experience his own exoneration?

Yet it was precisely his passing, in May 2009 of esophageal cancer, that set us up for being where we are today. The catalyst for the current initiative to revisit these cases was an exposé of three diaries he kept during his stay in solitary confinement—a posthumous affair by necessity.

Before I get into the contents of these texts, and how they've been used in the pursuit of exoneration, I have a pent-up urge to give an account of their revelation. It started in the fall of 2011 when my mother, Kristín Anna Tryggvadóttir, “took a leap of faith”, as she put it in one interview,<sup>4</sup> and decided to show the three diaries she had to journalist Helga Arnardóttir, who

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<sup>3</sup> The case is named after two men, and not just one, who went missing, and are assumed to have been killed, in an interval of 10 months in 1974, Guðmundur Einarsson and Geirfinnur Einarsson. On the subject of names: the Icelandic tradition of patronymics dictates that even in formal settings (such as the university essay), people are referred to by their first names, since last names refer not to family names, as is common in most Western cultures, but to an individual parent. Saying “the cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur” is therefore a lot more logical than saying “the Einarsson cases”, because the latter would refer not to them but their fathers, two completely different men.

<sup>4</sup> See the video interview that concludes the section titled “Questions” in Simon Cox, “The Reykjavík Confessions”: <[www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/2014/newsspec\\_7617/index.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/2014/newsspec_7617/index.html)> (May 15, 2014).

was researching the cases at the time. Amazed by what she held in her hands, Helga suggested they be passed on to forensic psychologist Gísli Guðjónsson for his expert evaluation. And “[o]nce I had read the diaries”, Gísli later wrote, “I knew that there was no turning back, the Gudmundur and Geirfinnur cases had to be reviewed afresh.”<sup>5</sup> After he made an announcement along those lines on national television—shifting his earlier stance not to comment on the cases, seeing as he was involved in work for the police at the time of the original investigation—Iceland’s Interior Minister, Ögmundur Jónasson, an austere socialist of the old school, appointed a work group of legal professionals (“a young team ... with no past links to the investigations”<sup>6</sup>) to conduct such a review. A lawyer from the ranks of Ögmundur’s Left Green Movement, Arndís Soffía Sigurðardóttir, headed the work group, and Gísli aided in the task.

Lurid quotes from my grandfather’s diaries subsequently circulated online and in the printed press. Outraged laymen joined hands in a wave of quick-and-easy opinion pieces and Facebook posts. News articles were largely repetetive, and deplete of historical sensibility and nuance. They were also riddled with errors, ranging from the erroneous linking of my grandfather to the Geirfinnur side of the case to the presentation of mistaken information about the circumstances of his detention in solitary. For years we were told, for instance, that his pre-conviction detention had gone on for 655 days. This was reiterated even in respectable scientific journals.<sup>7</sup> Now we’re hearing a less slick-sounding 627. It was also reported at the start that a prison parson by the name of Jón Bjarman (who became known in the 1970s for drawing attention to the heinous conditions in Síðumúli prison) smuggled the journals in and out of his

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<sup>5</sup> Gísli Guðjónsson, *The Psychology of False Confessions. Forty Years of Science and Practice* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, due to be published in the spring of 2018), ch. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gísli Guðjónsson et al, “The Role of Memory Distrust in Cases of Internalised False Confession”, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 28 (2014), p. 336-348.

cell, a rumor which implies some sort of clandestine scheme, requiring of my grandfather to have been hiding a pen and paper somewhere in there, when a brief look at his diaries makes it abundantly clear that this was not the case. I could go on, but it would be pointless. And I suppose no one should be too surprised by how many inaccurate things people posted, even (or especially) professional journalists; the modern crime scandal is, after all, a thoroughfare in exaggerations, rumors, and misunderstandings. Context certainly seems to be of secondary importance.

More telling about the zeitgeist than the faulty reportage, however, was the radical pitch in the rhetoric: the obvious moral position to take was a near-unequivocal denouncement of Iceland's criminal justice system. Undoubtedly, the movement to reopen the cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur benefitted from an interaction with anti-establishment energy still free-flowing in Reykjavík after our 2008 disgrace, a post-meltdown mood which saw the authority of many traditional pillars of power called into question from the left.<sup>8</sup> What Icelanders were experiencing here appeared in some ways to be the inverse of the furious class hatred that had swept the country—even those same people, sometimes—in the 1970s: criminal suspects previously demonized as dangerous to respectable society now had defenders in virtually every corner of society.

And why be bothered by inaccuracies in the news, one might ask, when all they do is add a little bit more grist to the mill of justice and righteousness?

By winter's end, Helga had won a reputable prize from Iceland's Journalist Association for coverage of the year, which she accepted by echoing a most quotable epigraph on one of my

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<sup>8</sup> Viðar Þorsteinsson has written (in English) on how left-wing politics in Iceland in the aftermath of our financial crisis seldom went far beyond that questioning. "Iceland's Revolution": [www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/iceland-banking-finance-icesave-left-greens/](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/iceland-banking-finance-icesave-left-greens/) (March 14, 2016).

grandfather's diaries—the source of her win—which states that, “the truth will come out, even if late.”<sup>9</sup> In movie theaters and on YouTube, people rewatched the shows and documentaries that are said to have started to change the nation's collective mind about the cases back in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Already then, I suspect, Anglophone writers had begun to groom the cases' rich raw material for the global cultural marketplace, with its seemingly insatiable demand these days for Nordic noir and tragedies of the true crime variant. It didn't take a genius, anyway, to recognize that here was something deeper than just the story of the year: this was only the most recent chapter in *the* national cause célèbre, largely overlooked by most of the rest of the world—like the nation—until very recently. Hence the cases' Netflix debut's promise to offer up “the strangest criminal investigation you've never heard of”,<sup>11</sup> and now, too, apparently, their rendering into an acted, English-language TV series by Iceland's most successful Hollywood director/film producer.<sup>12</sup>

At last, in March 2013, Ögmundur's work group published its results, a big report which only added fuel to the public outrage. This despite its authors' manifest chief objective being as conservative as any—namely, restoration of faith in the judiciary. “It is important”, they used

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<sup>9</sup> In the bibliography, I have included links to videos and discussions that are available only in Icelandic, for instance Helga's acceptance speech, and her coverage of my grandfather's diaries.

<sup>10</sup> The 1990s saw a few bouts of public activism for justice, variable in their intensity, and no less than three legal pleas to reopen the cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur. My grandfather partook in none of these, and they were all met with blatant rejections from Iceland's Supreme Court. Nevertheless, films such as *Aðför að lögum* (a title with at least three different meanings in Icelandic), by Sigursteinn Músson and Kristján Guðjónsson, from 1997, undoubtedly changed the minds of many people about the original police investigation's integrity.

<sup>11</sup> Dylan Howitt's *Out of Thin Air* will be available to North American viewers in September 2017: <[www.netflix.com/title/80119349](http://www.netflix.com/title/80119349)>.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Tartaglione, “‘The Reykjavík Confessions’: Buccaneer Media, Balt Kormakur's RVK Studios Plot True Crime Drama”: <<http://deadline.com/2017/04/reykjavik-confessions-series-baltasar-kormakur-buccaneer-media-rvk-john-brownlow-true-crime-1202078382/>> (April 27, 2017).

their epilogue to remind us, “that there be general trust towards the police, the prosecution, and the justice system as a whole.”<sup>13</sup>

The work group furthermore stressed in the epilogue that the cases’ progression within the justice system be “natural”, and that they enjoy “a neutral debate following the publication of this report. The cases be discussed in calmness and free of prejudice.” Irritatingly ambiguous, it was unclear who or what exactly these statements were meant to address. But at least there was an acknowledgement that the process itself—the question of *how* Iceland would get to a new conclusion about the cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur—would in itself be important for finding justice.

Here’s a portion of what the report said about my grandfather:

His diaries, which the authors of this report deem credible, and which were evidently written while he was detained for the Guðmundur case, give a good description of his bad mental state in isolation and total helplessness. Tryggvi Rúnar was a desperate man who made desperate attempts to get out of isolation by confessing his involvement in the disappearance and death of Guðmundur Einarsson.<sup>14</sup>

It was the first time officials from within the justice system admitted some glaringly obvious points. But they didn’t stop there. Not only had there been something wrong, they suggested—morally if not legally—about the way the system they represented had treated my grandfather; something also ought to be done about it.

The commission report set the tone for something like an innocence project in a country without precedents for such endeavors.

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<sup>13</sup> Commission report, p. 476. Here, I follow the insights of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on the self-sustaining values of the “legal world”. See: “The Force of Law: Toward a Sociology of the Juridical Field” (trans. Richard Terdiman), *The Hastings Law Journal* 38 (1986-7), 805-853.

<sup>14</sup> Commission report, p. 416.

What made this particular endeavor most singular, however, as far as standard innocence projects in the U.S. go, was that evidence for exoneration had to be sought entirely in the convicts' minds.<sup>15</sup> This was a direct legacy of the original investigation, for there hadn't been any physical evidence to begin with; no bodies ever materialized, nor did any murder weapons. And while nothing tangible had emerged to support the case for innocence, something else had: a historical argument about advances in the subfield of forensic psychology that deals with interrogation techniques and false confessions. It goes like this: the court that convicted my grandfather and the others hadn't built on a strong "scientific background" on false confessions, and were therefore effectively unable to take into account the deleterious effects of things like lengthy spells in solitary confinement on the confessing suspects. Relevant, pre-existing evidence—the confessions and the conditions under which they were produced—ought to be re-evaluated on the basis of newfound knowledge on the subject.<sup>16</sup> That being so, moreover, it seemed to make sense for my grandfather's diaries to be presented as "new evidence" required by law for the reopening of a criminal case, as they ostensibly contained a confessor's "psyche".

These were core ideas informing the work Ögmundur's group did, and they were central to the plea my family's lawyer composed, and my mother and grandmother put forward in my grandfather's name (Iceland's legislative assembly, the Alþingi, passed a law in December 2014 which enabled the deceased convicts' next of kin to seek restorative justice on their behalf). It's

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<sup>15</sup> By far the most common reason for the reopening of serious criminal cases in the U.S. is new DNA evidence. See the statistics compiled for the anniversary of the Innocence Project: <<https://25years.innocenceproject.org/impact>>.

<sup>16</sup> "The science behind false confessions originates in the 1980s ... Much experimental work has since then been conducted ... [T]he scientific background on false confessions is now considerable and has influenced case law internationally" Commission report, p. 346-47. And then in the conclusion: "With regards to the knowledge that now exists on unreliable testimonies and false confessions and the definite conclusion presented in this report, the work group considers it plausible that a bill be proposed to reopen the cases", p. 474.

safe to say, at last, that the decision from February earlier this year to go ahead with reopening the case would not have come through had it not been for this all-vindicating theory of scientific progress. While the state prosecutor did not accept the diaries as new evidence, he did affirm that “false and unreliable confessions are a fact”; “the convict at times endured duress during his detention”; and that, ultimately, there is “reason to reopen this case ... and [for] a new verdict [to] be put on the case where a stand is taken on what value the psychological assessment has in evaluating the reliability of the convict’s confessions.”<sup>17</sup>

For the law to so intricately involve itself in evaluations of psyches and characters hasn’t become any more comfortable today than it was in the 1970s. As I will argue in the second half of this paper, the most serious errors of the reopening process itself have been made precisely by putting my grandfather’s persona under such scrutiny.

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The sudden noise the diaries made, impacting on the national discourse and jumpstarting legal proceedings as swiftly as they did, marked a momentous departure from the long silence and secrecy surrounding them prior to then. In fact, my grandfather believed he had personally seen to their destruction, apparently as part of an effort to leave that part of the past behind him. It wasn’t until he was receiving palliative care for the cancer that would leave him dead a few days later that he learned how three of them came to be in my mother’s possession. She discovered a whole bunch of his prison diaries, she explained to him, and later to the world, when she was looking through things in our storage room, where he kept them (a bit recklessly perhaps) in an

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<sup>17</sup> The reopening committee’s decree in the case of Tryggvi Rúnar Leifsson. Case Number 6/2015 (February 24, 2017). The quotes here are contained in points 1203, 1206, and 1215, respectively.



unlocked briefcase. Of the dozen journals she estimates there were in total, she would take two or three at a time up to her room to read in secret, hiding them from view under her bed. “The curious teenager”—a role with an inbuilt justification for behavior that obviously infringed on her father’s privacy—was how she retroactively portrayed herself as in interviews, and the headlines reflected that.<sup>18</sup>

Luckily for the sake of everyone’s conscience, however, my mother sought her father’s consent to this future endeavor during that closing conversation between the two of them. “When the time is right”, he said, “you will know what to do with them.”

The trio of journals we have today are ones that happened to be under my mother’s bed when my grandfather embarked on his mission of historical erasure. Their successive survival then depended on my mother’s resolute preservation and silence, things that would come to earn her another retroactively conceived part in the bigger tale of these cases: that of the guardian. And not just any old guardian. To this point, Gísli Guðjónsson, the forensic psychologist, writes favorably of my mother’s emotional and protective disposition the first time they met (she flew down to England, where he is now Emeritus Professor at King’s College London, to show him the diaries, refusing to leave them out of her sight). In Gísli’s view, she had only “love for [her father] and complete faith in his innocence” as a lodestar for her conduct,<sup>19</sup> and with all the risk involved in showing those documents to an unfamiliar professor, this was what made her a truly admirable guardian.

So different were these new hues my mother was bringing to the picture, so much brighter in tone and texture, from the darkest darks these cases routinely evoke, it almost

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<sup>18</sup> See for example, Jóhann Hauksson, “Forvitni unglingurinn” (“The curious teenager”), *DV* (March 20, 2015), p. 21-22.

<sup>19</sup> Gísli Guðjónsson, *The Psychology of False Confessions*, ch. 11 (“The return of the Gudmundur and Geirfínnur cases”).

surprises me that people have wanted to include her little story in their bigger narratives; the way it fractures an otherwise solid noir aesthetic is practically a stylistic crime.

My favorite anecdote related to how my mother has been portrayed, however, concerns the making of the photobook *Sugar Paper Theories* by a Welshman named Jack Latham (with some textual contributions from Gísli Guðjónsson), for which he had my mother pose in our backyard holding my newborn sister in her arms.<sup>20</sup> The photograph, captioned “Kristín Tryggvadóttir and Katla”, appears near the book’s end and centers on a woman of great aplomb. She looks totally stunning, and radiates maternal energy. The cliché of a humanities graduate student that I am, the first question I asked my mother upon viewing the picture was whether she didn’t think it ultimately represented our family’s resilience in the face of the adversities we’ve had to overcome growing up in the case’s shadow. But no, it hadn’t been anything like that. Latham’s idea, she told me, had been for the pose to reflect her guardianship of the diaries (ah yes, of course: the affectionate safekeeping of the daughter seamlessly morphing into that of the mother), but as the subject herself saw it, it was just another day, and she was just holding her baby. How else was she to present herself to the camera?

I recount this episode because it captures well how I conceive of my mother’s character and attitude, towards this particular aspect of our lives and theatrics in general. Displays of melodrama about our “predicament” have simply never been allowed in the home. I sometimes think to myself that for this reason my mother would not make the best reality television star—something for which I am, however, incredibly grateful given the context.

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Latham, *Sugar Paper Theories* (London: Here press, 2016).

## “MY LIFE HERE IN SÍÐUMÚLI PRISON”

The three diaries that survive my grandfather form a timeline unbroken from October 25, 1976, when he had already spent over 10 months in isolation, to November 21, 1977, shortly before his first conviction at Reykjavík’s district court. The oldest remaining diary has “No. IV” written on it, so it’s safe to assume it was preceded by three others.

My grandfather’s time in solitary confinement can be separated into two periods. The first was marked by coercion, the second was meted out as punishment. The beginning portion was most intense, to be sure. This was when prison guards and police interrogators (the roles between the two were sometimes blurred—which is troubling in itself) got from him his confession: this was when they kept him awake for days, induced in him a four-day state of “florid” psychosis, and drugged him most heavily, all the while keeping him from his defense attorney in a repeated and focused fashion (even as the latter would prove himself a more or less useless man). One time, they tried to convince him that he’d been calling out from his sleep the truth of his evil deeds (they seem to have been obsessed with some facile strain of Freudian psychoanalysis and dreams in general), and when he wouldn’t confess, they pinned him down and taped some sort of bandage over his mouth—for his own sake, apparently. They even orchestrated a scene wherein they could appear to be safeguarding his life from an angry mob, which had, they alleged, gathered outside the prison to seek vigilante justice for his vile actions, when in reality it was them making the noise from the outside.<sup>21</sup> On January 9, 1976, following all this devilry, my

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<sup>21</sup> Here I have condensed well-documented episodes from the prelude to my grandfather’s confession. The abbreviated summary I provide—which could go on, but isn’t my key concern here—is taken mainly from my family’s plea to re-open his case, put forward by our lawyer, Lúðvík Bergvinsson, and from official responses to said plea. Most of this information comes from whistleblowers from within the prison system, some from the journal of the prison itself, and yet others from my grandfather’s own account, contained in Þorsteinn Antonsson’s *Áminntur um sannsögli* (Reykjavík: Skjaldborg, 1991).

grandfather signed the sheet that later Icelanders would work so hard to rescind, a murky murder confession.

It was then because my grandfather retracted his confession that he was ultimately condemned to rot, as his inquisitors had threatened he would should he not confess, in the oppressive confines of Síðumúli prison for all those months. Repeatedly in his diaries, my grandfather identified the extension to his detention as that: “a vindictive measure”, he wrote (on October 30, 1976), something administered entirely on the private whims of these policemen. Not that he mounted a systemic critique of this arrangement. No, he took for granted that there weren’t any rules or regulations in place to prevent such arbitrary exercises of power. He was unsurprised because he knew that was how Icelandic police operated.

The documents my mother salvaged cover a bulk of that period of punishment, by which time the sadism of the early days had passed. (The investigators had, after all, retrieved from my grandfather what they needed to finish him at trial.) If an abhorrence such as solitary confinement can ever be described as conventional, then this was it: months of unfathomable monotony and silence, isolation for all but a quarter of an hour per day when he could go outside for air.

By the time he started journal *No. IV*, my grandfather appears to have adjusted to this ill-accommodatable environment. Evidently, his thoughts were lucid. He recognized (and derided himself) when he had misconceptions about things, signalling that he was not, at the end of the day, going insane. He was still on some sedatives—had a dependency, Gísli Guðjónsson states—but later discussed his decision to get off them (on July 21, 1977). “Of course I had to take

something before, because I knew that my willpower wasn't sufficient, because it is a great strife to stay here innocent and to be able to dissociate from that like it's nothing."<sup>22</sup>

Overall, this period had nothing in store for my grandfather akin to the misery, disorientation, and devastation he had experienced before it. "A festival", he quipped, "in comparison to how it was the first 8 months here in Síðumúli" (October 31, 1977). In some ways, it was actually a period of productivity. Most notably, by late 1976 my grandfather had somehow mustered up a determination to use the remainder of his stay to work towards becoming, as he once put it, a man "formidable and tremendous!" (November 11, 1977) Contrary to rotting, he was spending 3 to 4 hours a day on physical exercise by the end of his confinement; "good", he bragged, "considering the air conditioning in here is very bad" (August 24, 1977). It's been remarked that his life in Síðumúli prison gradually came to revolve only around this "obsessive fitness routine" of his,<sup>23</sup> though I have to interject that such commentary overlooks the ways his behavior—and writing about that behavior—transcends obsession, and mere routine. A generous interpretation will surely find in such physical intensification a manifestation of a more abstract and high-minded undertaking playing out in his head, and on the pages of his journals: namely, the future-oriented projection of his will, an exercise of his personal autonomy given the tight constraints on his freedom. One needn't even read between the lines to grasp this.

I'm growing myself physically and mentally. And I'm on a good track with that. Ps my goal is to come out of here in top shape! physically and mentally though it's pretty tough to strengthen one's mental energy fully, because it's too encumbering to be locked in here! but I do my best and won't be cutting back on that: I take the exercises on with a firm grip, and will continue to do so (August 14, 1977).

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<sup>22</sup> I've attempted to the best of my abilities to translate the idiosyncracies of my grandfather's writing into English. Duplicating his punctuation and syntax is one thing, but spelling errors and peculiar word choices are other issues entirely; these will inevitably be lost to the non-Icelander.

<sup>23</sup> This particular wording appears in the section of *Sugar Paper Theories* titled "Absent Memories".

And exercise Tryggvi Rúnar did. What's more, the physique he would come to boast of wound up being more impressive than any I think I have ever laid my eyes on—or until his body's final adversary had reduced it, by the very end only, to skin and bones. Painstakingly sculpted, lavishly tattooed, bespeaking an exuberant masculine vigor, the man was unmistakably—I don't even feel weird about saying—exceptionally beautiful. What other kid had a *granddad* like that?

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Those with average familiarity with the common tropes of these cases (or cases including lengthy sessions in solitary) might be surprised by this summary of mine. The snippets people got around the time of the diaries' exposé were more wholly sensational, and might well have suggested that his entire 627 days in there took place in a perpetual register of crisis. Yet even without the exercises, that view of things is partial at best. The fact is that during the period the diaries were written, even the bleakest articulations of pain and injustice were frequently overshadowed by the desire for freedom, and the imperative to work on himself. Take this passage from October 24, 1977, for example, about being isolated for “22 months of my life, and innocent”:

It's a greater ordeal than many might think, the cell diameter is 2x2 [meters, 6.5x6.5 feet] maybe slightly more than that. Yes, I've spent 2 years of my life here, locked away from everyone! haven't gotten to see my family all this time ... but fortunately this is all drawing to an end because now it's been confirmed that a verdict will be in in the lower court before Christmas '77 ... so for Christmas 1977 I will be free and at home.

And an earlier passage from June 11 that same year: “Well in any case, then there's nothing to be done about this destiny, which has come upon me, but I do believe that better days will come. And for what remains, after I escape this case I am innocent of.”

When my grandfather expressed dismay over his situation in writing, he usually let it suffice simply to curse the names of those he believed responsible for it (individuals, always individuals), or else turned his attention, like he did here, towards some vague ideal of “escape”. “I just have to wait calmly”, he said to himself, “because that’s what’s best for me” (July 13, 1977). Irrespective of how temporary the relief these sorts of “stances” or “attitudes” really provided, they do appear to have, at least, given him that. Relief. Peace to work, breathe, and self-assess. They helped stave off the enormous paralysis that comes with desperation and hopelessness.

Another part of staving off the ever-imminent specter of desperation was his incessant listing of what he ate, what the weather was like when he went outside (he most favored exposure to extreme elements: wind, rain, and frost), what he could and could not do: in other words, the chronicling of everyday events of “my life here in Síðumúli prison.” (Those were words with which he frequently headed his diary entries.) Of all the day-to-day concerns, however, I was most struck by his character observations, and descriptions of how he tried to present himself to his captors. He habitually named all the guards he met (and made up nicknames for some of them), and wrote his judgment of their humor on any given day. Always afraid of making enemies, he made every effort to bring a positive attitude to the brief moments of human contact he had, even as he found that most of the guards were all too serious and depressed—*depressing* to him and others—and that the prison psychologists were “plebs, all of them” (October 25, 1977). He’d concluded regardless, as he reflected after recounting some minor quarrel he had with a guard, that it was “best just to smile at these calves” (October 31, 1977).

He was a man concerned with how people perceived him and his persona, as interwoven with physical appearance as that is for everybody. To provide a telling example: once, upon entering back inside from the outdoors session, “I looked into the guard’s room where I saw the attorney Örn Clausen. He eagerly waved at me and I back at him. I then puffed out my chest and flexed one arm body-builder style, Örn did the same and we exchanged smiles” (April 4, 1977). The mixture of banter, nonchalance, and earnestness keeps his act (and retelling of the act) from going down (for me, at least) as vainglorious machismo; my grandfather was indicating to a man he was acquainted with—someone who might tell other acquaintances about the encounter—that, in spite of everything, “I’m good.”

As he recorded his push-ups in the hundreds, he used the diaries to concentrate, to focus his effort of spiritual self-construction: building up, simply, the confidence needed to again be able to face the world. It wasn’t that he knew he would have to take to the stage one last time for the final act in the court drama of the century, and wanted to look good doing it. No, first and last he was concerned with his development as a person. A very famous, unjustly incarcerated South African once noted the cloister-like potential of the prison cell to bring about such improvement: “At least, if for nothing else,” Mandela wrote in a letter, “the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct, to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you.”<sup>24</sup>

Never has the logging and chronicling of the most minute details seemed less banal; one almost observes in this state of affairs the perfect foil to the suffocating complexity of the court drama playing out frantically, incomprehensibly outside the prison walls. For that particular, fleeting moment in the history of these awful cases, the diaries truly were a calm refuge right in the eye of the storm.

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<sup>24</sup> From a letter to Winnie Mandela in Kroonstad Prison, dated February 1, 1975. Cited in Nelson Mandela, *Conversations with myself* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 212.



It is unsurprising, then, that the various strands of his introspective life converged, bildung style, under the umbrella of “maturity”. A draft of a letter to his aunt, jotted down at the back of one of the journals, illuminates this convergence well. The letter’s beginning consists mostly of jokes, but midway through he cuts to the big issues.

The exercises have helped me get “upright” and mentally clear and indeed I now see life in the correct light and correct shape like a modern man healthy and honest with life, sees his weak points and fixes according to the best of his abilities. I’m always seeing what an utter fool and immature “phenomenon” I’ve been ha-ha, but this “phenomenon” your nephew has proven capable of improvement, and I think I’m now on a good track towards becoming a man who walks unafraid in spite of a bad past, who looks ahead “upright” and untroubled, in good health, strong, healthy in both body and soul. Your cousin’s goal is to move forward! ... I fully realize this will be rough sailing!! ... Dear Edda, we are guests here on earth, and we must carry out whatever task is put in front of us.

Performing the humble cousin for aunt Edda or not, no one needs doubt that the person who left that Síðumúli cell was stronger and more prudent than the one who entered at the age of 24.

Now, let me stress before I proceed that none of this is to trivialize the agony of solitary confinement, or to render even remotely venial the time my grandfather spent in there; each second of that time represents, in my eyes, a crime revolting enough for a hundred years of outrage. “It’s a greater ordeal than many might think”: with these words he captured an ocean-deep sentiment of injustice. But then, because he was no Solzhenitsyn, it was on to the next. It might well epitomize an unpopular philosophy of violence, such a brushing-off of the past (I wouldn’t know), but here was a young man who, alas, had never known anything *but* violence, and that’s how he responded, as an individual, to that most violent offense his nation-state has possibly ever been guilty of committing.



## LEFT-OVER PSYCHOLOGY

My memory of the first time I read expert commentary on the diaries is rather hazy. I had just walked out of the press conference during which Ögmundur Jónasson and his work group publicized their landmark report at the Interior Ministry in downtown Reykjavík. It was unusually warm and sunny for a March day. In particular I recall reading a passage which suggested that during his detention my grandfather hadn't realized the full gravity of the situation he was in. For these people, this indicated the naiveté of his character. The report was in Icelandic, of course, but the word was there in English: "naive", included in parenthesis to more accurately capture, one imagines, what the report's authors meant with their usage of the Icelandic adverb "barnslega", which literally translates to "childishly". (It's the parenthesis bit I remember most clearly.) I revisited the report for the writing of this essay. This must have been the section I read:

Tryggvi Rúnar's diaries show how childishly (*Naive*) he believed that the truth about his innocence in the Guðmundur case would be taken into account even though he had confessed his involvement. In [the diaries] there can also be seen his hope of being released from isolation if he told the investigators what he thought they wanted to hear. "I thought that by confessing I'd get out while the case was taken to court. I didn't want the two years that Örn Höskuldsson threatened I'd spend in here if I didn't confess" ... Research shows that the simplicity of people or their naive ideas about the justice system increase the risk of false confessions. In spite of a history of criminal behavior and experience of the justice system it appears as if Tryggvi Rúnar had a very naive faith in the solution of his troubles, which probably stemmed from his poor judgment and wishful thinking.<sup>25</sup>

The precision with which the Icelandic "barnslega" is defined matters because it alerts us to how careful (or not) the authors are around the issue of this now-dead man's wounded pride. A foreign word appears to do the trick precisely because it's so vague. "Naive" captures the

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<sup>25</sup> Commission report, p. 414-15.

innocent psyche that falsely confesses to murder: it's ignorance and suggestibility, frivolity and purity all at once. It furthers the hypothesis while doing less injury to the man than if he was actually said to have the intellectual and emotional capacity of a child. In other words, it amounts to a convincing case for an ostensibly progressive and modern court, and is far enough from being immediately revolting.

Or is it? Though their judgment did not disturb me on that beautiful March day half a decade ago, I admit that it's grown to do so. What did it wasn't that particular word choice, however. Rather, it was the *ease* with which they had mobilized the diaries in service of their own ends, how *uncomplicated* their reading of this simple, simple man had been. The sting came alongside my realization that this perfectly reflected how my grandfather's self has more generally been visualized on the grand canvas of these cases—that is to say, when people have even bothered with visualizing him in the first place. An easy-to-distill simpleton is all he appears to have been.

From that point of view, the excerpt above offers not only an alternative to my interpretation of the diaries; the difference between the two interpretations—theirs and mine—cuts into an important point of tension at the heart of the current-day pursuit of exoneration, where conflict arises between, on the one hand, the goal of resolving this massive legal issue—clearing my grandfather's name—and on the other, restoring his dignity. It's almost a paradox, because one would assume the two to be one and the same, given the nature of the undertaking, but the latter bidding seems disinclined to fall, as it should, into the former.

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And this is the part of the essay where I am compelled to shift the focus towards the “bigger picture”.

The disappearance of Guðmundur Einarsson did not cause much of a commotion when it happened in January of 1974. He was an 18-year-old from one of Reykjavík's poorest neighborhoods, always very generally titled as a “worker” in the papers and trial transcripts. The night he went missing he had been partying in Hafnarfjörður, a town then separated from Reykjavík by a lava field: terrain he probably decided he could cross by foot even though he was inebriated, and a blizzard was raging. The fact that his body was never found wouldn't have troubled Icelanders particularly if it hadn't been for another, more inexplicable disappearance that happened later that year, that of Geirfinnur Einarsson, a family man in Keflavík (some 50 kilometers southwest of the capital, adjacent to the prime U.S. military base in Iceland). Geirfinnur had gone for a drive on a weekday and never returned home.

How the two disappearances came to be linked—and my grandfather to them—is a perplexing and foggy matter, and ultimately not of the utmost consequence to our present concerns. Suffice to say that my grandfather's entrapment in part had to do with the other youngsters suspected of involvement in the disappearances, who under extreme duress pointed the police in his direction. The precarious nature of their predicament was not lost on my grandfather later in life; nevertheless, he doesn't appear to have ever forgiven those people for “lying him” into the case, as he frequently wrote in his diaries they had. They were Sævar Marínó Ciesielski and Erla Bolladóttir, a pair of on-and-off lovers who had recently become parents to an infant girl when they were taken into custody on December 12 and 13, 1975, respectively.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Both have provided informative testimonies of the first days of the investigation, for example in their autobiographies, *Stattu þig drengur. Þættir af Sævari Ciesielski* (Reykjavík: Íðunn, 1980), and *Erla, góða Erla* (Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2008). That he “never” forgave these individuals is a statement made by my grandmother in an interview with Gísli Guðjónsson. See appendix to ch. 16 in *The Psychology of False Confessions*.

Of course, it wasn't just these people's forced slandering of my grandfather that informed police action when they plucked him from his everyday life and accused him of involvement in Guðmundur's death and disappearance. No, that would have required collusion far too elaborate and sinister for the two of them to have arranged. My grandfather's pre-established notoriety played its part here. On his record he had, for example, the longest juvenile sentence ever given out in Iceland. (Severe as that sounds, the sentence amounted to a mere 9 months in jail; auto theft was the crime.) The problem, as contemporary experts have pointed out, was that not one of the investigators back in the 1970s appears to have thought twice about the evaluation that he was a perfect candidate for killing another person, a view that was part of—and contributed to—a more general tunnel vision these men retained throughout the investigation.<sup>27</sup>

The long-winded narrative of what supposedly happened to those two unfortunate men, Guðmundur and Geirfinnur, is contained in the Supreme Court verdict from 1980: 672 hardly legible pages in total. The court organized this document in a Rashomon-like fashion, with each suspect's confession of the events following that of the others—varyingly repeating, contradicting, or adding on to the preceding stories. The two tales being haphazardly lumped together in a single verdict, this is done back-to-back. The cacophony of narratives is then wrapped up and put into “scientific” context in the final part of the verdict, entitled “Personal circumstances of the accused”, which unveils the results of various psychometric, personality, and intelligence tests, and other psychoanalytic observations undertaken by a group of medical professionals in the summer of 1976.

What this section did in the greater scheme of the investigation was to rationalize the roles each of the defendants played in the narratives spun around the two disappearances. Sævar

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<sup>27</sup> “It is as if the investigators did not look at alternatives other than the accused persons' guilt.” Commission report, p. 452.

Marinó, for instance, was clinically diagnosed as—among other things—a manipulative sociopath, insecure about his masculinity. At the age of 19, he was to have beaten the drum to which my grandfather and one Kristján Viðar Viðarsson danced like a duo of brutish gorillas on the night Guðmundur disappeared, when they supposedly mauled him to death over a disputed bottle of alcohol. As Erla Bolladóttir recounts in the recent documentary *Out of thin air*, the island’s gossip circuits then took this allocation of roles to its predictable extreme by depicting Sævar as a Charles Manson-like figure—an analogy which of course made her into the docile girlfriend, and, though it’s unsaid in the film, my grandfather and Kristján Viðar into witless cult followers.

The “Personal circumstances” profiles, occupying the most prominent position in a case archive that is nothing short of prodigious, were what ultimately sealed the accused persons’ guilt. For my grandfather specifically, it was an upbringing on the social extremities of post-war Reykjavík, mixed with “great personality disorders, which manifest as *psychopathia*” (thus italicized in the original), “inferior intelligence” and substance abuse, which had predisposed him, as these men saw it, to “aggression or violence and other antisocial actions.” Rorschach tests indicated “that Tryggvi was not sensitive to human emotions and furthermore that his judgment was poor, his emotional life shallow and likely [sic] to act impulsively.” Indeed, his “mental state assessment” implied that the totality of his personality had been carefully mapped:

He makes every effort to be polite and cooperative, while being interviewed, in a manner most excessive. He takes pains to make his narration precise. In spite of that it is difficult to obtain a detailed overview of his life due to how insecure he is and his memory imprecise, often needs to think hard and correct his answers. His articulation is therefore slightly hesitant, and errors in his diction are prominent. His temperament is first and foremost that of anxiety, tension and insecurity, which is reflected in his facial expressions and movements ... Changes in mood are very minimal and appear shallow. Seldom can there be seen any signs of remorse, guilt or depression ... His judgment appears very deficient and his understanding and general knowledge

minimal. Tryggvi must therefore be considered poorly enlightened. No disturbances register on consciousness. He is aware of time and place and his own person.

The despicable nature of their verbal onslaught needs no explication. It also isn't true. I would not be here if it were.

What's important to note for now is that the examiners' psychological dissection offers my grandfather neither sympathy nor a single redeeming feature, turning him into a virtual sub-human alien, a miserable criminal out of place in society. With their frigid words they denigrated him to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben names "vita nuda", or "bare life": a living, breathing, conscious being—yes, that much is acknowledged—but one that is at the threshold of the political order, simultaneously in and out of the law—abandoned by his community, and "naked", as it were, to the law's clemency or punishment.<sup>28</sup> Only by attending to those words can we begin to understand how it was possible (and still is possible) for a citizen of a liberal democracy to be violated as my grandfather was violated. From our reading we might conclude, informed by Agamben and others of his academic persuasion, that my grandfather's suffering was brought about not in a vacuum, or in the absence of laws protecting criminal suspects, but, quite the contrary, that his tribulation was first and last a radical expression of the modern state's "biopower" faculties, to which it holds all its subjects—theoretically at least—in a tenacious condition of passivity. Or, more ominous yet, we might find there a state probing the very limits of those faculties in the process of investigating those disappearances/alleged murders, which have often been invoked in popular culture as the jolts that roused the idyllic island-nation from

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<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), especially p. 1-12 and 49-67.



its unaffected slumber, and into awareness of the dangers lurking out there in the big, bad world.<sup>29</sup>

That specific social milieu—a full-fledged moral panic about some surreptitious criminal underworld—is important to note here, too. To many, my grandfather embodied a degeneration in attitudes and behaviors that had found their way to Iceland from abroad, like some psychological contraband, and manifested as “juvenile delinquency”—LSD consumption and all.<sup>30</sup> He was nothing less than a parochial nation’s paranoia incarnate. In California, by contrast, even the Mansonite killings of 1969 were met with a certain jadedness, as Joan Didion memorably lamented. (“I also remember this, and wish I did not: *I remember that no one was surprised.*”<sup>31</sup>) We detect two uniquely Icelandic characteristics, then, to the Guðmundur and Geirfinnur fiasco: the intensity that came with symbolizing something *unprecedented*, and also just how embarrassingly *mistaken* the Icelanders were.

My conviction is that Tryggvi Rúnar and the other defendants were, first and last, prey to the senseless bureaucracy of an easily scandalized, prudish nation. I look at that monstrous dossier of court transcripts and see a monument to late-twentieth century Icelandic ineptitude and crudeness. As much as power figures still relish in waving that ridiculous paper around, supposing, one imagines, that doing so provides some sort of defense for the Supreme Court,<sup>32</sup> I,

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<sup>29</sup> We get this “innocent Iceland” in Howitt’s *Out of thin air*, for example, and in many other retellings of the events.

<sup>30</sup> We get this xenophobic Iceland in an overview of the nation’s history by historian-turned-President Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, for example. “For the more conservative members of society, the convicted youngsters were dropouts, druggies, or hippies, sad specimens of a society that was sliding towards decadence, sin, selfishness, and indulgence ... negative currents of the present coming from abroad.” In *The History of Iceland* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), p. 124.

<sup>31</sup> Joan Didion, “The White Album”, contained in the synonomous collection of essays *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 42. Italics hers.

<sup>32</sup> We periodically hear moans about the masses needing to “acquaint themselves with the verdict” before running their mouths about the cases. The premise is that the original investigation had been so extensive and exceptionally complicated that ordinary people can’t claim to have any real knowledge of it. Supreme court juror and member of the Alþingi, Brynjar Níelsson, is one proponent of such patronizing speech.

too, can see the sense in commemorating something like that for generations to come. Reflecting the shameful incompetence that marked the first generation of independent Icelanders,<sup>33</sup> it might help bring into existence better administrative virtues.

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How truly blessed we were to get my grandfather's diaries to see how he viewed and responded to this nonsense! But no, as we've seen, their contents were taken to scold the man for not taking this colossal joke seriously enough.

It's no great mystery what accounts for the Ögmundur commission's treatment of my grandfather's diaries. Sure, they had only so many months to think and a socially urgent hypothesis to advance, but their primary error was reading them through the lens of those psychiatric reports from 1976. "The result of the mental state assessment", they recapitulated,

was that he was "poorly intelligent and possessive of many personality disorders" and had been addicted to drugs from the age of 17, had a "poor" sense of judgment, gripped by anxiety and an inferiority complex. Research has shown that such a mixture of antisocial personality traits, substance abuse and criminal behavior, increases the chances of false confessions upon interrogation by police.

Credit should be given when it's due. It must have taken *some* thought-acrobatics to twist that bogus piece of "evidence" in a way for it to work in favor of my grandfather's cause. But when all is done, and the stunt's underwhelming—indeed, foul—effects sink in, one is left wondering whether there really was not a soul in the Interior Ministry willing or capable of pushing further against those old court dogs. Although the list of negative personality traits has been trimmed

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"Guðmundar- og Geirfinnsmálið í hnotskurn" [The cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur in a nutshell]: <[www.pressan.is/pressupennar/Lesa\\_Brynjar/gudmundur--og-geirfinnsmalid-i-hnotskurn](http://www.pressan.is/pressupennar/Lesa_Brynjar/gudmundur--og-geirfinnsmalid-i-hnotskurn)> (November 7, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Iceland unilaterally declared its independence from Denmark in 1944.

over time, and—thanks to the quotation mark—placed at even more clinical a remove, it's clear that these contemporary experts didn't really read the diaries; they mined them. Consequently, the experience he details is converted into nothing but the means to various ends: an avatar of victimhood, generating pity for a big justice campaign; a life put to the service of a psychology hypothesis.

Handicapped by the twin sins of laziness and prejudice, panels of forensic experts from the 1970s to the present have failed to give my grandfather the second look he deserves.

Approaching his diaries as the writings of a man who didn't possess an inner life interesting or deep enough to warrant close treatment, the notion is reproduced over and over that his rightful place was always on the margins of our society, perhaps precisely in a similar sort of box to which he was confined 40 years ago, without a conviction, for 627 days.

And a realization dawns on those of us who were naive enough to think that a state-led pursuit to exonerate a wrongfully convicted man was first and foremost about *him*. It was never that at all. As it was when the police investigators/dramaturgists of the 1970s cast my grandfather as a belligerent brute, so it is today, when the “redemption” act in these cases' epic history is coming to a conclusion. Curtain calls, the whole city summoned—but on stage my grandfather isn't anywhere to be seen. The simpleton, as everyone knows, can only ever aspire to support the bigger narrative arc.

## REFUSAL TO PERFORM

Yet, who in their right mind would want to star in a real-life drama about any of this? The cold-blooded killer, the tortured prisoner, the heroic justice martyr: sensible people do not choose for themselves identities so saturated with violence and humiliation, so susceptible to tragedy. Sævar Ciesielski, accounting for the genesis of a book about his life, published in 1981, wisely employs the passive voice to bear witness to that truism: “I am of the opinion that people shouldn’t fool around with autobiographical bullshit at an early age ... But I am in the peculiar position of *having been made into* the protagonist of a crime drama spanning tens of thousands of pages, which the nation has been entertaining itself with in recent years.”<sup>34</sup> It was a heavy cross to bear, the one placed on Sævar.<sup>35</sup> Viewing my grandfather’s fate from that perspective, we might find that perhaps being cast as the side piece in a crime drama spanning tens of thousands of pages isn’t, after all, the cruelest title in the character index.

No, when he was alive my grandfather never laid claim to anything meatier than what he was dealt. We see this already in 1980, when the defendants were asked to give their final speeches for the Supreme Court. He chose to abstain. He said no—and he continued to say no, more or less, to any spotlight afforded him by this travesty, for all his years to come.

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<sup>34</sup> Stefán Unnsteinsson’s book *Stattu þig drengur*, which the author himself translates (not literally) to “Grow up and be a man”, is a biography of the young Sævar Ciesielski, comprised of Sævar’s own testimony, anecdotal contributions from various people, and social commentary from Stefán himself. Quote on p. 13. Italics mine.

<sup>35</sup> A distinguished Icelandic journalist wrote an article in English following Sævar’s death in 2011, which provides a good introduction to his life and struggles. Egill Helgason, “The Tragic Story of Sævar Ciesielski” <<https://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2011/07/29/the-tragic-story-of-saevar-ciesielski/>> (July 29, 2011).

In the summer of 1981, for example, an interview with him appeared in the short-lived weekly *Helgarpósturinn*.<sup>36</sup> The occasion for the interview wasn't his involvement in a notorious murder case or his time in solitary confinement, but his graduation from a co-op program, newly offered to inmates at Litla-Hraun prison (where he was incarcerated, at last, as an actual convict) by a nearby trade school. At 29, he'd succeeded in becoming the first prisoner to finish the program, learning to be a welder. The journalist who conducted the interview described him as "weather-beaten after work on the Lava"—as the prison is commonly dubbed—"and obviously in good physical shape." Only a small fraction of the interview handles the matter on everyone's mind. "Tryggvi Rúnar does not want to comment on the so-called Guðmundur case, which he says belongs to the past. He has maintained his innocence in that case, but says he won't spend his days convincing others of that innocence." In his own words: "This happens to me at the time and that time has passed. If I had not come to terms with it", he goes on, "I would not be like I am today"—which is to say, looking like a million dollars.

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<sup>36</sup> The title of the article quotes my grandfather saying, "Spectacular to think of freedom." "Stórkostlegt að hugsa um frelsið", *Helgarpósturinn* (July 24, 1981), p. 2-3.



Figure 2. "Tryggvi Rúnar by his stereo set in his cell on the Lava: "There was a time when everyone competed for the coolest audio gadgets. I partook in that..." Photographed by Jim Smart"<sup>37</sup>

Gísli Guðjónsson proposes that my grandfather didn't come forward with his diaries when he was alive because he didn't realize their legal worth.<sup>38</sup> And while that may well be true, I would hypothesize that my grandfather didn't do it because he couldn't stand the thought of once more being dragged into a messy public spectacle. Surely he knew that documents detailing the thoughts of a suspect in the most infamous criminal case in modern Icelandic history would attract attention, whatever their value in court. In itself, that was deterrent enough to publicizing them.

The act of refusal has a peculiar sort of power, and I believe my grandfather's ballast as a social individual was heavily dependent on how carefully he exercised that power. Him destroying the diaries thus meant that not only could he start to forget and move on, it also eliminated a

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<sup>37</sup> Accessed on *timarit.is*, an open digital database of journals and newspapers.

<sup>38</sup> Gísli Guðjónsson, *The Psychology of False Confessions*, conclusion to ch. 11.

potential weak spot in the wall he was erecting between his family and the outside world—a wall that ensured, as I’ve come to appreciate, the relative stability that characterized my childhood and adolescent years. It was an action, I think, that was intended to keep at bay not only the past, but also the slimy tentacles of power, the white-collar plebs who would call him stupid, and the couch potatoes who would consume his pain as entertainment.

“When the time is right, you will know what to do with them.” That was my grandfather’s parting reservation about the posthumous handling of his diaries. Obviously the timing was phenomenal in terms of media exposure and political effectiveness. The real question concerns the enigmatic “what”: what if my mother had kept the gates shut, and done something different with those texts?

It would be senseless to criticize my mother for her leap of faith, just as the experts were wrong to slam my grandfather for his “very naive faith in the solution to his troubles, which probably stemmed from his poor judgment and wishful thinking” “in spite of ... experience of the justice system.” To hold individuals to account for failing to anticipate demeaning treatment from the justice system makes that treatment seem normal and beyond scrutiny. Besides, the air of reconciliation looming over the cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur was illusory. The post-crash mood, with all its promise for progressive governance, was illusory. The biggest illusion in the end, perhaps, was brought about through some semi-conscious acceptance, on everyone’s part, of the myth of the Icelandic nation’s essential egalitarianism, the idea that the sorts of prejudices my family has been subjected to in recent years had been extinguished from the corridors of our government buildings decades ago—maybe even since we kicked out the Danes.<sup>39</sup> (The myth’s prevalence is also what makes these issues hard to deal with: the fear

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<sup>39</sup> On Icelanders’ denial about class hierarchies, see the various essays contained in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Contexts* (eds. Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul

sneaks in that there is in truth something wrong with *us* to receive that treatment in the first place.)

The consequence of avoiding to acknowledge and confront the class prejudice that distorted my grandfather in the 1970s has been his post-mortem metamorphosis into the archetype he refused to perform in life: the broken, helpless fool.

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Is it too much to ask that the process of exonerating someone in a case of such deep personal scapegoating and character misjudgments shouldn't just boil down to someone uttering the word "acquitted"? Shouldn't the process itself demonstrate (to go back to the Ögmundur commission's coolheaded epilogue) that authorities have learned from their mistakes and prejudices? And isn't it almost perverse to think—let alone feel compelled to say—that my grandfather confessed falsely because he was "poorly intelligent", as if an upstanding, highly intelligent, conscientious citizen would somehow not have "given in" to what amounted to torture? Or is that perhaps just the last lie that needs to be told for this case to be won once and for all? Do we simply need to swallow the departure of the visionary spirit of ethics from the pragmatic spirit of politics, and accept that genuine left-wing concern for "the beaten and downtrodden" has yet again devolved into narrow questions of legalistic technique?

And if we do that, what then? Maybe we will find our grievances put to use again by some future historian seeking to analyze the relationship between the welfare state and the "marginal subject"; maybe that someone will see what I see in the state's extended abuse of my

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Durrenberger, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), especially the one by Durrenberger on the intersection of individualism and bureaucratic expectations: "Every Iclander a Special Case", p. 171-190.



grandfather's body and persona: a potent example to consider where the Nordic model's famed generosity comes from, and what its limits are. Maybe this historian will finally tell us more about how, when, and where humanitarianism and class prejudice, state paternalism and condescension, collide. And maybe we will be soothed by his demonstration that all of this suffering was actually built on deeper discursive traditions and historical trajectories.

My grandfather's diaries in themselves won't offer anything particularly significant to such inquiries, of course. But the diarist and his writings could provide something even more curious: an example of how someone can live on those margins by refusing to play the role expected of him. In his deviation from pre-given scripts, my grandfather might surprise a Netflix-viewing public that has seen and heard it all, and bureaucrats who think the same thing of the subjects whose lives they impact daily.

But first, the diarist would have to be freed from the encumbering narrative that's been imposed on him. What a romantic idea that is! to have my grandfather star in a story of his own (even though I doubt that an actor with a beautiful enough smile could be found to portray him). Maybe, once this deeply troubling exoneration initiative has run its course, opportunities for such schemes might open up.

Allow me to explain by indulging in a final analogy. If the diaries opened a gateway my grandfather had kept shut, what my family received in return from the state of Iceland was a gift made of paper: thousands and thousands of pages of legal text. We brought this stuff into our homes, and initially, we took the voluminousness of paper to mark a historic reckoning dispensed from above. But it was a trojan all along. Such quantities of paper were never truly intended to pay homage to my grandfather's torment; they were churned out to rid *Iceland* of a

problem. Us. Their secret purpose was to be lit on fire once the reconciliatory celebrations were over.

When that has happened, Iceland will no doubt think itself triumphant. It will think it has *overcome* the scandalous cases of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur. Yet again, however, Iceland will be wrong. This trojan's capacity for destruction might yet prove itself to be the very vehicle for my grandfather's emancipation.

## POST-SCRIPT

I know there's an issue in the air that remains unaddressed, and it seems logical to take a moment to address it. It concerns whether or not I've considered the possibility that these experts who have had access to my grandfather's persona, either via interviews and tests in prison or his diaries, were right about him. Have I considered, for instance, that the episode where he so brazenly puffs his chest might be symptomatic of an inferiority complex, the fitness regimen expressive of a shallow emotional life, and the abundance of grammatical errors in his journal entries reflective of poor enlightenment? How do I know that his refusal to perform in the true crime drama wasn't in reality founded on the suspicion that he had, as psychiatric experts have repeatedly told the nation, nothing of substance to show? And how indeed do I know that the diaries don't represent the elaborate mask of the psychopath who beat young Guðmundur Einarsson to death over a bottle of liquor in 1974?

Let me begin to address these matters with a confession of my own. I knew nothing about any of this until after my grandfather passed away. My delusions were shattered when I stumbled upon a front-page interview with my grandmother in December of 2010, titled "He killed no one", featuring exceedingly graphic descriptions of the torture my grandfather endured in solitary confinement. For some time after that—too long, in retrospect—the chaotic heaviness of all this history left me paralyzed. The most complicated hindrance to any action on my part—even reaching out to obtain and read the diaries for myself—was my troubled relationship to the diarist himself. He was a young man the same age as me, with the same name as me. He would eventually come to share the same roof as me for 17 years. Between him and I would develop one of two of the most intimate relationships of my life (along with that between me and my

mother). I would come to witness as he grew ill and died. And finally, after his death, I would watch from a distance, like a stranger, when his traumas were disclosed in public—traumas that were inflicted, as I learned, by grave injustices that had occurred in the very place and at the very time he had put pen to paper, as a diarist.

The diaries were a potential portal key to an era that appeared, in more than one sense, shrouded in darkness. They were also physical reminders of a psychological malaise infecting my homeland, and the wounded relationship between me and the man who raised me.

I can't say how my paralysis was then resolved. What I remember thinking at some point was, "well, this is what I was given." I found myself in the grips of something I can only describe, like my mother before me, as *faith*: faith in him, and in us. It was as if my grandfather had reached out through the pages of his journals and said, "it's me. It's really me." What achieved this effect wasn't the content of any particular entry. It was the "mood" created by the writer: his attitude, his disposition, his aura: the same stuff that had made the man I knew so easy to love, just projected through another medium. It was the elegance of his handwriting, which I had observed countless times while looking over his shoulder, where he sat by our kitchen table managing his accounts. When I now read the diaries, I am readily able to identify that person, sitting in his bathrobe, drinking black drip coffee; the raggedy clogs on his feet have white specks of paint on them.

It's all perhaps a little ironic, given my spiel about how his diaries were used to confirm their contemporary excavators' pre-existing worldview instead of unsettling it, that ultimately they performed a similar function for me. They reassured me of nothing less than the accuracy of my vision: that it hadn't in fact been clouded for the first 20 years of my life, regardless of how blind I'd been to the hidden scars he carried. They verified what I saw with my own pair of eyes:

that neither was this man a monster nor did he see himself as a passive victim to a tragic fate, and—most importantly—*that he had soul*.

And that's how I know.

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<sup>40</sup> It is customary for Icelandic first names to precede last names in bibliographies. See footnote 2.

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