

The
MANTELPIECE

Issue 10

Literary Magazine

April 2024





*A jewellery brand with
a surprising history*



Vera Design

A Piece of Icelandic Saga



TAKE A PIECE OF THE ICELANDIC SAGA HOME WITH YOU

The design is classy, based on traditional symbols and has roots in Icelandic history.

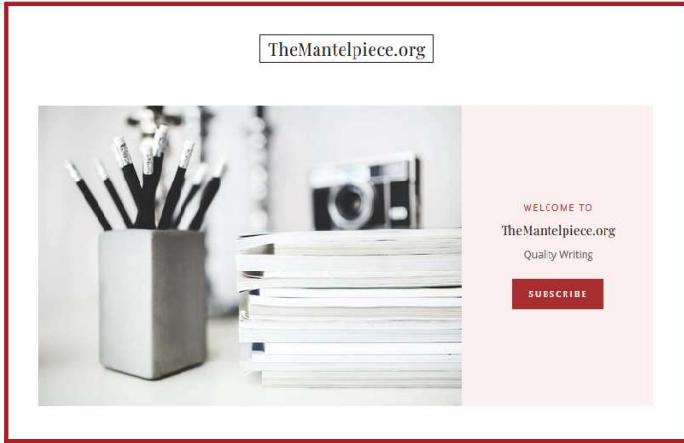
Vera Design was established on the foundation of a jewellery line by Guðbjartur Þorleifsson, who has designed a large variety of jewellery in the last 70 years. His design has roots in Icelandic history and Vera Design's team is proud to build on his tradition.

We aim to design timeless and unique pieces of jewelry that can be passed down through generations.

Vera Design's jewellery is sold in 24 stores in Iceland and one in the Faroe Islands and on their website www.veradesign.is from where it is shipped worldwide.



www.themantelpiece.org



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Table of Contents

Editorial

Lillian Heimisdottir 4 In the Presence of Giants

Commentary

Erik N. Patel 5 The Billionaire's Guide to Saving the Planet

Poetry

Philip Eggers 7 Taking The Long View Only Gets You So Far

Beate Sigriddaughter 17 Farewell

Food & Drink

Hector Jean Fournier 8 The Rise of Food Festivals

Fiction

Karen Regen Tuero 11 Helen and the Japanese Director

Lillian Heimisdottir 14 Dread and Discomfort

Angelique Fawns 23 Losing Angel

Literature

Eleanor Jiménez 12 Navigating the Convergence

Essay

Heimir Steinarsson 15 Digital Shadows and Tangled Webs

Travel

Pau Ollé Guerrero 18 Akureyri: A Hidden Gem

The Light Side

Heimir Steinarsson 27 Techno-Future

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In the Presence of Giants

Humanity's Encounter with Nature's Magnificence

In the endless narrative of existence, where humanity is but a single character amidst the vast tapestry of nature's theater, we are continuously captivated by the sheer magnitude and splendor of the world that surrounds us. From the majestic summits of towering mountains, where the very sky seems to kiss the earth, to the boundless expanse of the ocean, where the horizon stretches infinitely into the unknown, and to the timeless embrace of ancient forests, where each tree whispers secrets of ages past, our interactions with nature serve as poignant reminders of our place within the grand scheme of the universe. In the presence of such awe-inspiring landscapes, our hearts are filled with a deep reverence and humility, as we are humbled by the sheer power and beauty that permeate every aspect of the natural world. Each encounter with nature becomes a journey of self-discovery, a profound exploration of our own existence within the context of something infinitely larger and more magnificent than ourselves. Henry David Thoreau, the sage of Walden Pond, once mused, "I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees." These words resonate deeply with those who have stood amidst the silent majesty of nature, for they capture the essence of our experience when faced with its monumental presence. In the embrace of the wilderness, we find ourselves uplifted, our spirits soaring amidst the tranquility of the natural world.

Consider the mountains, those silent sentinels that pierce the heavens with their snow-capped peaks. Standing in their shadow, we are reminded of our own insignificance in the face of their timeless grandeur. Yet, there is also a sense of kinship, a recognition of the shared journey of life's ascent.

The ocean, with its boundless depths and ever-changing moods, speaks to the restless spirit within us all. Its waves, both gentle and tempestuous, remind us of the ebb and

flow of existence. In its vast embrace, we find solace and inspiration, for it is here that we are reminded of the interconnectedness of all living things.

And then there are the forests, ancient and wise, where the trees stand as silent guardians of time. Here, amidst the dappled light and the whisper of leaves, we are transported to a realm untouched by the march of progress. In their midst, we find sanctuary and renewal, our souls replenished by the harmony of nature's symphony.

Consider also the magnificence of waterfalls, nature's cascading masterpiece. With thunderous force, water plummets from great heights, carving its path through rugged terrain. Standing before a waterfall, we witness

"Let us cherish each and every moment when we find ourselves standing in the presence of giants, whether they be the towering mountains, the endless oceans, the ancient forests, or the thundering waterfalls."

the raw power of nature unleashed—a symphony of sound and motion that captivates the soul. The mist hangs heavy in the air, catching the light in a dazzling display of rainbows. Each drop, a testament to the relentless passage of time, eroding stone and shaping landscapes with its gentle touch. In the presence of a waterfall, we are reminded of the ceaseless cycle of renewal, as water returns to the earth, only to rise again in a perpetual dance of life.

In the presence of giants, whether they be the towering mountains, the boundless oceans, the ancient forests, or the thundering waterfalls, we are confronted with the vastness and magnificence of the universe. We, as humanity, are but transient beings in

the grand tapestry of existence—a mere blip in the timeline of timelessness. These natural wonders have borne witness to the dawn of creation, standing as silent sentinels through the ages, and will continue to stand long after our footprints have faded into the sands of time. Yet, despite our ephemeral nature, we find solace and significance in the fleeting moments we share with these awe-inspiring manifestations of nature's beauty. It is within the embrace of these giants that we discover a sense of belonging, a connection to something greater than ourselves. We find meaning in the contemplation of the universe's mysteries and purpose in our humble stewardship of the planet. In the face of such majesty, we are humbled, inspired, and invigorated, reminded of our shared heritage and our collective responsibility to preserve and protect the wonders that surround us.

Therefore, let us wholeheartedly embrace the awe-inspiring majesty of nature, allowing ourselves to be enveloped by its boundless beauty and profound wisdom. Let us cherish each and every moment when we find ourselves standing in the presence of giants, whether they be the towering mountains, the endless oceans, the ancient forests, or the thundering waterfalls. For in these transcendent moments, we are not merely spectators, but active participants in the grand symphony of existence. Here, amidst the splendor of the natural world, our senses are heightened, our spirits uplifted, and our souls stirred with an indescribable sense of wonder. It is in these sacred encounters that we are reminded of the interconnectedness of all life, and our hearts overflow with gratitude for the privilege of being a part of such magnificence. Let us savor these moments, allowing them to leave an indelible imprint upon our souls, guiding us on our journey with a renewed sense of purpose and appreciation for the miraculous world in which we dwell. □ *L.H.*

The Billionaire's Guide to Saving the Planet

Erik N. Patel



inconsequential in the grand tapestry of a billionaire's financial empire—coalescing to form a veritable financial force capable of rescuing an endangered rainforest or perhaps even two. This chapter not only redefines the essence of giving but also serves as a clarion call to the ultra-wealthy, urging them to reconsider the potential of their pocket change as a catalyst for environmental salvation.

Luxury Eco-Tours: The New Conservation

The epoch where modest research grants and grassroots conservation efforts were the norm has unequivocally passed, ushering in a new era as outlined in our visionary guide. This transformative document introduces an unparalleled series of opulent eco-tours, meticulously designed for the world's financial elite to observe firsthand the dire consequences of climate change—specifically, the alarming melting of the ice caps. These aren't just any tours, but extravagant voyages of enlightenment aboard multi-million-dollar yachts, each vessel a paragon of luxury and technological marvel, ensuring that billionaires can immerse themselves in the stark realities of global warming without forsaking the slightest comfort.

It's a stark reminder of what's at stake, yet delivered in a manner that aligns with the lifestyles and sensibilities of those who have the power to make a difference. By coupling the gravitas of the situation with the unparalleled comfort and elegance these individuals are accustomed to, the guide aims to foster a deep, personal connection to the plight of our planet—a connection strong enough, perhaps, to inspire real change. This initiative reimagines the concept of environmental activism, transforming it into an experience that's not only

In a groundbreaking leap towards saving our fragile planet, the world's billionaires have banded together to publish the ultimate manifesto: "The Billionaire's Guide to Saving the Planet Without Really Trying." This revolutionary guide promises to tackle Earth's most pressing issues with the same tenacity and innovation used to evade taxes and inflate net worth. Let's delve into the highlights of this philanthropic marvel.

Pocket Change Philanthropy

In a world where the magnanimity of philanthropic gestures is often measured in the sheer volume of zeroes on a check, the opening salvo of our guide challenges this antiquated notion with a simple yet profound inquiry: "Why donate billions when millions sound just as generous?"

This pioneering chapter doesn't merely suggest a novel approach to charitable giving; it wholly revolutionizes it by championing the avant-garde concept of 'Micro-Giving.' Eschewing the traditional model where tycoons are expected to part with significant portions of their amassed fortunes, this innovative strategy empowers billionaires to contribute merely what might be discovered beneath the plush cushions of their designer sofas or lost in the crevices of their luxury vehicles.

The philosophy underpinning this method is both elegant and egalitarian, asserting that every cent holds intrinsic value and that these seemingly insignificant contributions can, in aggregate, have a monumental impact. Imagine, if you will, the power of these collected lost coins—perhaps overlooked or deemed

educational but deeply moving, ensuring that the message isn't just heard but felt, resonating with a powerful call to action that's both grandiose and elegantly presented.

Carbon Offset Collectibles

In the face of mounting scrutiny over their carbon-intensive ways of life, the world's billionaires have come together to propose a groundbreaking solution aimed at neutralizing their environmental footprint, all while maintaining the opulence to which they are accustomed. This inventive approach, dubbed "Carbon Offset Collectibles," represents a unique fusion of environmentalism and luxury, allowing the ultra-wealthy to counterbalance the emissions from their lavish private jet excursions and sumptuous mega-yacht journeys. The essence of this program lies in the acquisition of rare and exotic plants, each with a carbon offsetting potential, which are pledged to be planted in various undisclosed locations at some point in the future.

This method is not only a testament to their commitment to addressing climate change but also a reflection of their refined tastes and affinity for the rare and extraordinary. The program allows them to transform their carbon footprint into a collection of living, breathing assets, contributing to the planet's well-being in a manner befitting their status. As articulated by one prominent billionaire, the program allows for the offsetting of lavish lifestyles through the ownership of unique botanical specimens. "I own a rare Amazonian orchid that offsets my five homes," he proudly stated, highlighting the program's allure. However, he then added with a hint of nonchalance, "I just can't recall where I planted it," underscoring a peculiar blend of environmental philanthropy and the aloofness that often characterizes the ultra-wealthy's approach to conservation efforts.

This innovative scheme encapsulates the billionaires' desire to contribute to the global fight against climate change, albeit in a way that aligns with their luxurious lifestyles and preferences for exclusivity and rarity. It's an approach that seeks to marry the necessity of environmental responsibility with the allure of unique, collectible items, creating a novel pathway for the affluent to engage with conservation efforts without forsaking their penchant for luxury and exclusivity.

The Virtue of Virtual Water

Within the creatively charged pages of the guide, a particularly inspired section emerges, addressing the pressing issue of water conservation with an innovative and somewhat futuristic concept: 'virtual water.' This visionary idea transcends traditional conservation methods by introducing a digital currency of sorts, tailored specifically for the environmentally conscious yet luxuriously inclined billionaire. Through the purchase of virtual water credits, these affluent individuals are presented with an opportunity to engage in a novel form of environmental stewardship, one that harmonizes their extravagant lifestyles with the imperative of preserving our planet's most precious resource.

The mechanics of this system are as ingenious as they are simple. For every Olympic-sized swimming pool that a billionaire opts to fill—an activity emblematic of their lavish way of life—an equivalent amount of virtual water is purportedly conserved in an intangible reservoir within the digital ether. This conceptual conservation effort ensures that with every indulgence in aquatic luxury, a corresponding virtual action is taken to safeguard an equivalent volume of real-world water. The beauty of this arrangement lies in its apparent win-win nature: billionaires are not asked to forsake the opulent symbols of their success, such as their expansive, crystal-clear swimming pools, and yet, through the magic of digital technology, the planet is said to benefit from the conservation of water that, while not physically tangible, is accounted for in the realm of virtual assets.

By framing water conservation as a matter of digital asset management rather than physical resource allocation, it provides a pathway for the ultra-wealthy to contribute to environmental efforts without diminishing the grandeur of their lifestyles. In essence, it promises the preservation of an essential global resource through a process that requires little more than a financial transaction, thereby marrying the allure of cutting-edge technology with the timeless appeal of opulence and ease.

Solar-Powered Superyachts

In a groundbreaking chapter dedicated to the cutting-edge intersections of renewable energy and luxury living, the guide proudly announces the conceptualization and impending realization of the world's inaugural fleet of

solar-powered superyachts. These nautical masterpieces represent the pinnacle of modern engineering and sustainable design, poised to redefine maritime luxury for the environmentally conscious billionaire. By harnessing the power of the sun, these superyachts promise to offer an unparalleled seafaring experience that significantly reduces the ecological footprint of traditional yachting, marking a bold step forward in the pursuit of eco-friendly opulence.

Crafted with meticulous attention to detail and an uncompromising commitment to sustainability, these yachts are designed to navigate the vast expanses of the world's oceans under the benevolent energy of the sun. This innovative approach to energy generation allows for a greener, cleaner voyage across the globe's most breathtaking maritime landscapes.

However, the ingenuity of these solar-powered marvels doesn't stop at their propulsion systems. In a stroke of dual-purpose genius, the solar panels adorning these yachts serve a secondary function as luxurious helipads. This clever design element ensures that even as the yacht draws its power from the sun, it remains ever-ready to accommodate the comings and goings of helicopters, thus preserving the essential standards of convenience and accessibility expected by the ultra-wealthy. There is, however, a fascinating caveat to this arrangement: the solar panels, and consequently the helipads, reach their peak efficiency only when the yacht is stationary. This unique characteristic suggests an idyllic scenario where the yacht is anchored in the serene waters of an exclusive Mediterranean port, basking in the sun's glow, and recharging its energy reserves in preparation for the next voyage.

This visionary plan not only showcases the possibilities of integrating renewable energy sources into the sphere of luxury yachting but also reflects a broader commitment to environmental stewardship without compromising the lavish lifestyle to which billionaires are accustomed. Through this ambitious endeavor, the guide offers a glimpse into a future where luxury and sustainability go hand in hand, charting a course towards a more eco-conscious horizon for the world's elite maritime adventurers.

The DIY Climate Summit

Fed up with the sluggish pace at which global leaders are addressing the planet's most urgent environmental crises,

Taking The Long View Only Gets You So Far

Philip Eggers

I am off and out in orbit floating
Without a tether. From here
In the outer reaches I see
No nations or notions;
No plants, no plans, nor people;
No animals and no armies.
There's just this one,
One perfectly sculpted sphere,
An organism unto itself,
Suspended and set into motion,
Safe from troubles and tribulations,
Hurling towards the end of history,
Floating at the edge of oblivion.

Oh

But it does gets lonely,

Going around and around
Like an outer space Ouroboros,
Observing our insignificance
As if it was a virtue. I prayed
For liftoff and the deepest stillness;
I got my wish, but the cold beauty of isolation
Can't compare to the gravity I left behind:
My feet on the ground moving towards you,
The heat of your hand in mine.

The transmission comes to me clear now:
Nothing can be built out in emptiness
Where the light is dim and voices are silent.
How can I be a part of this world when I am selfly
Set apart from it, losing all my senses to empty space?
Creation lies waiting back at home
And calls, calls through the void of separation,
Calls me to come home
To dwell, to help, and to be
One within the world.

a consortium of the world's wealthiest individuals has decided to take matters into their own hands. They plan to convene their own exclusive Climate Summit, not in some bustling international conference center, but rather on the secluded luxury of a privately owned island. This idyllic setting, far removed from the prying eyes of the press and public, serves as the perfect backdrop for discussions on the future of our planet, albeit through a lens tinted by privilege and opulence.

The ultimate goal of this high-powered gathering is to brainstorm and endorse solutions to the world's environmental dilemmas that are not only catchy and marketable but also require minimal personal sacrifice from the billionaires themselves. These solutions are intended to be easily digestible by the public and media, presenting the image of proactive environmental stewardship without necessitating any significant alterations to the attendees' opulent ways of life. In essence, the summit aims to produce a set of attractive, buzzword-laden initiatives that promise to make a difference without really disrupting the status quo of those in attendance.

This Climate Summit represents a bold, albeit somewhat paradoxical, attempt by the world's most affluent individuals to position themselves as leaders in the fight against climate change. By hosting this event on their own terms and in a setting that reflects their lavish lifestyles, they seek to craft a narrative of environmental activism that aligns with their interests, highlighting the complex interplay between wealth, power, and the pressing need for genuine action to safeguard our planet for future generations.

A Call to Inaction

The guide closes with a poignant call to inaction, urging billionaires to continue leading their lives of extravagance while making token gestures towards sustainability. After all, real change requires real effort, and who has time for that when there's an untouched wilderness to turn into a golf course?

"The Billionaire's Guide to Saving the Planet Without Really Trying" is more than just a manual; it's a beacon of hope for wealthy individuals everywhere, proving that you can indeed have your cake and eat it too, all while claiming to save the world. Remember, it's the thought that counts, and thinking about making a difference is almost as good as actually doing it. □

The Rise of Food Festivals

A Global Celebration of Culinary Diversity

Hector Jean Fournier



Photo: EdNurg /Adobe Stock

Two girls having fun at the Oktoberfest in Munich, the largest folk festival in the world, drawing more than six million visitors each year.

In recent years, food festivals have surged in popularity, becoming one of the most anticipated events in cities around the world. These festivals are more than just an opportunity to indulge in delicious eats; they are a vibrant celebration of culinary diversity, innovation, and tradition. Food festivals unite people through a love of food and provide a unique window into the heart of a community's culture, whether they are held in charming small villages or expansive urban hubs.

At the core of every food festival is the universal language of taste. These events offer a feast for the senses, presenting a dizzying array of flavors, aromas, and textures. From the spicy kick of street tacos in Mexico City to the sweet, rich taste of Belgian chocolates in Brussels, food festivals allow attendees to embark on a global culinary journey without leaving the festival grounds. It's an immersive experience that caters not just to food lovers but to anyone with a curiosity about the world's vast culinary landscape.

Food festivals serve as a cultural melting pot, showcasing the incredible variety of cuisines that make up a region's gastronomic identity. They provide a platform for local chefs and international culinary stars alike to share their passion and expertise with the public. Through cooking demonstrations, workshops, and tastings, attendees gain insights into the traditions and stories behind the dishes. This celebration of culinary arts fosters a deeper appreciation of the cultural heritage and innovation that shape our dining experiences.

The Economic and Social Impact

The rise of food festivals has a tangible economic and social impact. They attract tourists and locals alike, boosting local economies and providing valuable exposure for small businesses and emerging chefs. Moreover, these gatherings foster a sense of community and belonging, breaking down barriers as people from diverse backgrounds unite over their mutual love for food. In many ways, food festivals are becoming a vital part of urban and rural development strategies, revitalizing public spaces and contributing to the cultural and economic vibrancy of communities.

A Catalyst for Community and Sustainability

Beyond the celebration of food, these festivals play a significant role in community building and promoting sustainability. Many festivals prioritize showcasing local producers, farmers, and artisans, emphasizing the importance of supporting local economies and sustainable food practices. This focus on farm-to-festival dining not only reduces the carbon footprint associated with food transportation but also highlights the freshest, seasonally available ingredients. By connecting consumers directly with producers, food festivals encourage a more mindful approach to eating and a greater awareness of the origins of our food.

In the heart of cultural traditions and the essence of communal joy, food festivals around the world stand as beacons of gas-



Making Pizza for the annual Pizzafest that takes place at Naples' gorgeous seaside promenade, Lungomare Caracciolo.

tronomic delight, drawing in millions with the promise of flavor, festivity, and the shared love of cuisine. These gatherings go beyond mere eating; they are a celebration of culinary arts, cultural heritage, and the innovation that chefs and local cooks bring to the table. From the tomato-strewn streets of Spain to the aromatic chocolate halls of Paris, food festivals have become emblematic of the world's diverse culinary landscape. Let's embark on a global tour of some of the most iconic food festivals:

La Tomatina, Spain

Held in Buñol, La Tomatina is an exuberant celebration where participants hurl overripe tomatoes at each other in a spectacle that is as much about fun as it is about food. This unique event draws visitors from all corners of the globe, eager to partake in what could be considered the world's largest tomato-based food fight, celebrating the end of the summer and the town's agricultural bounty.

Taste of Chicago, USA

In the bustling heart of Illinois, the Taste of Chicago transforms Grant Park into a sprawling outdoor feast, showcasing the city's diverse culinary scene. As the world's largest food festival, it offers a smorgasbord of local favorites and international delicacies, accompanied by live music and art, making it a holistic celebration of Chicago's cultural vitality.

Melbourne Food and Wine Festival, Australia

Australia's premier culinary event, the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival, is a showcase of the country's rich gastronomic culture, featuring wine tastings, gourmet dinners, and masterclasses with renowned chefs. It highlights Melbourne's standing as a global culinary hotspot, attracting food lovers and industry professionals alike.



La Tomatina held in the Valencian town of Buñol, in the east of Spain in which participants throw tomatoes and get involved in a tomato fight for entertainment purposes.

Lantern Festival, Taiwan

The Lantern Festival marks the conclusion of Chinese New Year celebrations in Taiwan, illuminating the streets with vibrant lanterns and filling the air with the aroma of traditional Taiwanese dishes. It's a time when food stalls overflow with delicacies like tangyuan, symbolizing unity and prosperity, offering a taste of Taiwan's rich culinary traditions.

Oktoberfest, Germany

Munich's Oktoberfest is famed not just for its beer but also for its hearty Bavarian fare. This festival is a vibrant testament to German culture, featuring steins of beer paired with pretzels, sausages, and roast meats. Oktoberfest attracts beer enthusiasts and foodies alike, creating an unparalleled atmosphere of communal revelry.

Pizzafest, Naples, Italy

In the birthplace of pizza, Naples hosts the Pizzafest, a tribute to the art of pizza-making. This festival gathers the best pizzaiolos who showcase their skills, offering slices of traditional and innovative pizzas to eager attendees. It's a celebration of the city's culinary gift to the world, highlighting the simplicity and flavor that a classic pizza embodies.

Salon du Chocolat, Paris, France

Paris, the city of lights, hosts the Salon du Chocolat, a decadent festival dedicated to chocolate in all its forms. From the finest artisan chocolatiers to renowned pastry chefs, participants get to experience choc-



Streets are decorated brightly during the Lantern festival in Taiwan. People light lanterns to signal the coming of spring and to pray for a good harvest.

olate tastings, demonstrations, and even a chocolate fashion show, making it a must-visit for chocolate lovers.

Lobster Festival, Höfn, Iceland

The charming town of Höfn in Iceland is home to an annual Lobster Festival that celebrates the local catch of langoustines. This festival offers a range of dishes showcasing this exquisite seafood, from traditional soups to gourmet preparations. It's a culinary event that highlights the community's connection to the sea and their pride in their maritime heritage.

The Future of Food Festivals

As food festivals continue to evolve, they are becoming more than just a place to eat. They are transforming into incubators for culinary innovation, where sustainable practices, food technology, and new dining concepts are explored and celebrated. The future of food festivals lies in their ability to adapt, inspire, and foster a global dialogue about the role of food in our lives, our communities, and our planet.

The rise of food festivals reflects a global appetite for connection, exploration, and understanding through the universal medium of food. These celebrations remind us that food is more than sustenance; it is a source of joy, a means of expression, and a bridge between cultures. As we look forward to the next great feast, food festivals stand as a testament to the endless possibilities of culinary creativity and the enduring power of food to bring us together.

These events not only offer a platform for culinary exploration and innovation but also celebrate the cultural traditions and shared experiences that food can embody. Whether it's diving into a plate of the freshest langoustines in Iceland, savoring a slice of authentic Neapolitan pizza, or enjoying a mug of beer in Munich, food festivals around the world offer a taste of the diversity and richness of our global culinary heritage. □



Langoustine soup and langoustine grilled with fish and new potatoes. A typical meal presented at the Lobster festival held at the end of June each summer at Höfn, a lively fishing town in Southern Iceland.

Helen and the Japanese Director

Karen Regen Tuero



Illustration: Twins Design Studio / Adobe Stock

During the flight to Los Angeles, Helen kept thinking of her two-year old back in New York. It didn't help that two rows ahead, a toddler peeked out from over the seat. Curly Locks was making sounds, hitting on words like Olie would do. Helen waved. Curly Locks bounced, saying, "Hi!" in the same gleeful tone Olie used. This was Helen's first long separation from her child. God couldn't have played a crueler trick than putting Curly Locks in her eyeline.

Helen turned to her seatmate and showed him a favorite picture, thinking that talking to someone might help. "My kid," she said, then felt ridiculous when he barely glanced up from his paperback, a thriller, she saw from the flashy cover.

Beverages were served. Helen ordered a can of seltzer; she was still trying to lose the five pounds that made this and every other skirt or pair of pants she owned torture at the waist. "We're shooting a special on earthquakes," she told Mr. Thriller Reader, since he'd put down the book long enough to open a bag of nuts and stir a Perrier and lemon. "Japanese TV," she explained. "What a thirst they have for disaster! The last special I did was serial killers. You?"

"Hair." He planted a handful of nuts in his mouth. "I'm going to a convention."

He was youngish and completely bald, which suited him, a diamond stud glittering in each lobe. He was the kind she would have slept with immediately in her single days.

After finishing her beverage she pushed up the tray table, crossing her leg toward him, her black skirt riding up her thigh. He looked disinterestedly at her, returning to his book.

To distract herself from the slight, she reached for her own reading: twenty pages of interview questions to ask each of the American experts on tremors and quakes. It was her job to translate these into English for the Japanese producer/director and interpret on set for the next six days.

Helen took out the Japanese-English kanji dictionary she lugged everywhere and a half-used legal pad. Before setting to work, she chewed her lip, trying not to dwell on the blank expression in her neighbor's eyes when showing off her legs, her best feature.

She looked down at the single page left to translate, which she had deliberately saved for the long cross-country flight, but the pretty kanji characters ran together. When she refocused, the page was filled with kanji she once knew but had simply forgotten during the slippage that had accompanied her absorption in motherhood. Before the baby, the entire 20-pager would have taken three hours. But later in the flight, when she finally finished and tallied up the time, she had clocked sixteen hours. Fuck it, she thought.

While returning everything to her bag on the floor, her glance caught on her left foot. An age spot about the size of a dirty water droplet was peeking out between the straps of her dark leather sandal. No wonder Mr. Thriller Reader hadn't noticed her. No one did

anymore. Even Jake, her husband. "Let's face it, Helen. You don't matter anymore," he liked to joke, smooching Olie's cheek.

As a dinner tray was plunked down, the smell of the microwaved chicken nearly choked her. Oh how she had missed flying! She dutifully removed the plastic utensils from the cellophane. After sampling a couple of overcooked string beans, she offered the strawberry mousse to her neighbor since he'd gobbled up his own. Digging in, he perked up.

"Traveling alone?" she asked.

He nodded yes. "You?"

"I'm with the director. A late booking. Nothing but separate seats."

He scraped the bottom of the plastic dish, making an annoying sound.

"Everyone thinks the Japanese are so efficient," she said pleasantly. "Not so. Everything's last minute."

Their dinner trays were cleared. Her neighbor excused himself with a pitying smile and resumed reading what she now saw was the Amityville Horror story. Real life wasn't disturbing enough.

She walked toward the back of the plane to use the toilet, but got waylaid by a meal cart. They could perfect tomatoes by injecting them with genes from peanut plants, yet couldn't engineer a cart that let passengers by. Grateful for the uncrowded flight, she waited in an unoccupied seat until discovering the set of toilets both had their occupied signs illuminated.

Likewise for the set she found passing the bulkhead and crossing into business class. Folding her arms, she stood by at the closest one. That was when she heard the disgruntled voice of Kito-san, the director, there in the last row. He was saying something in English, unintelligibly, to a flight attendant.

"Kito-san, may I help?" Helen offered in Japanese.

"I've been asking for another dinner roll. The only thing edible on my plate. They said they'd bring it a half hour ago. But they just took everything away."

Helen explained this to the exhausted attendant, who snapped, "One minute." She returned with three rolls, thrusting them onto Kito's empty tray table.

"American service," Helen said. "In Japan they would have sent the purser over."

"Indeed." Looking frustrated, Kito leaned back against the seat, his straight black hair lifting slightly. "Anyhow, care for some bread?"

Smiling awkwardly, because she was still standing in the aisle, waiting for the toilet, she took the roll he passed her, taking a bite.

An announcement blocked any conversation, though they were both too busy eating anyway. The movie would begin shortly, she translated. All window-seat passengers should kindly slide down the shades for the benefit of those watching. Since Kito's window-seat passenger was sleeping, as was the middle-seat passenger, she had Kito lower the shade.

Once seated, he shifted restlessly, raising his eyebrows at the sumo-sized man in a tight yellow tee-shirt beside him. "I can't get comfortable."

"I saw a seat by the bulkhead. Shall I ask if you can change seats?" Helen suggested.

Kito removed his glasses - cool, octagonal silver ones - and rubbed his eyes. "I'll make do." He returned the glasses, looking at her as if appreciating her anew.

"Well, then," she said, tiring of the aisle.

Just then a passenger - another porker in tight plaid pants - tried passing. Helen had to brush against Kito to make room. "Pardon."

Kito smiled at her. "Quite alright."

She cleared her throat. "Well, four more hours to go. If you need anything, let me now." She told him her seat number and said bye.

The toilet was free now. She used it, flushed. The sound jolted her: it had been some time since she'd heard that sucking-up sound. She was always sure to put the lid down before flushing, afraid her hand and entire body might be inhaled into the vacuum. At the sink, she washed up, then stared into the mirror, adjusting the collar of her short-sleeved blouse, which she tucked into the spandex skirt, only to take it out again. She pushed down the thick elastic band, disgusted by the sideroll she could grab in her hand. It was topped by a beauty mark that had in recent years turned into a mole. She had considered having it removed but Olie liked playing with it.

When she took her seat, the hairdresser had his head back, mouth agape, and was snoring loudly; the thriller, open over his chest, rose and fell with each wheeze. She was reminded of all those times that the princes she brought home turned out to be toads. At least marriage protected you from that. She turned this way and that, unable to settle into the narrow seat. She considered the bulkhead for herself but it seemed too much hassle to collect all her things. Sleep was impossible. Her long legs had no room. She walked up to the bulkhead, to where the empty seat had been, but it was now occupied by the sumo in the yellow shirt. At least now the director would have room.

Cognac. That would put her out. Oh, screw dieting! The next two weeks of shooting - six am call times, the anxiety of having to translate for hours when her skills were rusty, no lunches, dinners so late she was bound to be more interested in sleeping - would surely shed pounds. She thought of walking back to the pantry to the mini-bottles, but the aisle was blocked by a couple of young Israelis, loud and unmindful of the fact that people were trying to sleep. She wondered if Kito was still up. Peeking into business class she saw his reading light was one of the few still on. He had the script out and was bent over it, scribbling in the margins. His workbag was in the next seat.

"Working hard?" she said, smiling.

"Work, work." He rubbed his eyes under his glasses.

"I was just getting myself a drink. Care for one?"

"Please. A Bloody Mary," he said, fumbling for his credit card in his workbag, but she waved him off with, "My treat."

The Israelis had sat down by now so she could get through. When she returned with the drinks, Kito offered her the next seat.

"Oh, I don't want to intrude."

"No, no. I'm through for now." He closed the tray table, returning the papers to the side pocket of his workbag, which he stored. Then he took his drink, stepping out into the aisle so she could get in.

"*Kampai*," he said, tapping his plastic cup against hers. "To a successful shoot."

"Six days."

She sipped her cognac. For a moment there seemed nothing else to say. In the instant before he turned off his own overhead light she noticed - as she had when they first met in New York - the small silver hoop in his left ear. It looked even better than the studs did on the hairdresser. She'd often wondered how pierced ears would transform Jake's appearance. But the one time she mentioned it after they first met, he scowled at her as if she was crazy.

"Cute baby," Kito said.

Curly Locks toddled down the aisle in the dark with his mother in tow. Putting down her drink, Helen waved.

"Do you like children?" she asked

"Sure. I have two. The oldest is nine."

"You're kidding." She drew closer, looking at him again. Traver, back at the office, had said Kito was terribly young to be directing primetime specials. "You must've married in the cradle."

“Practically. I’m thirty-two.”

“Oh.” She smiled uncomfortably. He was younger than she was. These days it was often so. Would she never again work with anyone older than she was?

“So we’ve got something in common,” she said to stop thinking. “I have a two-year old.”

He nodded evenly at her, seeming to look at her in a new light. “You’re a mother.”

He was wearing black leather pants. She was reminded of the ones of a polyester blend which Jake insisted on wearing. These days they showed off the weight he had lost since their marriage, which didn’t say much for her cooking. Despite his clothes, she’d once been so attracted to him she could remember pulling the car off the highway so he could make love to her in the backseat. Since the baby, Helen needed no calculator to count the number of times they’d had sex. First, there was the leaking boobs and the dryness “downstairs.” Then, once she stopped nursing, sex stopped hurting, but never got as good as it was before, and eventually she lost all desire. After a while she had wondered if this was the price for having such a beautiful baby.

She finished the brandy, put up the table and folded the cup with a painful crunch, sticking it in the seat pocket. She closed her eyes for just a moment. She was feeling agreeably woozy.

“Sleepy?” she heard Kito say, putting up his tray.

Her eyes popped open and she sat straight up, suddenly afraid of the slothful impression she was giving. Maybe he expected her to have brought the script with her, to be using the time to ask questions.

“Relax. You can stay here if you like.”

“Thanks. I think I will.” She cozied into the cushion.

He pressed the button on the arm of her chair, tilting it back, so it was at the same angle as his. She smiled in surprise, then looked away, folding her hands.

“Do you miss your children?” she said after a while.

He paused. “My wife’s with them. I don’t see them often. Even when I’m not on the road.”

“Work?”

“Right.”

A sigh unintentionally escaped her throat. “And they grow so fast. Mine’s latest is ‘walk.’ Helen imitated the way Olie said the word - ‘auk.” “She puts on her bonnet and walks right to the door.”

“Really,” Kito replied in a serious tone, making Helen’s heart sink. The levity she had tried to evoke had been lost in translation.

“Well, I’m a little sleepy too,” Kito said shortly. He tucked his glasses into the seat pocket. “Good night.”

Her spirits were revived by how tenderly he said this. She shifted in her seat, finding she was most at ease inclining to her right, in his direction. Her head nearly touched his. She quickly moved away.

She fell asleep almost immediately. Without realizing it, she had inched over, resting her head on his shoulder. She awoke, saw what she’d done, and was about to apologize when she noticed he had turned ever so slightly toward her. He, too, seemed asleep.

She edged her bare leg toward his, experimentally. She wondered: *Would she be aroused?* She could feel the black leather. She leaned into him a little more. She smelled the aftershave, the citrus scent, on his square jaw. She was feeling something, to her relief, and horror.

When he opened his eyes a full minute later, she was staring into them. *Tell me, am I still pretty?* she thought. *My hair - tell me it’s not like charred straw from my pregnancy. My legs - tell me the skin is smooth and the age spot on my foot will disappear.*

He put an airline blanket over the two of them, turned toward her and lowered his lips toward hers. They made out, heads back, mouths open, like she used to in high school. Had it ever felt this good?

After a while he slipped his hand under her blouse and touched her. Her breasts were smaller than they’d ever been in her adult life. The one he cupped didn’t even fill his hand. They were slacker too. She whispered into his ear. “I used to have beautiful breasts.”

“They still are.”

“Don’t lie.” She began to cry. She thought he would stop touching her, but he didn’t. He was lowering his hand, pulling back the elastic on her underpants, rubbing her in a way she couldn’t recall experiencing before. He slipped his finger in and out of her and she reached for him, released his zipper and with her own hand found him.

She was moving her hand up and down when Curly Locks appeared in the aisle beside Kito’s seat. “Da-da Dada,” the child said, reaching up toward Kito’s arm.

“Jeremy, come here!” a mother’s voice called, softly so the other passengers wouldn’t be disturbed.

The child was staring at Kito now, laughing. He’d captured Kito’s eyeglasses and was holding them by one arm, flapping them.

“I’m so sorry,” the mother said, carefully retrieving the glasses and returning them to their owner. She scooped the child into her arms.

It was the glance the woman gave Helen over her shoulder before walking off that made Helen aware of what she must look like. The blanket over the two of them, their guilty expressions. Helen rose, dropped the blanket and, squeezing past Kito, rushed to her seat, sinking into it breathlessly.

What if Jake finds out? Her mind raced. Well, it was just this once. But then her mind skipped to L.A. To checking in, their hotel rooms on the same floor. Another drink.

She could imagine Jake yelling, her crying, the calls for comfort to her old friends, who were still single, whom she’d lost touch with. The cold stares of her mother and of her mother-in-law. Olie laughing, thinking that loud voices were funny, clinging to Helen while being pulled from her arms.

“You okay? Need water?” the hairdresser said, startling her, since she hadn’t realized he was awake. He was eyeing her uncertainly in the spotlight from the overhead light.

“I’ll be fine.”

There wasn’t enough room but she curled up her legs as best she could. Her glance fell again on the age spot. Turning to examine her ankle, she noticed for the first time a big cluster of light brown spots.

If only Jake had shown a little more interest instead of giving everything to the baby, she thought, tears slipping down her face. Then this wouldn’t have happened. She frowned, considering how cheesy that sounded. How could she blame him? Hadn’t she, too, given all her attention to Olie?

She tried to picture Jake kissing the spots on her ankle in a way that the Japanese director would have done had they had room. But even in her imagination Jake’s lips kept touching her everywhere but there, and when she directed his mouth to that ankle and those spots, she felt nothing.

She wiped her tears, then took out the photo of Olie. She gazed at the white bonnet, the orange Playskool slide in the backyard, the sun, the peace in her child’s face.

There were six days ahead. *I’ll tell Kito it can’t happen again.*

She closed her eyes, trying to sleep, but soon heard footsteps. The touch of a hand on her shoulder made her jump.

“There you are. Helen-san,” he said. □

Dread and Discomfort

Lillian Heimisdottir



Illustration: reison8211 / Adobe Stock

The car slowed down as it approached us from the opposite direction and stopped when it was beside us on the road. The driver rolled down his window: “You’re in trouble?” he asked.

My mother also rolled down her window, but not all the way down, only enough to carry out a conversation. She looked at the driver of the other car for a short while without answering, as if she were checking him out. “We’re alright,” she said and tried to look confident. “Thank you, we’re fine.”

“You’re sure?” the man asked. “You don’t look fine, being stuck here in the middle of nowhere at this time of the night.”

I heard somebody laugh out loud in the other car. It wasn’t a pleasant laugh, but sounded malicious and cruel. My mother stiffened but didn’t say anything.

“Your car broke down?” the man asked.

“We ran out of gas. My husband went to get some at the fuel station. He should be back any minute now.”

“Your husband, huh?” The man turned to the person in the passenger seat of his car and said something we couldn’t hear. Then he turned back to my mother: “The station’s almost four miles from here. It will take him a while to get there and back.”

Again the malicious laugh from inside the car.

“He got a ride to the station and will be back very soon,” my mother said, raising her voice to sound more convincing. “In fact, that’s him coming,” she said and pointed to the headlights of a car approaching us from a distance.

“Well, in that case you don’t need our help, I guess.” The man looked at my mother for a few seconds; then he rolled up his window and drove off.

The lights of the car in the distance got closer and eventually it drove passed us and we watched its taillights fade away. Neither of us said anything till my father arrived an hour later, on foot with the canister of petrol. □

Digital Shadows and Tangled Webs

The Battle for Autonomy in the Information Era

Heimir Steinarsson



Illustration: makibesphoto / Adobe Stock

In the age of the digital economy, technology has reshaped the landscapes of communication, commerce, and connectivity, heralding unprecedented levels of convenience and efficiency. However, this digital transformation also brings to the forefront profound ethical dilemmas regarding privacy and autonomy. As we navigate this new terrain, the balance between benefiting from technological advancements and preserving individual freedoms becomes increasingly complex. This article explores the intricate relationship between technology, privacy, and autonomy, offering insights into the ethical considerations at play in the digital economy.

The Promise of Technology

The advent of the digital economy has been a catalyst for profound transformation across the business landscape, introducing innovative business models that have fundamentally altered the way companies operate and interact with their customers. This shift has not only streamlined operations, making them more efficient and cost-effective, but has also opened up new pathways for global collaboration and creativity, fostering an environment where ideas can flourish and cross-pollinate across borders. Technology-driven entities, ranging from behemoth e-commerce giants to nimble fintech startups, have been at the forefront of this revolution,

redefining the paradigms of shopping, banking, and interpersonal interaction. Through the sophisticated aggregation and analysis of big data, these companies have managed to offer highly personalized services, adeptly predicting consumer preferences and thereby significantly enhancing the user experience. This level of personalization, which once seemed the stuff of science fiction, is now a reality, tailor-making our digital interactions to suit our individual tastes and needs.

However, as we increasingly weave our lives into the fabric of digital platforms, entrusting them with vast swathes of personal information, a concerning consequence has emerged in the form of surveillance. The very technologies that empower us with information and convenience also possess the capability to monitor our digital footprints on an unprecedented scale. This surveillance, often conducted under the guise of enhancing customer experience, raises significant ethical questions about privacy and consent in the digital age. As our dependence on these platforms grows, the boundary between personalized service and intrusive surveillance becomes ever more blurred, casting a long shadow over the numerous benefits brought forth by the digital economy.

The Price of Convenience

The allure of convenience provided by digital technologies, while undeniably transformative and enriching our lives in countless ways, exacts a significant toll on our privacy. In an era where our every move can be digitized, a vast array of personal information, ranging from the minutiae of our online browsing habits to the precise locations we visit, is ceaselessly gathered by corporations. This relentless data collection serves as the lifeblood for refining complex algorithms that not only improve service delivery but also hone targeted advertising strategies, making them increasingly effective and, by extension, more invasive. The mechanisms through which this data is amassed are often shrouded in opacity, buried within the dense legalese of terms of service agreements that few users have the time or expertise to fully comprehend. As a result, many of us inadvertently consent to a level

of tracking and surveillance that goes far beyond what we might knowingly accept, entrapped in a web of digital oversight woven from our own data.

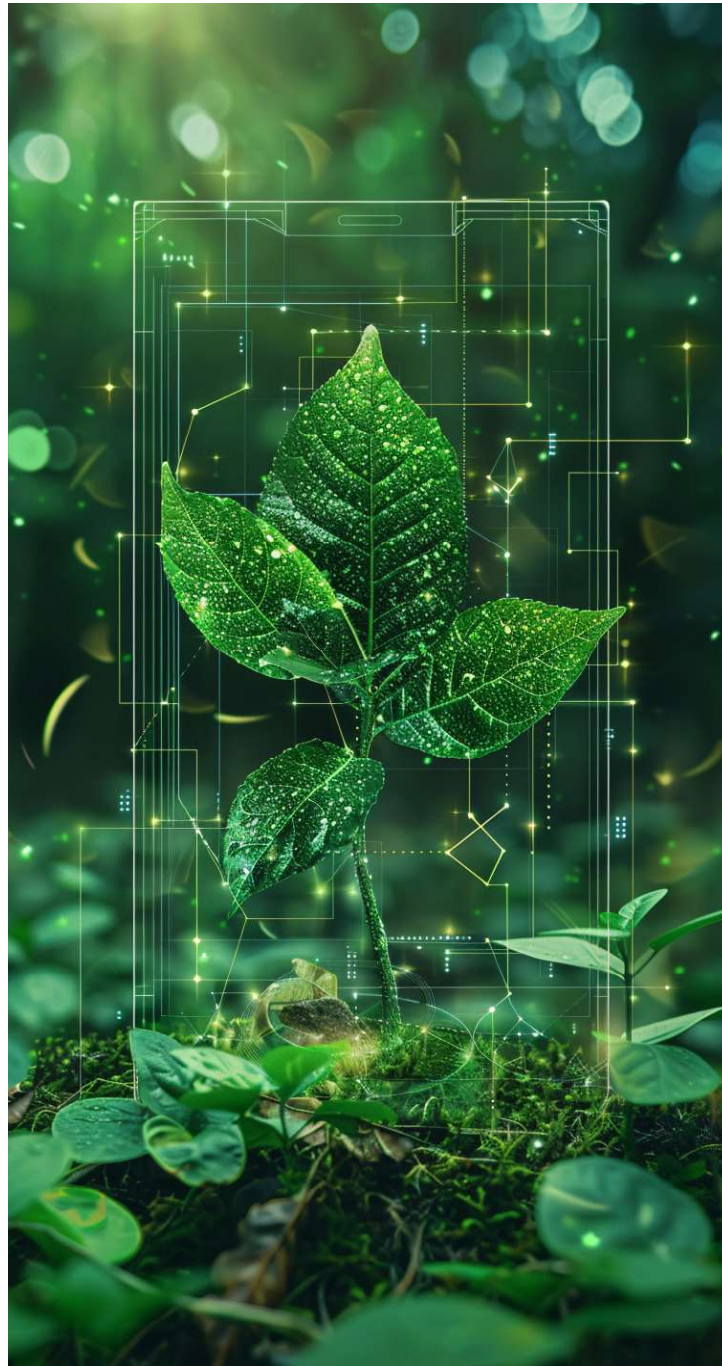
This pervasive collection and commodification of personal information underscore profound ethical dilemmas surrounding the right to privacy and the dwindling autonomy over our own digital footprints. The very notion that personal data is a commodity to be bought, sold, and exploited challenges the foundational principles of privacy rights and personal autonomy, raising critical questions about consent, ownership, and the boundaries of corporate surveillance. As digital technologies become ever more integrated into the fabric of daily life, the balance between benefiting from technological advancements and preserving the sanctity of individual privacy becomes increasingly precarious. The erosion of privacy in exchange for digital convenience not only undermines our control over personal data but also prompts a reevaluation of the ethical frameworks that govern digital interaction and the responsibilities of those who wield our data.

Autonomy in the Digital Age

Autonomy, defined as the capacity to make informed, uncoerced decisions, stands as a cornerstone of individual freedom, empowering persons to navigate their lives according to their values and beliefs. In the realms of the digital economy, however, this foundational principle faces significant threats that undermine its very essence. Among these are manipulative design tactics known as “dark patterns,” insidious techniques

employed by some platforms that cleverly nudge users towards actions they might not have taken if fully informed, such as unwittingly sharing more personal data than they intended or subscribing to services difficult to cancel. These practices exploit psychological vulnerabilities, casting a shadow on the notion of free choice.

Beyond the immediate realm of user interface design, the challenge to autonomy extends into the more insidious territory of



algorithmic curation. Algorithms that dictate the content of news feeds and recommendations have the power to shape our perceptions of the world and influence our behaviors in subtle yet profound ways. By filtering the information we see based on past behavior, they can trap us in echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs without exposure to divergent views. This algorithmic shaping of our informational landscapes can subtly guide our decisions, preferences, and social interactions, often without our conscious awareness.

As digital technologies become ever more interwoven with the fabric of our daily existence, the distinction between autonomous choice and technological manipulation becomes increasingly obscured. This blurring of lines prompts a critical reassessment of what autonomy means in the digital age. It raises pressing questions about the integrity of our decision-making processes and the degree of control we truly wield over our digital interactions. With technology's pervasive influence expanding, safeguarding individual autonomy in the digital sphere demands urgent attention, challenging us to redefine and protect the boundaries of personal freedom in an interconnected world.

Ethical Imperatives

Navigating the ethical landscape of the digital economy requires a reevaluation of the principles that govern technology development and deployment. Privacy should not be a luxury reserved for those who can afford it or navigate the complexities of digital settings. Instead, it must be reasserted as a fundamental right, protected by robust regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union, which empowers individuals with greater control over their personal data.

Moreover, transparency and accountability should be at the heart of technological innovation. Companies must be clear about data collection practices and the purpose behind them, offering users genuine choices about their information. Ethical design principles should prioritize user well-being, avoiding exploitative practices and ensuring technology serves to enhance, not undermine, autonomy.

Towards a Balanced Future

The path forward is one of balance, where the benefits of the digital economy are harnessed while diligently protecting privacy and autonomy. This requires collaborative efforts from governments, industry, and civil society to establish ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks that prioritize individual rights. Education plays a crucial role, empowering users with the knowledge to navigate the digital landscape critically and consciously.

As we delve further into the digital age, the dialogue between technology, privacy, and autonomy must evolve. The ethical considerations of today will shape the digital economy of tomorrow. By fostering an environment of respect for privacy and autonomy, we can ensure that technology remains a force for empowerment and progress, rather than a tool for surveillance and control. The digital economy holds vast potential — it is up to us to steer it in a direction that upholds the dignity and freedom of the individual. □

Farewell

Beate Sigriddaughter

So long as the sun rises,
she will picture him walking up
some trail, or down, alone,
his heart wild with quest.

In the vicinity of scorpions,
rattlesnakes, cougars, or a bear,
he wanders, radiant with trust
beyond the civil claws of doubt.

In his memory bald eagles might fly.
Here vultures circle and he is at home
in this yearning to be part of all.
Farewell, my love, she whispers.

This is how she loves him best,
awed by reality, befriending frogs,
deer, javelina, canyon walls,
measuring a bear print in moist sand.

She trusts he will find what he is
looking for in clouds, in waterfalls,
and hopes that they will meet again
one day when joy is rising.

Akureyri: A Hidden Gem

A Captivating Journey to the North of Iceland

Pau Ollé Guerrero



Photo: Gestur / Adobe Stock

Certain countries cause fascination just by talking about them. Either because of its culture, its landscapes, or simply because the little known is entirely different from what we are used to. This week, we were lucky enough to visit one of these places. An island four times larger than Catalonia but with only 370 thousand inhabitants. The land of fire and ice, where everyone must live near the coast because volcanoes, glaciers, and geysers make the center uninhabitable. For this article, I went to Akureyri, in the icy north of Iceland.

It's strange to think that a town like Akureyri, with only 18,000 citizens, can be the second largest urban area in a country.

The town is located at the apex of the Eyjafjörður fjord and is full of pleasant surprises despite its small size. "Each corner tells a story," describes Lilli, my Icelandic guide, "from the stone streets, the architecture, the mountains surrounding it... and the people, above all". Today, Lilli lives in Barcelona, pursuing a career in Literature and Creative Writing. Talking to her and delving into her culture has been a sensational experience. Join us on this journey through their memories.

"The winters here are special", she says. "During the Christmas holidays, the street decorations are beautiful, and everyone goes out into the streets and participates in the Christmas markets with traditional

products. The sense of community is greater than ever." In our culture, cold nights always bring a bittersweet feeling, especially when it gets dark early. "All these months we have about 4 or 5 hours of light daily. But we are so used to it that we don't notice it. It becomes another element of everyday life". Can you imagine not seeing the sun until eleven in the morning and disappearing again after lunch?

But the cold is very easy to romanticize, especially when the landscapes accompany it. "In Akureyri, everyone loves nature, and a little snow doesn't stop us from enjoying all our wonders nearby." "There are many guides who take you for a walk on the mountain with snowshoes. The paths and

forests are transformed in winter; it is truly a unique experience". Many routes end at strategic locations because, at night, when the clouds and wind allow it, one of the country's great attractions appears: the northern lights. "From November to February, more or less, they are very common," assures Lilli.

"Iceland is like a small village," she says, "everyone knows everyone. And even more so in towns like Akureyri". Life in Barcelona is certainly very different, and people there appreciate this tranquility with a lovely sense of community. "The townspeople always help keep everything nice. We have many community gardens where everyone grows their produce. Bars and restaurants support emerging artists by letting them play in their venues. And everyone respects and helps others." From what Lilli explains, it is a utopian society.

Although Akureyri is not as large as any city in the world, it offers all the amenities and services one would expect from a large metropolis in a highly condensed area, making everything accessible quickly. It may be a tiny town, but you won't get bored in Akureyri. "Walking through the town center is charming in itself. The town hall offers the so-called "cultural walk," a guide to all the historical points of the center, with explanations about each relevant building." Like in many Nordic countries, small houses of different colors abound in the streets. "The church is incredible - of Viking architecture, which always attracts attention - and if you walk for a few minutes, you can see the whole village. The theater and the Art Museum are full of sculptures, paintings by local artists, and multimedia displays."

Akureyri has a rare subarctic climate with cold but not severe winters and mild summers. In the summer, temperatures reach eighteen degrees. But on the other hand, they have geothermal energy everywhere. "What's really cool is the municipal swimming pool because it's thermal water. There is also an outdoor spa, jacuzzis, a sauna, and a large slide. There are always people to hang out with; you have a good time wherever you go." One of the most common plans of Akureyri residents is to spend the afternoon here and then go out for dinner. "Kaffi Ilmur is the place to go for a coffee and some



The Church in Akureyri lit up festively for Christmas.

artisan cake before going to a restaurant. Due to our few inhabitants, there are many restaurants and, frankly, very good ones. Hamborgarafabrikkan, Greifinn, or Sjúvargrillið are among my favorites".

The country's treasures come to light when the weather cooperates, and a fantastic world can be experienced during the winter months. And with good weather conditions, you can do many more activities. "If you visit it in the summer, what will surprise you the most is that it stays bright throughout the night." The Midnight Sun is one of the great features of the country and is truly unique. "It is a moment of celebration. Seeing the orange sky all night makes everyone want to stay up later. We meet in front of the fjord for a drink, locals, tourists, people you know and people you don't. It further strengthens the sense of community because we teach all our traditions to people from other countries and learn theirs. Moments like these are what give meaning to life."

And once you've connected with the citizens, a world of possibilities opens

up. "If you are lucky, they will invite you to do activities with them, whether they are touristic or not." As they live on the coast, next to a fjord, Icelanders have a great time fishing. "Almost everyone has a small boat, and, for us, spending the morning on the water chatting quietly and waiting to catch lunch is synonymous with peace." But if you want more action, you can also rent a kayak or canoe and explore the calm waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

In Akureyri, the reality of what you can do exceeds your imagination. The enthusiasm with which locals connect with tourists will take you to unexpected places. Biking routes through mountains and forests never seen before; horseback riding on the edge of the fjord; watching professional skiers perform high-risk jumps most impressively; exploring the caves of Hrafnagil or going out to sea to sail among whales. Who could have imagined that a small town lost between volcanoes and glaciers would be a jewel of these dimensions? □

Navigating the Convergence

The Evolving Landscape of Modern Art and Literature

Eleanor Jiménez

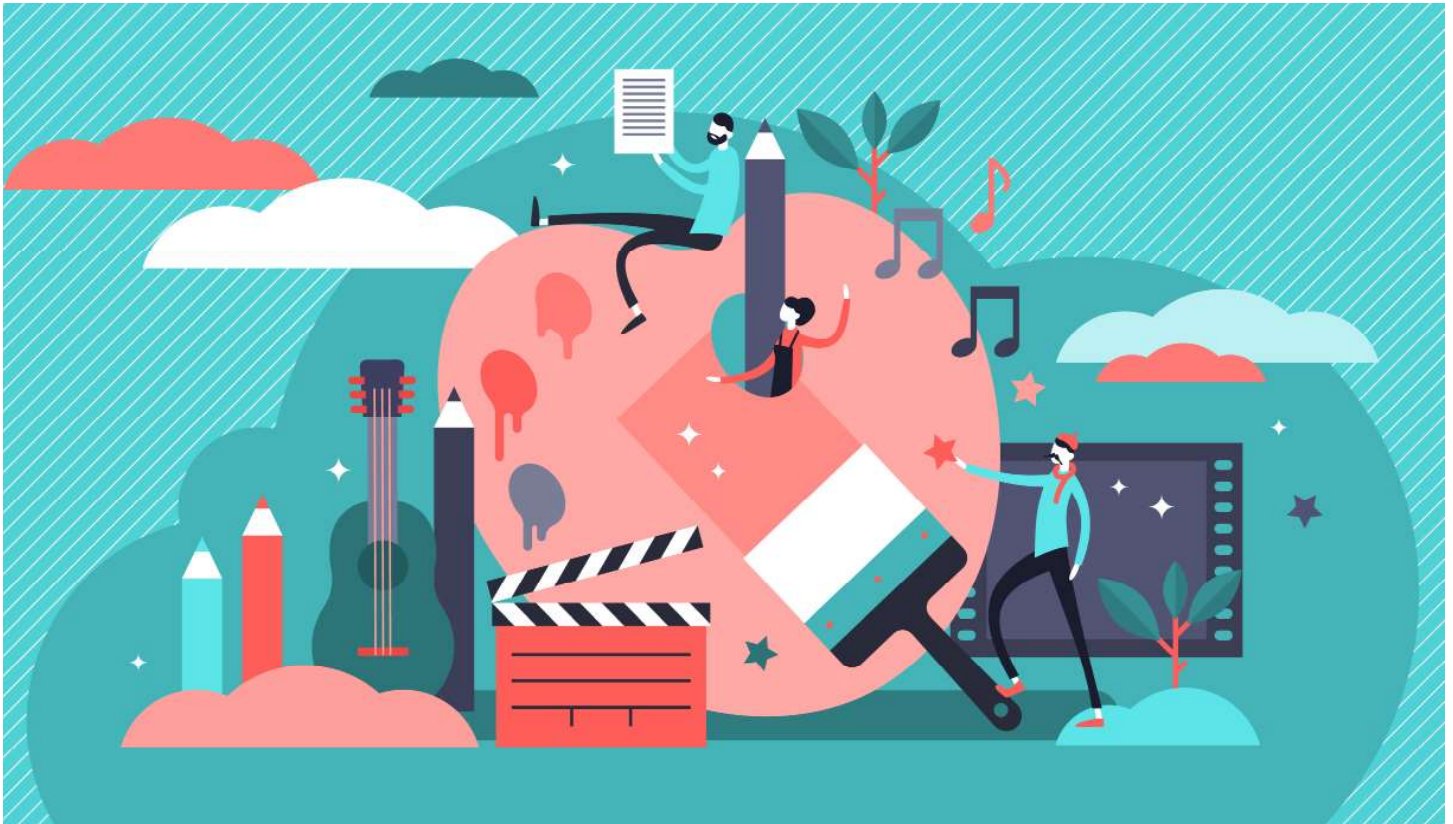


Illustration: VectorMine / Adobe Stock

In this distinctive era, the realms of modern art and literature find themselves at a remarkable intersection, driven forward by the relentless forces of digital innovation and a culture deeply entrenched in globalization and connectivity. This period of convergence, which once simmered beneath the surface, subtly influencing the trajectory of creative disciplines, has now surged to the forefront, decisively molding the very framework within which creation, consumption, and critical analysis occur. This fusion between the textual and the visual, the literal and the abstract, fundamentally alters our collective comprehension of narrative structures and aesthetic principles, challenging us to

engage with art and literature in ways previously unimagined.

As we delve deeper into this rich and complex terrain, navigating through the myriad ways in which technology intertwines with human creativity, it becomes evident that this merging of worlds is not merely a passing phase but a profound transformation of the cultural landscape. Digital platforms and tools have dismantled traditional barriers, fostering an era of unprecedented accessibility and democratization of art and literature. Creators and audiences alike are now participants in a dynamic, interactive process, where the roles of producer and consumer blur, giving rise to a new paradigm of collaborative creativity.

Moreover, this period is characterized by an expanding dialogue between diverse global voices, facilitated by the internet's boundless reach. This has led to a vibrant cross-pollination of ideas, styles, and narratives, enriching the cultural fabric with a multitude of perspectives and experiences. In this ever-evolving expanse, a number of key trends stand out, serving as both a mirror reflecting the current state of affairs in the world of art and literature and a window into what the future may hold. These developments, rooted in technological advancement and cultural shifts, promise to further dissolve the boundaries between disciplines, inviting us to reimagine the potential of human expression.

The Present:

A Tapestry of Interconnectivity

In the contemporary landscape, the distinct boundaries that once separated the worlds of modern art and literature have increasingly become permeable, thanks in large part to the advent and proliferation of digital technologies. These platforms have not only facilitated but have actively encouraged a cross-disciplinary melding, effectively blurring the demarcations between textual narratives and visual aesthetics. Today, it is not uncommon for literary endeavors to seamlessly integrate visual elements, elevating them beyond the realm of mere illustrative support to become fundamental components of the narrative architecture. This integration invites readers to embark on a multi-sensory journey through the pages of a book, engaging not just with the text but with a visual and sometimes tactile experience that enhances the storytelling.

Similarly, the realm of visual arts has begun to embrace narrative techniques traditionally reserved for literature, asking of its audience not just to observe but to read and interpret stories woven into the fabric of the artwork. This evolution transforms gallery spaces into arenas of literary exploration, where each painting, sculpture, or installation becomes a chapter in an unspoken narrative, awaiting interpretation. The interaction between art and viewer, then, becomes a dialogue, a shared story that deepens the connection and enriches the experience.

This era of digital enlightenment has played a pivotal role in democratizing the fields of art and literature, breaking down the barriers that once made these domains the exclusive preserve of a privileged few. Social media platforms, blogs, and online forums have emerged as vibrant, dynamic spaces where artists and writers can share their work directly with a global audience, free from the traditional gatekeeping mechanisms of publishers and galleries. This direct line of communication has not only facilitated a more intimate interaction between creators and consumers but has also paved the way for a rich diversity of voices to be heard. Stories and artistic expressions from the margins are finding their way to the forefront, challenging conventional narratives and reshaping the

canon of modern art and literature. This shift towards inclusivity and representation heralds a new era where the mosaic of human experience is more vividly and accurately reflected in the cultural artifacts we create and cherish.

The Synergy:

Technology as a Muse and Medium

In the rapidly evolving landscape of modern creativity, artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) stand out not just as tools or aids in the processes of artistic and literary creation, but as active collaborators, reshaping the very foundation of how we perceive and engage with art and literature. The advent of AI-generated art and literature is at the forefront of this transformation, pushing the boundaries of traditional creativity and sparking intense discussions around the concepts of authorship and the authenticity of creative works. These debates delve into the nuances of what it means to create, challenging preconceived notions about the exclusive role of humans in the artistic and literary domains.

Virtual reality, on the other hand, brings an unparalleled depth to the immersive experiences available to readers and viewers. By allowing individuals to step inside and actively navigate the narrative worlds, VR blurs the line between observer and participant, offering a level of engagement that traditional mediums struggle to achieve. This immersive interaction invites participants to not just witness but influence the unfolding of narratives, adding a dynamic layer to storytelling that was previously unimaginable.

Alongside these technological innovations, there is a noticeable resurgence and growing popularity of multimedia art forms, such as graphic novels and interactive installations. This trend signifies a broader shift in audience preferences, with an increasing demand for experiences that move beyond the limitations of single-medium expressions. Graphic novels weave together text and visuals in a seamless narrative dance, while interactive installations engage visitors in a dialogue, turning passive observation into an active conversation. These art forms merge text, image, and interactivity to craft complex, layered narratives that require—

and reward—active participation from their audience.

The enthusiasm for these multi-disciplinary experiences reflects a deeper cultural and societal shift towards valuing engagement, interaction, and immersion in the consumption of art and literature. As technology continues to evolve, so too does the canvas of human creativity, expanding into new dimensions that challenge our traditional understandings and experiences of art and storytelling. The collaboration between human creativity and technological innovation, represented by AI, VR, and multimedia forms, heralds a new era of artistic and literary exploration, characterized by depth, interaction, and an ever-expanding horizon of possibilities.

The Future:

Toward a New Renaissance

As we gaze into the horizon of the unfolding future, it becomes clear that we are poised at the brink of an era that could well be described as a new renaissance in the realms of modern art and literature. This forthcoming epoch is characterized by a deeper fusion of technological advancements with creative endeavors, leading to an unprecedented blurring of the once-distinct boundaries between genres and mediums. The imminent future holds the promise of an evolved paradigm where the interaction between creators and their audiences transcends traditional frameworks, heralding the rise of participatory art and literature as the new standard. This transformative shift suggests a future where the creative process becomes a shared journey, challenging long-standing perceptions of authorship and the proprietary nature of creative works, as communal and algorithm-driven creations gain prominence on the cultural stage.

The advent of sophisticated predictive algorithms stands to revolutionize the way literary and artistic experiences are curated, offering content that aligns with the nuanced preferences of individual consumers. This movement towards hyper-personalization holds the potential to craft narratives and artworks that resonate on a deeply personal level with each member of the audience. However, amidst this technological marvel lies a

latent challenge: the risk of narrowing our exposure to a homogenized stream of content that echoes our existing tastes and opinions, thereby diminishing the rich diversity and unexpected discoveries that are the lifeblood of creative innovation.

Moreover, the future landscape of art and literature is likely to be significantly shaped by the pressing issues of our times, such as environmental sustainability and the myriad socio-political movements that sweep across the globe. Artists and writers are increasingly drawn to these themes, using their platforms to spotlight sustainable practices and address the complex challenges facing humanity. In this context, art and literature are poised to transcend their traditional roles, acting not only as reflections of societal values but as powerful agents of change. By fostering empathy and inspiring action, creative works can catalyze societal transformation, highlighting the intricate relationship between cultural expression and the broader currents of human progress.

In this evolving scenario, the interplay between technological innovation, participatory culture, and the pressing issues of our era presents a multifaceted landscape for modern art and literature. As we step into this promising yet uncertain future, the creative community stands at the threshold of redefining not only the mechanisms of artistic and literary expression but also the role of culture in shaping the collective consciousness and charting the path towards a more inclusive, empathetic, and sustainable world.

Final Brushstrokes: Completing the Picture

At the confluence where modern art and literature meet with the ever-evolving realms of technology, social movements, and the rich mosaic of global cultures, a dynamic and colorful tapestry of human expression is being woven. This intricate tapestry, rich with threads of innovation and tradition, personal and collective narratives, is continuously unfolding across the canvas of our shared existence. As we journey through this multifaceted landscape, we encounter a profound challenge: the imperative to maintain a delicate balance between embracing the new—the cutting-edge technologies and



Illustration: VectorMine / Adobe Stock

avant-garde ideas that push boundaries—and honoring the timeless practice of introspection, the deep self-reflection that connects us to our core humanity. The task at hand is to ensure that the evolving future of art and literature not only advances in its diversity and inclusivity but also deepens in its capacity to reflect the full spectrum of our collective human experience.

In the midst of this convergence, where diverse influences intersect and mingle, we are not merely spectators forecasting the future trajectory of artistic and literary expression; rather, we find ourselves gazing into a reflective surface that reveals our collective soul. This mirror, polished by the advancements of time and technology, offers us a glimpse into the essence of who we are as a society. It shows us how our cultural expressions—our stories, our images, our symbols—are not static relics of the past but living entities, constantly being reshaped by the forces of innovation and the immutable human spirit.

This period of convergence is marked by an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine the boundaries of what art and literature can be. It invites us to consider how new technologies can amplify voices that

have historically been marginalized, how social movements can inspire narratives that challenge the status quo, and how the integration of global cultures can enrich our understanding of the world. Yet, with these opportunities come responsibilities: to wield technology with wisdom, to engage with social issues with empathy, and to embrace cultural diversity with openness and respect.

As we stand at this pivotal juncture, the path forward requires us to weave together the threads of the new and the old with care and creativity. It demands of us a commitment to fostering an environment where art and literature can thrive as instruments of enlightenment, empowerment, and connection. By doing so, we not only contribute to the evolution of artistic and literary expression but also participate in the ongoing creation of a cultural legacy that truly embodies the depth, complexity, and beauty of our shared humanity. In this vibrant convergence, we discover the potential to shape a future that reflects the best of what we are and aspire to be, guided by the transformative power of art, literature, and the indomitable human spirit. □

Losing Angel

Angelique Fawns



Illustration: Kateryna / Adobe Stock

The warm rays on my cheeks feel good from the sun streaming through the open blinds. Why are there blinds? We have curtains in our bedroom. My chest flares with a burning sensation. It's not the same as those other dang hot flashes that make me sweat the sheets and soak my nightgown. This heat wave is panic.

I don't know where I am.

Twisting my head, I see a familiar naked man beside me. Love cools my anxiety, and I rub the soft rolls covering what used to be a washboard belly. Phil. I grab his pudgy arm.

"Phil! Why are we here?"

He flutters his eyes and yawns in reply, "Betty. We're on vacation in Pass-a-grille, Florida. We've been here two weeks."

I'm hot again, but this time from shame. "I knew that!" I get out of bed and pull on my linen shorts and favorite pink tank top in a huff. I frown, looking at my wrinkled decolletage peeking out of the faded cotton. I know I should put on a bra, but I can't figure out why I would bother.

In the kitchen, my fingers hover over the dashboard of buttons. These days, you need a pilot's license to make coffee. Why are these newer gadgets so complicated?

"When are you gonna get out here and make me some coffee?" I've made the man millions of breakfasts in our years of marriage. About time he stepped up. "I like cream cheese."

He shuffles out of the bedroom, his still-handsome face screwed up in discomfort. The old mule's knees are shot, but will he listen to me and get a new set? Nope.

He pops an Aleve from the container on the small table. "I know Betty. You want some coffee and a bagel."

"I love cream cheese." I can see from the expression on his face that I must have mentioned that already. But it's worth repeating. "Cream cheese is really good on bagels."

His voice is slow with forced patience. "Yes, Betty. We also have peanut--" His last word is choked off as he hacks up something gross. Worse than an alley cat, that man.

I look around the rental room, and acid from my empty stomach crawls up my throat. I can't see my daughter-in-law. There should be a messy head of blonde hair hunched over a laptop in the living room. "Where's Angel? Didn't she come home last night?"

Frustration flares in Phil's blue eyes. "Angel went missing last year."

My spine straightens in indignation. "What do you mean 'missing'? Angel comes with us on our holiday every year."

Phil raises his palms in supplication but I'm on a roll now. Angel married Duke a few years ago, but they constantly fought over travel. "Our silly son won't vacation, so she joins us." Like I need to tell him.

My husband speaks like he's talking to a small child. "Last February, Angel took her backpack, told us she was going to Tampa to shop, and never came back." I hate it when he patronizes me this way.

My cheeks are burning as I swallow my rage. "Why didn't we look for her?"

“We did, Betty.” His lower lip quivers. “Look, I can’t do this every damn morning.”

He walks into the kitchen. I cross my arms and wait him out. I feel like he’s ignoring me, but I’m not easily brushed away like some fly-over bananas.

A couple of minutes later, he comes out of the kitchen with a hot, steaming cup of coffee. The familiar aroma soothes my frazzled nerves a touch. Angel loves her coffee with three sugars. Or is it two? She likes her treats, that one does, but works out to burn off those extra calories. Loves jogging on the beach.

I bite the inside of my cheek. “So, did we find her?”

Phil takes a seat at the table and slides his reading glasses on. “We didn’t. Neither could the cops. They couldn’t find any signs of foul play and decided she probably took off. Angel and Duke weren’t getting along. Oil and water, those two.” Considering the conversation over, he pulled out his phone to scroll through the daily news posts.

My teeth ache with indignation. I won’t be swiped away like an unpleasant story.

I slam my coffee down beside me, wincing when a bit of hot liquid splashes onto my hand. “She would NEVER do that. Leave our Duke?”

Phil puts his hands over his eyes and sighs. “Betty, can you drop it, please?”

I snort and grab my purse. “I’m going for a walk. I’m going to find Angel!”

He takes a slow, deliberate sip of his coffee. “Don’t you want your breakfast? It’s in the toaster.”

Snatching my sunglasses out of my purse, I pinch my lips together. “I’ve lost my appetite.”

Phil rubs the back of his neck. He’s a big man, and his neck, once strong and roped with muscle, now blends in with his shoulders, making him look like a disgruntled turtle. “Please don’t get lost.”

I pause at the door. “As if! Why would I get lost? We’ve been coming here for years.” I wrinkle my nose, thinking about it. “Why didn’t we go to Spain? Or Mexico instead?”

His speech is child-slow again, “Pass-a-grille is our favorite part of St Pete Beach. Only a few blocks between the causeway and the ocean. You know your way around. I’ll meet you later for a swim.”

Is he insinuating I don’t have the sense to find my way around someplace new? As if.

I try for a comeback but can’t think of anything suitable. “Be careful in the water! Dolphins love big fat guys.” With that, I flounce out of the tiny cabin.

He’s got some nerve.

I stop at our Chevy 3500, parked directly outside our tiny white one-bedroom cottage.

Room is at a premium on this little peninsula, and our huge pickup truck is practically parked on our porch. The sideview mirror works great for seeing my reflection.

I straighten my shoulder-length white hair with my fingers. In my desire to hunt for Angel, I forgot to put my face on. My fingers scramble through the old leather handbag draped on my shoulder. Good thing I always have an emergency lipstick.

At 68, I still catch the eyes of the male lawn bowlers next door. Forget being a cougar, I’m a granny jaguar. My once auburn hair is now cut in a thick white bob which accents my green eyes. As a bonus, my calves are taunt from all the walking I do.

As I walk towards the sea, the smell of salt and seaweed spurns some fuzzy memories. I wish they had reading glasses for the mind so I could recall them more clearly. My son Duke is a steady, no-nonsense kind of boy. Farming does that to you. He’s too concerned with his cows to ever drive south for a break from our harsh Canadian winters. He took over our farm when Phil retired.

Angel, Duke’s beautiful blonde bride, the spitting image of me when I was younger --doesn’t like being locked down on the farm. She joins us every year for a break from the snow and loves to run along the sand down here.

I round the corner and see the ocean, my flip-flops making a satisfying smack on the cracked pavement. It’s hotter than Hades today, but I love the sun. The age spots on my crepey chest are the proof. The V-neck t-shirts I wear used to display an awesome set of ta-tas. All natural, but now they droop. Angel has a great little body on her, from all that jogging no doubt.

There is a decrepit old hotel on the corner right across from the water. A man with a long, dirty beard sits on the patio. The only thing he’s missing is a banjo and one-eyed dog. He has a face like a hatchet, sharp and stained. Hatchet is sipping something out of a chipped cup and gives me a sideways scowl.

Normally, I like to greet everyone with a cheery “Good Day!” But I avoid this guy’s eyes, instead letting my gaze drift up to the weathered sign over his head, which says “Tides Inn.” Most of the windows are boarded up, like in a horror movie. I don’t remember seeing anyone other than Hatchet going in or out of the place. A chill runs down my spine. It gives me the serious creeps.

My spirits lift as soon as I cross the road and get away from that Bates wanna-be Motel. The smell of salt is stronger now.

The beach is directly across the road, but you must travel over these long wood bridges over dunes to get to the water.

I grab the railing and hoist myself onto the slightly rotten boards of the bridge. The whole structure creaks as I walk. Kind of like how my joints creak nowadays. A young man, greasy with coconut sunscreen, jumps behind me with a mini surfboard under his arm. I gasp and lean up against the side as the bridge sways with his heavy stomping. His arms are covered with tattoos of skulls and sharks.

I look down into the sharp dune grasses to hide the fright he’s given me. “Nice, er, art,” I say.

The tan terror says “Thanks” as he flies by.

Guess he didn’t catch the sarcasm.

My eyes are drawn to a lavender false fingernail in the sand under the bridge. The broken piece is faded, like it’s been there a while. The white sugar sand is protected by the dune grasses so garbage can stay stuck for ages. Angel wears press-on purple nails. I remember being appalled when she got off the plane with them.

“How do you scrub dishes or clean the house with those?” I’d asked her.

She’d laughed and kissed my cheek. “I manage.”

Angel is like that. Hard to offend and a personality as sunny as this day.

I slip off my sandals and peer up and down the beach. It’s almost empty except for one of those vultures who trolls for lost jewelry with a magnetic stick. He looks predatory, all hunched over his treasure finder and shuffling through the surf. I ignore him and walk the other way.

The feel of the sand is glorious between my toes. Warm and abrasive. I close my eyes for a minute to relive the days we used to bring Duke to the beach when he was a young boy. He used to laugh and laugh! Covering Phil in wet sand until only his big head stuck out, and begging me to make mud pies with him. When he got older, he grew out of that infectious laugh. At least until he met Angel. A quick memory jabs my frontal cortex. The cops shaking their heads when I tried to convince them my daughter-in-law would never take off. A wave of confusion washes over me like the waves tickling my toes.

Was that a real memory? Or something from a TV show? I open my eyes and blink against the strong sun. Where is Angel? I look at the beachgoers for the familiar flap of her ponytail and long bronzed legs pumping down the beach. She’s an eye-catcher that one, she is.

My breath whisks from me when strong arms hoist me half an inch in the air.

I scream and hear a familiar voice wheeze, "I'm never going to get old; I'm way too immature." Grabbing his callused palms, I kick my bare feet against Phil's shins till he puts me down.

My husband is grinning at me, his one missing tooth giving him an impish look, and he's tossed his cane in the sand. "Just can't keep my hands off my beautiful bride."

I can't help but smile back. "There is no fool like an old fool." I look over his shoulder. "Have you seen Angel? She's not back from her jog yet."

The fun light fades from his blue eyes. "Angel isn't jogging; she packed her stuff in her backpack, said she was catching a bus to shop in Tampa, and never came back. Who shops at six in the morning? She and Duke were fighting a lot." His voice softens. "You know that Betty. That woman was a free spirit. Didn't want to be tied down. Duke wanted kids and to keep her on the farm. She left him."

Gritting my teeth, I abandon the argument. I'll never believe that Angel would just up and leave us, but I can't argue forever with Phil. If you don't sometimes agree to disagree, you won't stay married.

My stomach rumbles. "I'm starving. Are we going to eat something today, or are you going to let me waste away to nothing?"

His grin returns. "Maybe you should have eaten your bagel after all!" He bends over, trying to reach his cane from where he dropped it on the wet sand.

I grab it for him. "Don't fall over Phil. You go down; it will take ten strong men to get you up again."

The sturdy wooden cane has crampons that you can slide out with a lever. Little spikes that grip the ground in four points from the tip. I push the spikes down and hand the cane back to him. This is the all-weather version and helps prevent slips and falls on ice back in Canada. It even has a built-in flashlight for evening strolls. Hopefully, it will anchor Phil in the deep sand here.

He flicks on the little flashlight that shines between the spikes. "Smile, you're on candid camera."

I strike a sexy pose, fluffing up my hair, and Phil laughs. Digging the crampons into the sand, he walks towards our favorite beach-side café. I pause, watching his butt. It's still a nice strong butt. I know the man thinks I'm losing my mind. It's natural to forget some things when you get older. Phil can't remember to put the toilet seat down; does that mean he's senile? I'm not forgetting anything when it comes to my daughter-in-

law. She's spicy but loyal. She didn't pick up her pack and headed for the hills.

Angel is missing, not jogging.

The shock of Angel being gone takes my breath away. I lean up against the pole, holding a mossy orange lifebuoy. My fingers grasp at the wood, and a sharp flame of pain bites my finger. A splinter. I look closely at a gouge in the pole. Is there a hint of purple in there? Like a strong nail scraped a railroad of desperation into the wood? A headache blossoms behind my wrinkles. The number eleven between my eyes that deepens every year.

The fog from my brain clears, and I look across the bridge at the Tides Inn across the road. It's all lining up. Nail polish on the pole. A ripped nail under the bridge. The old motel at the end of it all.

"Betty, hurry it up!" Phil calls back to me, the salt water staining his leather sandals.

I lose my thought. My stomach rumbles. That's right. I was hungry.

I push myself off the pole and stride after him. "Are you going to leave me to waste away all day, or are we going to get something to eat?"

Something lurks at the periphery of my memory. There was something I'd almost figured out...

The warm sweetness of toasted blueberry bagel tempts my nose as I look out the cottage window. I'm sitting in the rocking chair, directly in front of the air conditioner, enjoying the cool breeze on my chest. I can see just a sliver of the ocean from here, with the seagulls and pelicans hunting for fish over the blue water. I'm also keeping my eyes peeled for the familiar bobbing ponytail.

Phil's voice bellows at me from the kitchen. "Are you going to put some clothes on?"

I look down at my nightgown, faded flowers on the cotton hanging down to my knees. "No, I'm going to walk around like this all day." My voice piques with irritation.

He comes out from the tiny galley with a bagel with cream cheese on a plate.

A frown pulls down the corner of my lips. "Angel's not back yet. Duke is going to kill us if we lose his wife!"

Phil leans on the table and speaks slowly, "Angel left Duke last summer. She went shopping and didn't come back. Get dressed, Betty."

Rage boils in my belly. "What do you think I am, an idiot?" I head into the bedroom to pull on my shorts and tank top. Forget the dang bra; this tank top has a built-in one. "By the way, Angel would never leave Duke!"

I stomp out of the bedroom and see Phil glued to his phone. No doubt doom-scrolling

all the stupid news. Who has time for that stuff anyways?

"I'm going to find Angel."

"Don't get lost," he mumbles at me, not even looking up. "Why don't you take your bagel with you?"

Gritting my teeth, I don't bother to answer him. Instead, I grab his cane. The one with the spikes and flashlight. My knees are a bit stiff this morning. Plus, I'm hoping taking his cane will prevent him from following me.

Who needs that man anyway? I tap the cane as I strut down the alley. All the old fogies playing an early game of lawn bowling next door whistle and wave. I give an extra wiggle of my hips as I walk by.

The Tides Inn sits like an ugly wart across from the ocean. Why don't they tear down the decrepit eye sore? Rumor is that some old eccentric owns it and refuses to do anything with it. I squint at the basement windows as I walk by. Are those new boards in that one room? Hatchet glowers at me from his frayed lawn chair. Silver hair covers surprisingly strong arms. An old pop machine sits behind him, obviously long bereft of cold refreshments.

My mouth waters. Maybe I will have a cold Diet Coke later.

I ignore the man and cross the road to the weather-beaten bridge. My fists clench at my side. I really do hate these bridges, but it's the only way to get to the beach. And Angel sure does love running on the beach. My sandals catch a little rock, and each step on the weathered wood hurts. I stop to shake out the pebble, and my brain jolts like a mini bolt of electricity just struck me. The purple fingernail is still just under the bridge in the dune.

Angel had purple nails. Didn't I see something else purple on the beach yesterday? I blink, and the fog clears from my brain.

Angel isn't running on the beach. She went missing last year. But there is no way Angel would leave our Duke.

My brain jolts again, and I see it. The mossy life buoy on the pole, the bridge, and the creepy hotel. Angel heading down to the beach to do some stretching before she catches the bus to Tampa. What if someone grabbed her? What if the purple mark on the pole came from her press-on nails? A shudder runs through me as I close my eyes. I know this isn't a memory. I can't always trust my mind these days. But what if?

I tighten my grip on the cane, sore knees forgotten, and stomp back to the Tides Inn.

Hatchet isn't on the patio anymore, but that doesn't concern me. I see those new boards in the basement, and I lift my chin high. If you want to go someplace, you gotta walk in like you belong there.

I brush my fingers on the Coke machine as I enter the dim hotel. The machine is warm. Nothing cold to drink in there. The smell of dead mouse and mold gags me as my eyes adjust to the dark.

A tremor of fear makes me pause in the lobby. The front desk is a hoarder's dream of piled newspapers, empty pop cans, and rotting clothes. The air is so dusty, I can feel it coating my face like a night cream.

For a second, I lose the plot. The dust settles on in my mind as well. What am I doing in here again? I fight the urge to flee back into the sunshine and concentrate.

Angel. Angel didn't go shopping and never came back. I don't think Angel left Pass-a-grille.

A fresh sheet of plywood is leaned up against the gaping hole where elevator doors used to be. Like that new plywood on the basement windows. There is a door beside the elevator that probably leads downstairs. Tightening my grip on my cane, I consider going home and getting Phil.

I'm not entirely unaware. The reality is that I sometimes forget things. I know I might forget why I went home. Eat a bagel and zone out to daytime television. But there is no time for that. Angel might be here and need me.

With a shuddering breath, I gather up all my stubbornness. The sticky slap of my flip-flops echoes in the lobby as I cross over to the door. The cheap tile is gummy with grime and old age. Sliding my hand onto the dusty doorknob I ease it open. It's darker than a moonless night.

A wave of panic washes over me. I can't do this. If I try and go downstairs in the pitch black, I'm likely to fall and break every bone in my body. My hand clenches on the cane, and I feel it. The tiny button for the flashlight! I switch it on; there are no excuses now. I tremulously ease through the door and then jump when it slams behind me.

If I thought the lobby smelt bad, the staircase is worse than the bottom of a dumpster at a fish market. Attempting to breathe through my nose, I navigate the stairs slowly. The thin beam from the cane cuts through the gloom.

When I reach the bottom, I'm in a long hallway. With maybe eight doors, but only one is open a crack. The number six hangs crookedly above a taped-over peephole. When I push the door, I expect it to scream like my nerves. But the hinges glide silently as if they've been recently oiled.

A thin sliver of light catches dust motes as it filters from the plywood over the basement window. The smell of old pizza and despair is overwhelming. There's a mattress laying flat on the floor, disturbing stains mottling the surface, and a backpack leaning against it.

A backpack with a small Canadian flag on the front of it.

A wash of adrenaline sets my nerves on high alert. There's an industrial freezer on the other side of the room with small holes drilled into the side of it. We had to deal with some ugly stuff on the farm, but I'm terrified this is going to be much worse than a dead calf. Or henhouse after a visit from the fox.

Am I brave enough to look in that freezer? The cane steadies me, and I snap my teeth together. Before I can change my mind, I stride over and throw open the lid.

I knew Angel would never leave Duke. Her blonde hair is brown with filth, her arms are tied with old boating rope, and she's skinnier than I've ever seen. But she's alive. There is no recognition in the wide green eyes.

Blood and musk waft from the old blankets as she flinches and rolls over. "No. God. Kill me now." Her voice is dry and defeated.

Horror battles with relief. "Angel, it's me. I'm here. I'm getting you out of here." My voice is higher pitched than it should be. I lean the cane against the freezer and untie her arms with panic-fueled dexterity.

Angel flips and struggles to sit up, a strangled gasp as she points behind me.

I feel, rather than hear, him enter the room. "I'm going to have to kill both of you." A hellish voice, rumbling with corruption and too many cigarettes.

A strong hand grabs my arm. I grab the cane again while twisting my head and see Hatchet. His ugly face is demonic. Psycho. Angel screams. I scream too. But not with fear. With rage. With frustration. I've always been a stubborn old biddy. Who do you think dealt with the worst of the farming mishaps? Phil isn't the tough one. I am.

With a flick of my finger, I slide down the crampons from the cane. Hatchet wrenches me backward, and I flail at him with my weapon.

And miss. I hit the ground, the cane rattling away from me. The air rushes out of my lungs as my back slams against the concrete. Hatchet cocks back his fist, and I see the veins on his arm bulge. If he lands this punch, I'm done.

My hand scrabbles for the cane, and I can't find it. Panic and pain overwhelm me, and I have a moment where I think it's the end. The fist descends towards me and I close my eyes, but my fingers haven't given up. They are still exploring the cracked, cold floor.

Hatchet groans as something knocks him off balance. My eyes fly open. Angel managed to scramble out of the freezer and flew at him, her emaciated body bouncing off Hatchet like a spent tennis ball onto the mattress. He staggers

sideways and his fist connects with my ear. Which hurts like hell, but I am still conscious.

My hand finds my weapon, and I whip it around and stab it at his face. He rears his ugly head back, but it connects. The metal prongs meant for Canadian ice sank easily into his rheumy eyeballs. He screams and falls to the floor, taking my cane with him.

I struggle to sit up, but even emaciated, Angel can move fast. She scrambles, and her thin arm reaches past me. She yanks the cane out of Hatchet's head and pummels him, the prongs stabbing his head, his chest, and his cheeks. Angel yells like one of the old cows caught in barbed wire fencing. She hits Hatchet again and again.

Hatchet is done screaming. Forever.

I've always been good in crises at every age and stage of my life. My brain gets foggy, but I'm thankful a burst of adrenaline has swept the cobwebs away in this moment. With a firm hand, I guide Angel slowly up the stairs and back into the sun. She sobs and blinks like a newborn calf when I lean her up against the old pop machine to catch her breath.

I pat her arm and say, "It's going to be okay, Angel. We love you, and people who love each other can get through anything."

The smell of toasted cinnamon bagel permeates our little cottage.

"I love cream cheese," I remind Phil.

He calls back from the kitchen. "Yes, dear, does Angel want one?"

Concern tightens my belly as I look at the messy head of blonde hair hunched over a laptop in the living room. "Angel honey, do you want a bagel?"

She looks up at me, dark circles prominent under her eyes and a haunted look still darkening the green of her irises. "No thanks, just coffee."

"Got it," Phil says.

I walk over and rest a hand on her shoulder. She flinches but then relaxes. "Duke got on the first plane and will be here by tonight."

Angel nods. "Thank you, Betty. I would have died--" Her voice trails off weakly, and a shudder shakes her thin frame.

Empathy and purpose snap through my brain, enlivening my synapses. "We are going to get you better. The best therapists. The best lawyers. Though it was obviously self-defense." I sit at the table across from her, giving her lots of space.

She just nods, and I wish I could do more.

I might have some of that old-timer's disease. But there are things I will always know.

I know Angel will never leave our Duke.

I know cream cheese is great on bagels.

I know Phil loves me. □

Techno-Future

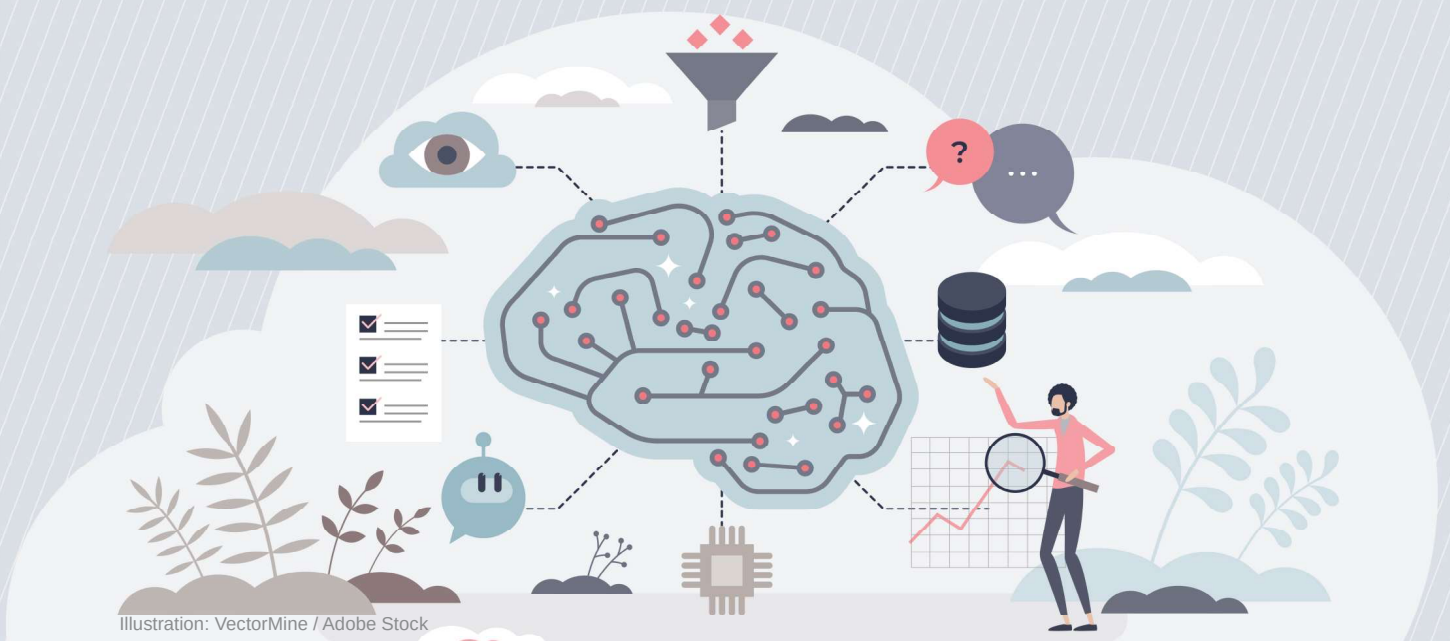
Heimir Steinarsson

The next years in technology will bring us things that nobody is able to foresee today, and that will likely change the way we handle global business and take care of daily tasks at hand.

But humans should tread carefully when dealing with machinery that has the power to compete with us and make us obsolete.

It has become increasingly apparent that technology alone cannot propel our race towards a more auspicious place.

Well, come what may, I'm sure we will be ready for the techno-thrill, so long as we don't let the bots dictate the rules and call the shots.





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