

## **Surtsey**

By Doug Johnstone

She lifted a handful of black sand and squeezed it through her fingers.

There was a gurgle and she turned. He was still laid out beside her, hadn't moved. Only the shallow swell of his chest, a thin wheeze escaping the wound in his neck. His blood had soaked the sand, glistening like oil. There was a rattle of breath then his body slackened.

Sunlight shimmered across the volcanic vents guarding over the island like giants. She longed to see those peaks explode, throw ash and lava into the air like they had when the island was born not so long ago.

She got up and pulled the broken bottle from his chest wound. There was a sucking sound. She stepped over his body and down to the water's edge. Through the morning haze she saw the closed fist of Heimaey. The festival would still be going strong there. She leaned back and hurled the bottle as far as she could. It spiralled through the air and landed with a plop in the dark Atlantic.

She turned to survey the island. Ragged cliffs, dark beach, craters and cracks, all shaped into a teardrop so small you could walk round it in an hour.

So this is home, she thought.

‘Surname?’

‘Mackenzie.’

‘First name?’

‘Surtsey, it’s S, U, R...’

‘Like the island, yes?’

She looked surprised, then nodded. ‘Like the island.’

‘Passport, please.’

She handed it over, pristine and unused.

‘How many bags are you checking in?’

‘None.’

The girl behind the counter looked at the empty conveyor belt. She had an earthy beauty, eyes like sea glass and sturdy hands. Pretty accent too, rugged and rolling. She scanned Surtsey for hand luggage.

‘Spur of the moment thing,’ Surtsey said, taking her passport back.

The check-in girl wasn’t much older than her, maybe twenty. But she looked like she knew what to do with her life. Her name badge said ‘Rán’. Surtsey wondered about that vowel.

‘Enjoy Iceland, Ms Mackenzie.’

‘Thank you, Ran.’

‘It’s “Rown”, actually.’

‘Sorry, Rán.’

‘It’s OK, I’m used to it.’

‘Yeah. I know what you mean.’

At the bar she studied the gantry.

‘What can I get you, love?’

‘What do they drink in Iceland?’

The barman shrugged meaty shoulders. ‘Beats me.’

‘Give me some Finlandia, close enough.’

He went to pour it.

‘Just leave the bottle,’ she said.

It was something Bogart would say in those old films her mum liked. Her stomach cramped. She waved her mum’s credit card at the barman. He brought the bottle and glass. She downed it, shivered, refilled it.

She looked at the runway and wondered how many strangers would pass through the airport today.

‘Just take it.’

‘Mum...’

‘I’ve got no use for it now.’

She took the Visa card from her mum. She stared at the blotches of purple and yellow where the drip broke the skin of her mum’s hand. She pocketed the card.

‘Take care of yourself.’

‘Stop it...’

‘I mean it, Sur. You have to start thinking about...’

‘I don’t want to, OK?’

‘Please, you have to be practical.’

‘Stop talking like this.’

Her mum leaned back, gasping, and reached for the mask. She held it over her mouth and closed her eyes, breath clattering. She was under six stone, her skin saggy and her stomach and bowel hacked away by surgery and aggressive carcinoma.

The descent had been quick. Abdominal pain, vomiting blood, tests, chemo and surgery, all in a month. And now this. Bedridden and clock-watching, trying to maintain comfort and dignity.

Her mum removed the mask, a string of bile from her mouth.

‘Go. I don’t want you seeing me like this.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Promise me you’ll look after yourself.’

Surtsey didn’t speak.

‘Promise me.’

‘Where to, darling?’

She gave her address. Ten minutes later they pulled up outside. She looked at the front door. She'd spent the last fortnight alone in there.

'Wait here.'

She ran to the door, scrabbled with keys then tore upstairs. She dug around in her desk, lifted the passport and darted back out. She climbed into the cab.

'Airport.'

The driver grinned. 'Last minute holiday?'

'Kind of.'

'Somewhere sunny?'

'No.'

\* \* \*

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are starting our descent. We'll be touching down at Keflavik in approximately ten minutes.'

She gazed out the window. A thread of tarmac covered amongst jagged rocks, green waves hurling themselves against the coast. Snowy peaks and columns of white steam in the distance. Something hardened inside her as the plane swung round to meet the land.

'What's your name?'

She turned. He was cute, a squint smile poking through the beard. Skinny, indie, harmless.

‘Surtsey.’

‘Like the island? Sorry, you must hear that all the time.’

‘Actually, you’re only the second person ever to say it.’

He tilted his head. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Somewhere else.’

He held out his hand.

‘My name is Snorri. Pleased to meet you, Surtsey.’

She looked at his hand. Soft skin, girlish fingers. She took it, surprised by the firm grip.

‘Hi, Snorri. Fancy a drink?’

He thumbed over his shoulder at a gang of laughing boys and girls, all cheekbones and woollen wear. ‘I’m with friends. Why don’t you join us?’

\* \* \*

They bundled from Brennslan to Kaffibarinn to Sirkus as the evening pulled focus and fell forwards. The watery daylight at midnight was dizzying and she liked it. She let Snorri’s banter wash over her as she soaked up the dinky buildings, the tangy air, the singing, growling accents.

The beer garden was fenced-off concrete, palm trees painted on the walls.

‘This place was in a Björk video.’ It was Katrín, Snorri’s friend. Not girlfriend. She was tall and solid, pointy ears.

Surtsey looked round. The place was a mess of Reykjavík’s beautiful and wasted.

‘Do you like Icelandic music?’ said Katrín.

‘Don’t really know any.’

‘So you’re not here for Þjóðhátíð?’

‘What?’

‘Þjóðhátíð. The People’s Festival. On Heimaey, one of the Vestmannaeyjar, the Westman Islands.’

Surtsey stared at her. ‘Like Surtsey?’

‘Like your namesake, yes. You must come with us to the festival. It’s the biggest party of the year.’

‘Can we visit Surtsey?’

‘It’s illegal. Scientists only. It’s a world heritage site.’

‘I know all that, I meant under the radar.’

Katrín laughed. ‘You could ask Gunnar.’ She pointed to a stocky boy in a bobble hat and orange shades, shimmying with Snorri. ‘We’re going to Heimaey in his father’s boat.’

‘When?’

Katrín waved a hand. ‘When this place dies down.’

Reykjavík harbour shrank fast as they headed southeast. They blasted through olive-grey swells, trailing white froth. The wind blew her hair, which swarmed her mouth. She tugged at it.

‘Some boat, yes?’ It was Gunnar at the controls. ‘She’s a beauty. 62-footer, 25 tonnes, but she can do 50 miles an hour easily.’ He tapped a digital display. ‘She’s called Loki.’

Katrín appeared from below deck clutching a green bottle with a black label. It read ‘Brennivín’ around a silhouette of Iceland. She handed it to Surtsey, who unscrewed the lid and sniffed. Mouthwash and medicine.

‘Icelandic schnapps,’ said Gunnar, swerving the boat so they all had to shift their weight.

Katrín shook her head. ‘Boys and their toys, eh? Gunnar’s daddy is one of the bankers who brought our country to its knees. And yet he’s still a millionaire. Gunnar doesn’t like to talk about it.’

‘Dad is an asshole.’

‘An asshole who gave you his boat for the weekend.’

‘Still an asshole.’

Surtsey drank from the bottle, flinched, then passed it to Gunnar. He glugged for show.

‘So, how does a beautiful Scottish girl come to be named after an Icelandic island?’ he said.

\* \* \*

She’d pored over online maps and pictures as a kid. Named after an island vomited from the bowels of the earth in the sixties, a chain of eruptions lasting years. A virginal and barren land. Then, as years went on, home to tiny plants and eventually animals. A whole ecosystem untainted by human contact. She immersed herself in her mum’s textbooks,

revelling in phrases like tephra, breccia, palagonite tuff. She stared at photographs of lightning storms, lava flows, billowing piles of steam and ash rising miles into the atmosphere.

‘My mum’s a vulcanologist.’

‘Sorry?’

‘A volcano expert.’

‘Oh. Has she ever visited Surtsey?’

She looked at the expanse of water, the mainland just a grimy shadow in the distance.

‘No. She never has.’

A thick drumbeat cannoned round the crater and back toward the stage. Her eyes throbbed in time. Red flares lined the ridge, igniting one after the other, like a warning passed across ancient hilltops. People cheered as the chain of fires tore round the volcano.

She laid her head back on the grass and looked up. The same filmy midnight light. The drums stopped but there was singing from the crowd. They all knew a secret song. She tried to hear the melody, listen for the words, but the sound drifted past her.

‘Are you OK?’

Snorri lying beside her.

‘What are they singing?’ she said.

He laughed. 'A really crappy folk song.'

She propped herself up on her elbows. 'It sounds beautiful.'

He was looking at her in a way she recognised.

'Can I kiss you?' he said.

She lifted her Brennivín and drank, wiping her mouth with her hand.

'Sure.'

She looked at the roof of the tent. The red nylon a membrane separating her from the world. She ran a finger round her nipple but it didn't harden. Snorri slept next to her, his mouth slack.

Her mobile rang, an old telephone ringtone. She sifted through her clothes, pulled it out and answered.

'Hello?' she said.

A voice at the other end she didn't recognise.

'Yeah, that's me.'

The voice was professional, resigned. A middle-aged woman tired of delivering bad news.

'I see.' It was all Surtsey could think to say.

The voice talked on, bouncing across the atmosphere between two northern countries, vibrating in the air. Surtsey waited until the woman ran out of words.

'Well, thanks for letting me know.'

She ended the call and looked at Snorri. Sweet boy. She got dressed and slunk out the tent.

\* \* \*

‘You want to go to Surtsey now?’ Gunnar was swaying and laughing. Euro rave pulsed somewhere far away.

‘Why not?’ said Surtsey.

‘Because it’s illegal.’

‘So what?’

Gunnar looked behind her. ‘What about Snorri and Katrín?’

‘They don’t want to come.’

‘I don’t want to go either.’

‘Then let me take the boat.’

‘No chance.’

‘If you don’t, I’ll just steal it.’

‘You won’t get it started.’

‘I’ll hotwire it.’

‘You don’t know how.’

‘But I’ll make an expensive mess of the electronics trying, won’t I?’

He stopped dancing and stared at her. He looked round at the sprawl of drunken mayhem.

‘What’s it worth?’

‘I’ll be your friend forever.’

He looked her up and down. ‘OK.’

The sun was below the horizon, but fluid light still hummed in the air. She could make out the undulations of Surtsey, it wasn’t far at all. Each journey took her further away from herself.

\* \* \*

She held her nose and jumped over the side. The cold pounded the breath out her body and her chest stuttered as she went under. Her head broke the surface and she gulped. She started swimming, a splashy crawl towards the island.

She felt sand under her feet and began wading. She was shivering, pushing gelid waves behind her, snot running from her nose.

She stumbled up the beach shaking and sniffing. Gunnar emerged from the water and sat beside her. He pulled a bottle of Brennivín from his trousers and opened it.

‘This will help with the cold.’

They drank.

‘What now?’ he said, touching her hand on the bottle.

She removed her hand and looked away. Ashen beach and boulder-strewn expanses, dominated by two craggy ridges.

‘Let’s explore.’

They traipsed round the coast, stumbling across bulbous lava fields. They climbed a ridge, stopping at a volcanic vent. They swigged schnapps and got their breath back.

Surtsey looked out. 'Just think, none of this existed 50 years ago.'

Gunnar shrugged and eyed her. 'I need to get warm.'

'So your dad's a wanker?'

He narrowed his eyes. 'Yeah.'

'What about your mum?'

'She's OK, I guess. Not as cool as being a volcano expert.'

Surtsey shook her head then jumped up, wiping grit from her jeans.

'Let's go back to the beach.'

She lay on the sand with her eyes closed. The sun hovered on the horizon, but she was still cold. She felt his hands on her clothes, peeling layers from her. The smell of schnapps and seawater. He was rough, nothing like Snorri. He pulled her legs apart and pushed inside her. She felt the zip of his jeans bump against her. He held one of her wrists, his weight on her stomach and chest. She thought of her mum, who never made it to this desolate place. He seemed to get heavier, more oppressive. She had trouble breathing.

'Stop,' she said. 'Get off.'

She hardly even heard it herself. He grunted and kept going.

'Stop.'

She tried to prise him away with her free hand but he was too heavy. She felt around in the sand and her fingers touched the bottle. She fumbled at the neck, grabbed it, then swung hard at the back of his head. They were showered in glass. He reared up as she thrust the broken bottle at him, pushing with all her strength until the terrible weight had been lifted from her.

She revved the boat and looked back. She knew the island was dormant, but she thought she saw a tiny trail of smoke coming from one of the vents.

She steered away from the beach, the point of the teardrop. From here, the body looked like just another slab of volcanic rock, resting after the furious fires of the earth's core.

She pushed the throttle and the boat jerked forward. She pointed it away from everything and headed into open water.

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