

Reynisfjara
by Kristopher Zgorski

Reynisfjara is a three-hour drive from Keflavík International Airport on the beautiful island nation of Iceland. On our first visit two years ago, it was just a brief stopover on our way to the village of Vik and locales in the South, but today, it is our main destination.

“You know you’ve created a monster, right?”

He laughed. “Oh, is that right, Ernst? Is this another Frankenstein reference?” Tram asked.

“No, I’m serious. This isn’t about my term paper, you doofus. Although I do recall a certain professor who is in this car saying I should consider publishing it someday,” I said, lightly punching him on his upper arm. “What I mean is a travel monster. Before our first Iceland trip, I hadn’t been anywhere. Now look at me. In just this past year, I’ve been to Iceland, Hawai’i, and the Florida Keys.”

“Lucky for me, you—’Ern the explorer’—allowed me to accompany you,” Tram said as he lifted our entwined hands from his leg and proceeded to kiss the back of my fingers.

“Let’s see how you feel after we get this task done,” I said.

The drive south on Iceland’s iconic Ring Road made the journey to Reynisfjara quick and easy, something that is not always true about the less-traveled secondary roads across the island. Iceland is known for the treacherous crosswinds that can make navigating around the island a bit like a solo race on a deceptively complex obstacle course with invisible impediments forcing you off the path at random intervals. Success feels like it depends on some mythical combination of concentration, perseverance, and a bit of luck.

The blurred landscape out the passenger side window hypnotized me, making me think of H.G. Wells’ time machine, transporting me back to that first journey to the foreign environs of Reynisfjara Beach. It had almost been a year ago to the day, but the novelty of it being my first serious travel kept it as a treasured memory in the forefront of my mind. Well, that and a few other things, of course.

Bertram and I stayed in Vik on our original trip. Our binge sessions watching this bizarre but fascinating science fiction-esque Netflix series set in the small village dominated by the specter of the Katla volcano served as inspiration for our first adventure together. Reynisfjara Beach featured prominently on that streaming show, so it naturally helped dictate the agenda.

Since the route to Vik took us past the famous black beach first, Bertram insisted we tackle that before checking into our hotel, despite the exhaustion of all the day’s travels.

“I can’t believe we’ll soon be standing on such a strange and unique beach, just like on the show,” I said as we took the side-road turn that would lead us directly to the parking lot.

Once we parked the car, the short path to the main beach didn’t even lend itself to anticipation. Just a short distance and BAM! your life view is instantly and forever altered.

“Holy smokes,” I said, probably looking as shaken as I felt. “I’ve never seen anything so weird and beautiful at the same time.”

In the distance lay a vast canvas of sand and stone, various shades of black and grey occasionally spotted with a brief glimpse of an off-white pebble. The fierce assault of the Atlantic waves was undeniable, pummeling the shoreline, looking for all the world like Poseidon’s horses bursting out of their watery stables, ready to trample anything in their path.

Off to the left rose the huge basalt cliffs that closely resemble something one might expect to find in Middle-earth.

“Are you taking all this in Ernst?” Bertram asked as he grabbed my shoulders and spun me around for a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view.

We must have spent an hour or more walking the beach, basking in the majestic nature around us, never straying too close to the incoming tide, obeying the signs in the area that warned of danger.

I don’t even remember when I first spotted it. Or even what it was that caught my eye. Somehow, I had found myself separated from most of the crowd on the shoreline that day, so I was free to explore unimpeded. Unjudged.

The moment I kicked the thin layer of black sand—the result of years where the powerful waves pulverized the dried and hardened lava flows from the nearby volcano—the shiny surface of this small stone called to me. I bent to pick it up; the small black rock seemed harmless in my hand, the smooth surface not so much reflecting the afternoon sunlight as absorbing it like a terrestrial black hole. I knew immediately that I would be taking it home with me. A while back, my best friend Jason had got me started collecting fossils and unique gemstones, so it was inevitable that I would crave this for my stash. I wouldn’t realize why until some time later.

Back in the present, next to Tram on a journey to that beach once again, I marveled at life’s strange trajectory.

“I can’t believe how quickly things started to go wrong after I took this,” I said, pulling the simple stone from its hiding place deep in the pocket of my faded jeans.

Tram gave me that look. “There’s no such thing as a cursed rock. But it was stupid of you to take it. Everything else is just a coincidence you have manifested with an overactive imagination.”

“Riiiiight,” I said, while thinking two things: “you’re full of shit and little do you know.”

By the time we’d gotten back to our car in the parking lot on that initial visit, most of the other tourists had moved on for further sightseeing. Bertram was the first to notice the flat tire. Thankfully, the rental car came with a spare, and my hunky travel companion knew how to change a tire.

Then the Vik hotel couldn’t find our reservations. I’ll admit, for a moment, I thought maybe Tram had made the error on purpose, just to give me a fright. But the Icelandic residents are so kind that the issue was resolved quickly.

It continued with little things like that throughout our stay, small inconveniences that seemed unusual and random. I mentioned them each time, even saying maybe I should put the stone back, but Bertam—ever rational Bertram—said I was being ridiculous and foolish.

The encroaching warnings of real trouble continued on the way back to the airport at the end of our stay. A warning light came on, indicating the car needed AdBlue, which neither of us had ever heard of. Turns out, it’s a special additive motorists add to diesel fuel to help prevent it from freezing in colder climates. Who knew? The car rental people had not thought to leave some of that in the trunk for emergencies, so we almost missed our flight home.

Honestly, I guess I should be thankful that our plane didn’t drop out of the sky. Maybe I should have left the stone on the island of its creation. Perhaps the foregone conclusion could have been avoided. Certainly, things might have progressed differently if not for that cursed rock. I think MeMaw would agree.

Our car conversation on the way to MeMaw’s house that Sunday more closely resembled a first date than a relationship at the stage of meeting relatives, but there you have it.

“Do you think your grandmother will like me?” Bertram queried. “Who am I kidding? Everyone likes me.” Bertram followed this with a half-hearted chuckle, a shade closer to affirmation than it was to jest.

We had been over this many times already. “Yes, MeMaw is going to love you,” I said, despite knowing the age difference was going to be a challenge for her. In our normal circles, the twenty-year age gap was never questioned...well, honestly, I’m not sure we really even had a “circle.” It was mostly just us. All the time. The fact remained that I’ve always related better to people older than I was. Even my best friend—my only friend—growing up, Jason Johnson, was five years older. We were like brothers until he went away to college. Over the course of two years, his visits back to the neighborhood became ever more infrequent. Sadly, I came to realize that sometimes people leave and can’t come back, shattering my

idealized view of the world. It was at that point that I began to rely on humor to deflect everyone about everything, including my May-December romance.

“You know what would be funny,” I said. “Let’s tell MeMaw that we are calling ourselves Bert and Ernie.”

From the tone of his pseudo-laugh, I could tell Bertram was annoyed.

“What the hell is wrong with you? You know you have a few screws loose, right? Doesn’t that seem a tad bit childish to you?”

“It was just a joke,” I said, trying to smooth things over. “She’s the only family I have, so I need her to like you.”

Dinner with MeMaw went swimmingly. She really did seem to find Bertram interesting and kept any concerns she might have had to herself.

“So, Mrs. Ziegler, what do you think about these nicknames for your grandson and me? We have taken to calling ourselves Tram and Ern. That’s got a ring to it, don’t you think?” Bertram said, shooting me a side eye worthy of its own Tik-Tok meme.

MeMaw shook her head. “Oh gosh, younger generations have the strangest priorities. It’s just silly. What really matters for a relationship to stand the test of time is love, respect and always listening to each other.”

As I poured some coffee for everyone, I hoped that Bertram was picking up what MeMaw was laying down. “Why don’t you grab the brownies you made while I show MeMaw the rock I stole from Iceland,” I said to Bertram...or rather to Tram...after I collected the dirty dinner plates. “We need to head out soon.”

The shifting shades of red on Bertram’s face were visible. “How many times do I have to tell you that is a skúffukaka, a very traditional Icelandic dessert that may look like a run-of-the-mill brownie, but requires a more complex preparation resulting in better flavor,” he said, dripping condescendingly with pride and indignation.

That blunt correction suitably delivered, Bertram slipped into the kitchen, but not before I heard him say “Please don’t bore her with that ridiculous theory about how the stone is somehow cursed. As if.”

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A short while later, Bertram carried the Pyrex casserole dish in from the kitchen, humming a little tune. “Who wants dessert?” he said.

Watching my boyfriend wield the knife to cut his ultra-fancy brownies made me wary of getting too close. "If you aren't careful, you are going to hurt yourself or someone else with that thing," I said.

As MeMaw enjoyed the sweet after-dinner treat, I could almost see the past as it flashed behind her eyes. "You know, this reminds me of a dessert Mrs. Johnson used to make. Do you remember her, Ernst?"

"I do," I said, not wanting to continue on that particular memory stroll.

MeMaw came back to the present. "It's a shame. She was never the same after her only child succumbed to suicide. He had such potential."

The room took on a stillness that felt heavy. "I find it's best not to dwell in the past. We have to live for today," Tram said with compassion, not wanting to end the evening on a downer.

Turns out his words were almost prophetic. The police would tell us later that when we left MeMaw's house, it looked as though no one locked the front door, allowing access for some maniac to ransack the house looking for valuables and to brutally stab MeMaw to death in the process. The curse of the Icelandic rock would rob me of any future dinners at MeMaw's house.

Tram gave my hand a squeeze. "Are you thinking about your grandmother?" he asked.

"I'll never understand why she didn't lock the front door," I said. "She was never that careless."

As the unique landscape loomed outside the windshield, tears made their way down my face like tributaries seeking an outlet. I heard Tram's comforting voice, but all I could understand were the words tragic and accident. But my true feeling was that it was neither of those things.

"Hey, look, there's that stop-off for that waterfall where visitors can walk behind the majestic falls. Let's be spontaneous and go on an adventure," Tram said.

The Seljalandsfoss is one of the tallest waterfalls in Iceland and the only one where it is possible to view nature's infinite beauty from both in front of the cliff and from within the falls themselves.

The trek to the top of the falls was not as strenuous as one might expect, but it certainly was slippery. I had to stop a few times to center myself, avoiding what certainly could have resulted in a broken limb if not careful. But that was nothing compared to the thin coating of water that made the rocks behind Seljalandsfoss so slick.

Tram grabbed my shoulders and positioned me so that the cascading water was behind me. "Lift your arms like you are Loki, controlling the elements," he said.

As silly as it sounds, I knew this would make an awesome photograph, between the falling water and the vast wildness stretching into the distance as far as the eye can see.

“You do realize that Loki has nothing to do with the elements, right? Have you ever even seen a Marvel movie?”

Tram got a look on his face. “I think you need to move closer to the edge for the angle of this shot to work properly.”

I could feel my feet sliding across the slimy rock face as I took timid steps backward. “How’s this?” I queried.

“Perfect. Got it!” Tram said before lunging forward to pull me safely into his waiting arms. “I’ve got you, babe, don’t worry. I would never let anything happen to you.”

Our voices echoed off the cavernous walls as we began our trek out from under Seljalandsfoss. Like countless times before, Tram to the rescue.

“Ern, it’s not exactly a practical car,” Tram said, looking at the vintage cherry red Mustang with the dramatic racing stripe down the hood.

“I’m still young and adventurous, practically is over-rated,” I said, an edge to my voice.

I could see the confusion on the face of the gentleman selling us the car. What is the deal with these two weirdos?

“Aren’t you tired of having to drive me around, Tram? Or do you like having that level of control over my whereabouts?”

Bertram tried to hide his indignation behind a grunt, but it was clear my words had touched a nerve. “That’s not it at all. Do what you want,” he said. “But let’s at least look under the hood, shall we?”

As Bertram and I checked out the car, I couldn’t help but notice a shift in the seller’s demeanor. “You know, I’m thinking maybe I underpriced this beauty. Let’s make it seven thousand.

“You can’t do that,” I said, deflating. “I only have the forty-five hundred you quoted me over the phone.”

Hearing the exchange, Bertram stood to full height. Walking away from me and the car, I knew this stranger was in trouble. “What is it, can’t bear to sell your precious vehicle to a couple of queers, much less a queer couple?” Tram said, the anger apparent in both volume and tone. “That’s unacceptable.”

“My car, my price.” There was no negotiation.

Bertram came back to the front of the car and pushed me aside before slamming the hood with more force than was necessary. "It's all right," he said, glaring at the man. "We'll find you a better car somewhere else."

I took Tram's hand in mine as we turned and stormed away from the homophobe.

Had we watched the news over the next few days, we might have heard about the car driving off the road and into a ravine that evening. The newscaster would say that it appeared to be some critical mechanical error and that it was likely the Mustang's driver had no time to even panic. I remember picking up the Reynisfjara stone from the nightstand and unconsciously stroking it to soothe my nerves. Some things have a way of working out just as they should.

The feeling of déjà vu as we arrived at Reynisfjara beach again was palpable. Sure, the sky this time was overcast, with the threat of damp, chilly rain every present, but somehow that seemed appropriate.

Tram and I walked hand in hand to the edge of the sand and watched in silence as the waves pummeled the shoreline and cliff face. Out in the distance stood the iconic rock formations rumored to be petrified trolls. I couldn't remember if they were supposedly guarding the coast or attacking it. Seemed irrelevant either way; today, they would simply be witnesses. Nothing was going to alter the decision I had made.

I turned to Tram—perhaps with tears in my eyes, but let's face it, the wind was strong that day. "This ends here," I said, with a seriousness in my voice that could not be downplayed.

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you saying you want to end our relationship?" Tram turned to face me and saw the bleak look in my eyes.

I made a sound that was a cross between a huff and a laugh. "Oh, not the relationship...you!"

The shock on Tram's face confirmed my decision. Such arrogance, as though no one would ever think badly of the great Bertram Bannister.

"What the hell are you talking about?" His confusion as pathetic as he was.

We began to stroll towards the basalt wall that stands to the left of the beach. "Are you kidding me? Do you really think I am that clueless? I saw how you looked at that twink in the front row of your Intro to Lit seminar last week." Keeping the anger from my voice was imperative. It had to look like we were joking to the few other tourists around us. "I'm not as stupid as you like to think."

"I never said you were. And I would never get involved with a student." Tram placed his arm around my shoulder, and despite my disgust, I allowed it.

“Never?” I laugh. “Uh...ya did! I’m standing right here.”

“I meant other than you, of course. I love you.”

In the hollowed-out cave along the basalt wall, the cold of the whipping wind diminished, but the chill remained in my voice. “Please. Don’t make yourself look so pitiful. The player got played. You will do what I say, or the whole world will know how you manipulated a poor, innocent freshman. How you abused your power. And it wasn’t the first time.”

“It wasn’t like that, and you know it,” Tram said, confused.

It was time to bring out the big guns. I’d been holding this secret so long that I struggled to open up. Looking around to make sure no one could overhear us, I stood face-to-face with Tram.

“Remember Jason Johnson? He was an older kid in my neighborhood...I idolized him. I loved him. And you destroyed him. What you did drove him to suicide. He put it all in his diary, which he left in my possession. I carried that diary around with me for years until I could arrange our meeting. From that moment, I knew I would make you pay.” The cathartic power of truth coursed through my veins.

I could tell this revelation shook Bertram to his core.

“Have you gone insane?”

But I wasn’t going to stop there. “And if threatening to ruin your reputation isn’t enough incentive, don’t think I won’t tell the police how I suspect that you killed MeMaw.”

The color drained completely from Bertram’s face. He was a ghost of his vibrant self.

“Yeah, I set you up, my love! You should have seen MeMaw’s face when I used my spare key to open the door that night. I proceeded to stab her with the kitchen knife you used to cut your precious brownies. Just more collateral damage of your toxic nature. Hey, and a financial windfall for me.” My laughter was more performative than authentic.

“This can’t be happening.” Tram stood in disbelief, his chin quivering.

Was it denial or respect? Did I care?

I just nodded. “Oh, it very much is happening. And remember when I wanted that Mustang? If I wasn’t going to get that car, no one was. Fortunately, I hung out with some troubled kids growing up. This one delinquent, Scott, taught me how to cut a brake line in minutes with the tiniest tiny hack saw you ever did see.”

That seemed to be the last straw.

“You’re a monster.”

Fortunately, there was no one else around to hear this accusation. “Didn’t I tell you that earlier this morning? You really should learn to listen more closely. Wasn’t that MeMaw’s advice?”

It was time for my coup de grâce. Or, as I learned in Professor Bertram Bannister’s Literary Terms 101 course—the denouement.

I faced Bertram with my steeliest look. “You are going to walk out into that water and meet your maker—or whatever stupid cliché you’d like. If it makes you feel better, you can just blame it on this cursed rock.” I tossed the worthless pebble toward the shoreline, its purpose complete. No longer needed.

I saw a moment of hope glimmer on Bertram’s face. “Exactly! This is not necessary. You have returned the stone to the beach. The curse has been broken. We can get past this.”

“If only that were true, Tram. Doesn’t the idea of a curse seem just a bit childish to you?”

With resignation and perhaps a shattered ego, Bertram turned to the tumultuous water. His silence spoke volumes.

“You need to walk into that water right now. We are about to see if my decision to change majors to the theater department was a good call. I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.”

“You are going to rot in hell for this.”

“I’ll see you there!”

I pretended to be distracted by the complex patterns of basalt columns, but I kept an eye on Bertram’s death march. I knew it was only a matter of time before one of the legendary sneaker waves grabbed him and pulled him to a watery grave. Once that happened, it was my moment to shine.

“Help, help. Oh my God...this can’t be happening. Someone save him.”