

— Ó, ég vona að það sé ekki satt. Þér hafið verið — verið mér svo góður, sagði hún og fögru augun hennar lýstu af innilegri blíðu.

— Þú hefir verið mér sem góð dóttir, sagði hann og brosti daufu brosi. Þú hefur verið mér mjög góó.

Hún lét augun hvíla á glæðum arinsins um stund, svo leit hún aftur á hann.

— Af hverju eruð þér svona stoltur? spurði hún lágt og viðkvæmt.

Þá hló jarlinn köldum hlátri.

— Komdu Veronika. Þú veist að ég jafnast ekki á við þig með það. Ó, vertu ekki að andmæla! Það er ættargallinn. Ég hefi tekið eftir þér. Það er galli; er það ekki Bolton? — Hann fylgir þér. Ég á engan son. Það kendi óstyrks í rödd hans augnablik, en svo varð hún aftur höp og tilfinningarlaus. — Mér er ekkert um Talbot frænda minn. Wayneford — það var eign móður minnar — ég vil hafa þar vænan og dugandi húsráðanda. Kæra Veronika, ég er vitanlega of viðkvæmur. Þú þarft ekki að ákveða þig samstundis. Þú mátt hugsa þetta til morguns.

Hún gerði svo líka hreyfingu með hendinni og jarlinn hafði gert áður en hún kom inn, að hr. Bolton undraðist.

— Þakka yður fyrir, ég get afráðið það nú þegar, mælti hún brosandí og vék máli sínu að hr. Bolton. — Ég þekki fátæktina. Ég sat við banabeð föður míns. Fátækt er hræðileg. Augu hennar urðu tárvoð og varir hennar skulfu. Ég veit hvað auðæfin hafa að segja. Svo þarf ég heldur aldrei að giftast.

Laura Sewell Matter

an excerpt of

Pursuing the Great Bad Novelist

ON a cold spring day in 2002, I found a damp and crumpled piece of paper on a beach near Reykjavík, Iceland. Unwadding it, I discovered it was a single page torn from a book. It was brownish, about five inches by seven, with typeset Icelandic words on both sides, and page numbers: 17 and 18. I had been studying the language for almost a year and had attained a level of competency that enabled me to read books (slowly, painstakingly, with a dictionary at hand), but the paper was too wet and matted with seaweed to decipher.

I decided to keep it. Nearby, I came upon another small clump of pages that appeared to be from the same book: pages 19–22 and 27–30. I collected these, too.

When I got back to my apartment, I spread the pages out to dry on the shelf beneath the window, and a decaying, fishy smell filled the room. In one sense, I had picked up some trash from the beach. But I couldn't help taking a more romantic view of the situation. Somehow these pages had ended up in the ocean, where by rights they ought to have disintegrated in the water or been bleached by the sun, yet they came back to land whole. A mystery. Maybe that's why I found the story they told so compelling, even though I recognized, from the moment I began reading, that I had found something amazingly, almost unbelievably, bad:

“Oh, I hope that isn't true. You have been—been so good to me,” she said, and her beautiful eyes showed sincere affection.

“You have been like a good daughter to me,” he said and smiled a dull smile. “You have been very good to me.”

She let her eyes rest on the embers in the fireplace for a moment, and then looked back at him.

“Why are you so proud?” she asked quietly and sensitively.

The earl laughed a cold laugh.

“Come, Veronica. You know my pride is nothing compared to your own.

Still, I had Ralph and Veronica. Why I continued thinking about them, a year after I first discovered those bits of a bad novel, is difficult to explain. Certainly it was not because I admired what I had read. The characters were caricatures; the plot, such as I knew it, was ludicrously improbable. I was not a reader of romances (unless you count the chivalric medieval variety). I suppose I wanted to keep reading in that book because I wanted confirmation that I had correctly inferred what would happen to Veronica and Ralph, but I also wanted to be amazed to learn how they would achieve this. I wanted both the expected outcome and surprise: I wanted *melodrama*.

Admittedly, in other circumstances the story alone would not have warranted my fascination. Had I found the book on a shelf, I probably wouldn't have opened it; if I had, I soon would have set it down again. But because I found it on a beach, I *had* to read it. The discovery of the pages was melodrama itself. Like a man lying about the moors to prevent the unconscionable trampling of innocent, free-roaming puppies, these pages were lying on the sand that day for a reason; though they could not know it, they were destined to be there, waiting for the girl—me—to wander into sight.

I decided to search for the book.