

## Sons of the Samson

By Barbara Vuskovic

Sometimes my brain fogs up. There's no excuse, I know. I own my behaviour. I try my hardest to look ahead.

I pause.

And it all rushes back to me. Incessant camera-flashes of guilt absorb my mind. My emotions turn fearful. Cold. *Anxious*. Grief erodes me.

I know that my past has stained my recollections, marking my thoughts with an intolerable, unshakeable sense of regret.

But I'm sinking.

I manage to drag my feet to the newspaper stand. My focus drifts as I lift my head wearily. '*The Destruction of the Indestructible*', read the headlines of the Daily Telegraph.

And there it is.

A trigger is flicked.

\* \* \*

"South-west. Only *fools* hunt northward in the spring!" Fredrik exclaimed, raising his hand to his forehead in frustration.

*Ah, here we go again*, I sighed.

Meanwhile, Leon, our deckhand, opened his mouth to respond, holding his tongue in hesitation. The pair bickered incessantly, back-and-forth like

stubborn kids on a playground. Yet, I'd grown familiar with being their middleman. After years of easy-going camaraderie, we'd come to ignite a special kind of closeness.

Listening to the pair sparring tediously, my mind flashed back to one fateful afternoon, many years ago. We were playing when we heard that the sailboat of Leon's father, Mr Nilsen, had crashed with the smoothness of a bike on a gravel road. Dragged out from the water, his body lay still, stranded, like a soldier deserted on a battleground. Yet, it was the hypothermia that'd rendered him senseless, soon becoming one with the pigment of the sea.

After witnessing his father, every muscle in Leon's face grew tense, and without a word he communicated every inch of his heartache. I'll always remember him reaching for the skin of his father's cold, grey body being lifted out from the water. Yet, losing his father at such a young age never turned him away from the sea.

*Grief comes in waves*, I thought. Never to know it might visit us at the most random moments, replacing a feeling of normality with those familiar tears. None of us were perfect, or neat and tidy, and he was like a father to us all.

We were young boys with our frayed edges, making vows of brotherhood, for we were bound by something deeper than blood: Tragedy.

Mr Nilsen's death taught us that we were not fearless people by nature; in fact, quite the opposite. We put on facades of courage, but our anxiety was like a knife, piercing into us, snarling *cower, cower*.

Now, as I stood out on the *Samson's* deck, pausing in remembrance, my eyes met with Leon's. He was maintaining a part of the deck, focused and silent, with his thoughts to himself. He was a lanky figure, with broad shoulders and a brooding stare which made him very difficult to read. And even before his father's accident, he'd never been much of a talker, yet his debates with Fredrik never ceased to bring a fire about him.

Meanwhile, Fredrik was our ship's chief officer. He was entrusted with all safety and security procedures for the vessel. He was almost a foot shorter

than anyone else I knew, but headstrong, and bold in nature. He had a hoarse voice, one that gave him an air of solid confidence and sounded like *thunder* in his anger. After he survived a tumultuous trip down the south passage last September, Fredrik was even awarded an honorary medal by the mayor. I'd always felt a strong sense of admiration for him. Whilst it was undeniable that he was the most *brutal* crewmate at times, he was also an honest, courageous man with a heart of gold.

Or so I *believed*.

Clamours of thunder consumed my ageing ears like the roars of a waking dragon. Our treasure, a steam-powered Norwegian schooner, which Fredrik had one night drunkenly termed the '*Samson*', tossed and turned like a ragdoll for many nights and days. Seal-hunting was more than a pastime, it was a part of us. Each April, we'd embarked on hunting trips from Newfoundland Island, slightly east of Canada, venturing through the unforgiving depths of the Atlantic.

Yet, this year was bound to be different. With new legislation declaring seal-hunting '*unlawful*' came a new hitch in our yearly tradition. *Does this make us criminals now?* Dread gnawed at my insides. *What if we're caught?* My panic fueled me. *But what would happen to us?* My anxious thoughts were akin to driving around a block blindfolded, over and over again, but faster and faster. I stopped. I owed it to myself to take control of the wheel.

My concerns were no less, but my defiant words masked my fear. "*Boys, we've got a trip to make,*" I urged, commanding their attention.

Embarking on our latest odyssey, we remained unfazed by the streaky lightning emblazoning the sky and the sense of grave risk facing our journey. Fredrik cried out; "Aye, Leon, South of Cape Hatteras, that's where we're headed! Glad to see you've learnt *something!*"

Leon replied, "Fredrik, hurling you from the deck would *significantly* speed our trip up, wouldn't it?" smirking in good humour.

"You're a funny guy," Fredrik chuckled, "But we've still got a fair way to go, so I'd stay on my good side if I were you."

Standing up from his seat, Fredrik grew transfixed by the rhythmic percussion of the sea. He steadily watched the horizon, eyes aglow with faint orange rays before twilight beckoned the stars. The wind had become the ocean's orchestral conductor, calling waves to their crescendos in the ballad of the night. One by one, the waves crashed but never rose again.

Fredrik paused abruptly in thought. His gaze shifted to a sudden movement in the sea. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the landscape, he made out lifelike silhouettes on the icescapes around us. Slowly steering the boat in their direction, we were captivated by the sight of a seal colony on the nearby icescapes. Whilst we'd hunted for many years, a colony of this size was as rare as a comet; a memory I would choose to look back on fondly, were it not for the events that followed.

The crisp, outside air embraced me as I prepared for Leon's signal to lower the plank. Nearing the icescapes, we grabbed our instruments of choice. I leapt for the stash of hakapiks lying in the corner; a tool I'd used since I was a boy of twelve, hunting out in the wilderness with my pa. The sound of Fredrik's proud exclamations filled our ears; "Boys, I bet we could get a fancy price for these skins, call 'em 'limited edition' as they come by the dozen, shall we?" Leon and I chuckled in agreement. Minutes later, the three of us scurried through the wintry landscape, the grey clouds bequeathing an infinite bounty of snow.

I spotted Fredrik and Leon in the distance, two miniscule flecks of colour in a long blanket of snow. I watched vigilantly as Fredrik's hunting knife lunged forcefully into a seal's back flipper. Failing to kill it outright, the creature let out deafening cries of agony as it slipped off the frozen edge and into the sea, taking Fredrik's knife with it.

The hunt lasted for hours.

With the sun slowly setting in time, we listened as the creatures' fearful cries were muted by a deafening silence. Miles and miles of icescapes, yet we were the only animals to fear.

*Another year over, just like that,* I thought in disbelief.

That same night, at around 11:30, the first morse code distress signal sounded from our radio. *'Dit-dit-dit.'* Meanwhile, Fredrik and Leon were

preoccupied with dart-throwing down in the cabin. They were a pair of happy drunks, not just on whiskey, but on the feeling of having achieved hunting success some 380-odd miles off the coast of Newfoundland.

*Da-da-da.* Standing on the deck's edge, strong gusts of chilly wind traversed their way onto my prickled skin. I felt like I was spinning slowly, my mind elsewhere. *Dit-dit-dit.* I knew it immediately. **SOS.**

The signal snapped me out of a trance, as I hurriedly pelted downstairs to alert the others.

Standing with his arms crossed, Leon muttered; "Y-yes? So, we should purposely turn from our route? And... and risk getting thrown in bloody *jail?*" His forehead slowly wrinkled all over, and his eyebrows formed a 'V' shape in vexation.

Fredrik, slurring his speech, expressed in agreement, "Arthur, you try justifying the couple tonnes of seal-skins we've got hidden beneath deck." I listened. Never before had I noticed how time is so much like water. It can pass slowly, a drop at a time, even freeze, or rush by in a blink. As seconds passed, the incessant *'dit-dit-dit'* of the SOS signal was like a pounding of icy waves. And somebody, somewhere, was drowning through our apathy.

Minutes later, a second and third distress signal rang through our ears, followed by what appeared to be a fleet of rockets lighting up the sky from a distance.

"You see that?" I asked, raising my voice to mute out distant echoes of waves. "We're only 7 or 8 miles south of Cape Hatteras, fellas, we really ought to be of service," I urged in agitation.

"Alright Arthur, you've made your point," Fredrik spoke coarsely, with little sympathy or affection resonating from his voice. He quickly glanced at Leon, and the pair exchanged a smirk in agreement. "But we're not getting caught just 'cus some fisherman can't read his compass points."

Then Leon continued, "Or what if the signal's coming from that new ship everyone's talking about? You know, the swanky one, with the three letters in its name. *RMS?* Something like that... A ship of that kind,

they're probably just entertaining their patrons with fireworks, anyway," both men chuckling in agreement.

"Come on, they've fired a *million* signals already, and we don't even know if there *is* anyone else out there!" I cried out, my heartbeat increasing in intensity. I paused. I listened to them. But these weren't the boys I knew.

"Arthur, we get it!" Fredrik's voice had turned to thunder. "But if someone catches us with all this seal-skin... Well, we can kiss the sweet taste of freedom *goodbye*."

I knew that they'd made up their minds. "Whatever it is, some emergency rescuers will rush over in no time. There's *nothing* to worry about, someone will get to 'em eventually."

And there it was.

My speech silenced itself to the irreverence of his words. I paused, as my emotions grew jagged, my insides tight. The thoughts. The *memories*.

It all rushed back to me. But Leon and Fredrik nodded to each other. "Push the engine to full sea speed, let's head home," Fredrik commanded, marking our names with a stain of cowardice.

Whilst I stood by, watching and listening in silence.

\* \* \*

That day, 1517 lives cried out to us.

And by fleeing, we silenced them.

There's no excuse, we own our actions. They define us, marking our every move and our very reputation. Our emotional scars are a roadmap of sorts, one that speaks of our travels in our personal wars.

Now, the name '*RMS Titanic*' forever marks me.

Perhaps we could've been remembered on the *right* side of history. We could've glimpsed at the headline of the Daily Telegraph, reading; '*Sons of the Samson: Our Heroes!*', as we strolled past the newspaper stand.

'*Could've*', I thought.

Now, the void between us old friends, *brothers*, will only grow. I'm left with my wide eyes and shaking limbs, just thinking about that dark place of ours all over again, yet praying for the light.

Thinking about how seven miles separated us and *history*.