

The Halfway Space

By Tim Clarke

There was a pattern.

First, the roaring cold of the North Atlantic as he plunged beneath the surface, then the silence after the wave had rolled down his back. Always he would hang in that momentary lightness in the back of the wave, that peculiar moment where he was still underwater, but above sea level. That halfway space, neither here nor there...

Almost immediately, the illusion would be shattered. He would break through the back of the wave, back arched, surfboard held tightly between blood drained knuckles. The natural inclination was to shriek from the cold, for the pain to echo across the dark icy waters of Ísafjarðardjúp. But this wasn't Sam Gregory's first time. Instead, he breathed through it and paddled onwards.

After a minute, he made it out past the breakers, and he sat up on the board, slowly exhaling. He was alone. Even the water was lifeless and still, broken only by the occasional line of swell bending around the headland to the west. The northern side of the fjord was a wall of flat-topped mountains with thin snowy veins, and this blocked most of the swell from entering the bay. Most people surfing in Iceland opted for the south coast where the water was fractionally warmer, and the waves were significantly better. Down there, they would be clad in booties, a hood, and a drysuit that could have been used on spacewalks. Sam's own wetsuit was bought for an Australian winter, where the water might hit eighteen degrees on a particularly vicious day. So far, the water up here in

the Westfjords had not crept past eight degrees. He was only about forty kilometres from the Arctic Circle, after all. Yet there was a relish in the burning freeze, the constriction of his chest, even in the chilblains that were blossoming across his feet. It was an all-consuming cold, a cherished loss of sensation. It meant that he could only surf in short sharp bursts, no more than twenty minutes at a time. Sometimes, he wouldn't even get a wave. Not that it mattered.

The numbness would do.

Sam tucked his hands under his armpits as he waited. A knee-high wave dribbled past him, barely breaking in the dying light of the September afternoon. If a clean north-east swell ever marched in from the arctic, and was met by a south-west wind, Bolungarvik Harbour would become a playground of clean left handers peeling off from the ridiculous upswing of the snow-capped mountain range of the fjord. It would be a freezing mirror image of D-bah or Burleigh, the waves he had grown up surfing in southeast Queensland, half a world away. He tried to push the thought away, sliding off the back of his board, and it ricocheted into the overcast sky as he disappeared under the water once again. The stab of cold, and the internal shriek. Then, the silence. That old pattern.

This time, he lasted 25 minutes.

As Sam stumbled across the rocky beach, his numb bloodless feet clumsy on the shifting stones, movement caught his eye in the lupines that lined the foreshore. A small mousy haired boy was lying prone amidst the lilac, eyes wide and fixed on the shortboard under Sam's arm. For the briefest of moments, they locked eyes, and as though this were an invitation, the kid pushed himself up and slid down the dark sandy dune that separated them. Sam busied himself with unwrapping the hot water bottle from his towel. The kid would surely get the hint. Yet, after several seconds spent trying to separate his socks with cold dumbed fingers, he heard the footsteps come to a halt a few feet away. There was a moment's silence.

"Are you the Australian?" came the little voice. It was pre-pubescent and scratchy with a thick Icelandic accent.

Sam still didn't look up, offering a noncommittal grunt. Another pause.

“My father says you either have balls the size of a troll or brains the size of an elf.”

Sam fiddled with his bootlaces, and the kid filled the gap.

“Because of the cold.”

Sam nodded. He normally got changed on the beach, but he began folding his clothes back into his tote bag. Sensing that the moment was slipping away, the kid stepped forward.

“My name is Gylfi Jóhannsson. I am eleven years old, and I am the best tobogganer in Bolungarvik.”

Sam turned to him finally, and lips drawn tight, he nodded. He didn't look eleven. Christ, he looked like... he had the round cheeks, searching eyes and slightly agape mouth of a child half his age, the age that made Sam's heart contort in his chest. He turned and began walking up the ashy dune, biting his lip until he could taste the metallic relief of blood.

“You toboggan on the ocean. Can you show me how?” Gylfi called after him.

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Sam lay on the bed in the only room of his house. It was lined with yellowing vertical wood panels, and stuffed with old furniture and dust. It was halfway up Ófæra, the hill above Bolungarvik. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but lichen and mossy khaki tundra, only the odd sheep breaking the monotony. Sam's tiny shack was tucked in against the fence on the edge of the cliff line. It belonged to a farmer named Guðmundur who lived in a newer house on the sunnier side of the hill. He let him stay there in exchange for the occasional helping hand around the property, fixing a fence, birthing a heifer. It bore no resemblance to Sam's previous work as a graphic designer back in Australia, and he was rarely any help. It was an uneven exchange in every way, but the kindly old man had detected something behind Sam's eyes and offered him

the place not long after meeting him at the bar on the main street of *Ísafjörður*.

Sam had lived there three months now. He had initially drifted to Reykjavik but had found every Magnus and his husky sitting in the water, all keen for a chat once they detected his accent. So, he had headed northwest into the emptiest part of an empty country, and the hill above Bolungarvik was about as empty as you could get.

He turned his attention back to the dog-eared copy of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' held aloft, and silently mouthed the words as he read. '*Not until twilight did Gregor awake out of a deep sleep, more like a swoon than a sleep.*' Sam wondered how long it would be before he could fall asleep. It was half past eight, and there was some light lingering in the sky. The days were still long in the Westfjords in September, but Ófæra cast most of Bolungarvik in shade before its time. Darkness metastasised at the foot of the hill, and each day was a little shorter than the last. He carried on reading: '*His left side felt like one single long unpleasantly tense scar, and he actually had to limp on his two rows of legs.*' That reminded him. He put the book down and pulled his own leg up on the bed. The chilblains marshalling on his feet were beginning to climb past his ankle. His ex-wife had been a doctor, and he was used to having her fix whatever injury came up from time to time. But those days were long gone, and so was she.

And so was the boy.

* * *

The stab of the cold.

The roaring silence of submersion.

Dawn had not yet broken, but already Sam was emerging from the back of a crumbling wave. The swell had picked up overnight, a generous three to four feet, although the howling northerly wind was feathering whitecaps all the way across to the far side of *Ísafjarðardjúp*. It wasn't fun, but it was cold. He sometimes wondered about his long-term plan. In some ways, the universe was forcing his hand; the days were becoming shorter,

and it would reach the point where he would be surfing in darkness in water just above freezing. With his wetsuit, that would be a death sentence. But that was a problem for another day. He supposed he had lost the capacity to think beyond the immediate. Thinking about anything for too long always led him into those dark backward recesses of the mind, which nothing but the malevolence of the cold could remedy.

It was a lull between sets, and he brought his hand up in front of his face, slowly bending each finger forty-five degrees and contemplating the dull ache in each joint. The north swell had bought a new level of cold straight from the Arctic Circle. Each inhale was a constriction, and each exhale, a choke. Again, movement on the shore caught his eye. Forty yards down the beach, a ridiculous little figure goosestepped across the rocks. Even from here, Sam could see that the wetsuit Gylfi had dug up was gathered in black rubber rolls around his ankles and wrists, the material filling the spaces between his little limbs like sails. Under his arm, he clasped a sled with the skis crudely snapped off.

“No,” Sam breathed.

Without even a moment’s hesitation, Gylfi took a step into the creeping fingers of the waves and gave a high-pitched shriek. The diving suit he had found may have been useful about forty years ago for someone three times his size. It was probably doing even less than Sam’s own steamer, which was no mean feat. And yet, he pushed on, trying to block each oncoming wave with the sled, his whimpers audible over the wind, even from this distance. Sam urged him backward silently. Give it up, kid. Just give it up. Go home. But Gylfi carried on, now waist deep. Every time he hurled the sled over an oncoming wave, water began to pool on top and he would need to dredge it to the surface again, struggling for air more each time. Sam’s shoulders slumped. The thought of seeing anguish on a little face again made him feel nauseous. Like most Icelandic kids, Gylfi probably wasn’t a seasoned swimmer, and a cramp could end it all.

Sam took a shaky breath. He turned around, staring at, but not seeing, the sullen cliff line on the far side of the fjord, as behind him the young boy disappeared beneath the waves.

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Sam had hated those visits to the children's hospital in Brisbane, but he had hated it more when they had abruptly stopped. He felt like a fraud, watching as the doctors had pumped bags of poison into those little arms. It was his job to protect, and he had merely sat by as the boy had melted from within.

That was four months ago, and he still couldn't even bring himself to say the boy's name.

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A final ring of bubbles broke the surface, lost in the chaos of whitewash. Beyond the breakers, Sam sat staring at nothing.

* * *

His ex-wife had vanished into the night a few days after the boy. They had endured six months of wordless waiting in hospital rooms, so it neither surprised nor saddened him when she had left. He knew the statistics of what usually happens to couples after a child dies. What *had* surprised him though, was the pain of dismantling the crib. That had knocked the oxygen from him, if there had been any left in his lungs at that point. He had burnt the wooden frame underneath the leafless liquid amber in the backyard, but he had no idea what to do with the mattress. The thought of tossing it on the tip at Reedy Creek seemed like a second death, so in the end, he had called his brother and merely pointed at it from the other side of the room. His brother, tears in his eyes, nodded and took it away without a word. In the days following, Sam had scuttled around that room for hours at a time, burned by both presence and absence.

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Sam strode through the shallows holding a spluttering Gylfi in his arms. Not even the cold could numb him as he navigated the rocky beach and lay the kid down on the ashen dune. He turned to the lichen and tundra that spread out across the rolling hills.

“Christ’s sake, kid,” he muttered. “This isn’t... it’s not a joke.”

Gylfi pushed himself up. “I don’t think it is a joke,” he said, his voice shaking. “I just-”

“Did you think about your parents? What if I hadn’t been there? Did you think about them, at all?”

Gylfi didn’t say anything.

Against his better judgement, he looked down at the kid, who sat staring bullishly at the ocean. From among the churning mess of anger and grief, emerged the slightest thread of... something, ducking and weaving in and out of the darkness. It wasn’t quite concern and it certainly wasn’t fondness. His mind seemed to work in slow motion, punch drunk and entirely unsure of itself. Before he could gather himself, Gylfi sat up, walked towards the toboggan that was gently washing in and out in the shallows, and disappeared up the track in the lupines on the foreshore.

That night had passed slowly.

The anger made sense. But that other thread irritated him like a hang-nail. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but as he strode onto the beach the following day, he had his shortboard under his left arm and his longboard under his right. He suited up and left the longboard lying on the sand. He didn’t want to encourage the boy, but that toboggan was lethal. He wasn’t sure he could cope with a dead child on his conscience. Not again. He winced as he pulled the wetsuit over his head and craved the cathartic stab of the cold.

After twenty minutes, he saw Gylfi again, emerging from amongst the lupines, still in the oversized dry suit with the toboggan under his arm. As he approached the shoreline, he eyed the yellow longboard hungrily, looking out at Sam, trying to work out whether this was an invitation or a trap. Sam sat on his board with his back to the shore, *also* trying to work out whether it was an invitation or a trap. It was neither. Or perhaps it was both, he had no idea. There was a full minute of stillness, an absurd tableau, before Gylfi put his toboggan down, and held the longboard delicately, waiting to see what would happen.

Nothing.

He lay it on the water and began the slow paddle out past the knee-high swell. Sam saw him in his peripheral vision but made no acknowledgment of his presence as the kid tried to prop himself upright on the board.

Silence again.

Winter would arrive with a vengeance that year. By New Year's Eve, chunks of ice would drift listlessly through Ísafjarðardjúp, snow would cover the spongy tundra of Ófæra, and the aurora would be burning in the dark sky like emerald and purple tongues of fire. Residents of Bolungarvík would be readying themselves for the annual parade of lights, each gripping a candle to help lead the elves to their new homes for the upcoming year. The cold is a deterrent to some. *"Let the Huldúfólk find their own damned way,"* they would grumble. *"It is no good that I freeze for them!"*

Just out from the headland, Sam would be sitting on his shortboard, wrapped in booties, a hood and a drysuit, the spacewalking kind. A few feet away, Gylfi would sit on his own shortboard, dressed similarly. They had been picking off left handers for an hour, though they'd not exchanged many words. Sam would think about how he had always planned to do this with Oscar, and he would swallow back the tears. Some days, he would think about Oscar and almost smile. Other days, it tore like a puncture wound.

There was no pattern to it at all.

But this was many months away. On that brisk September morning, Sam just stared out across the fjord, urging on the stabbing cold in his extremities and doggedly ignoring the boy who couldn't balance on the borrowed longboard. Without looking at him, Sam muttered into the stillness.

"Slide back. You're too far forward."