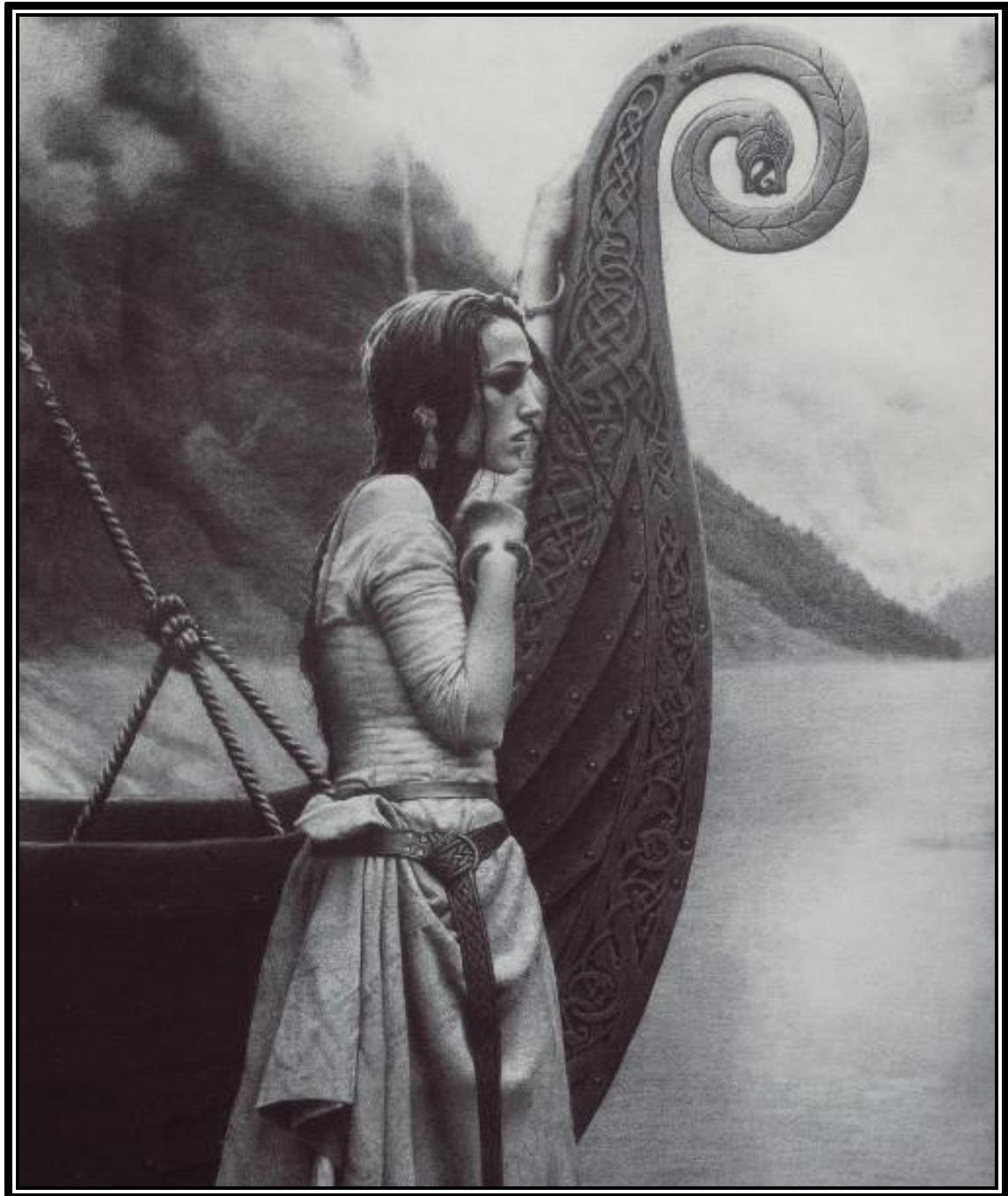


Waiting for the Longships

Bradley Stoke



Astrid looked across the room at her son illuminated by the fire but obscured by the mist of its smoke. She hoped he wouldn't wake up and wonder what his parents were doing on the straw mattress opposite. Not that he wasn't used to the lovemaking Thorvald and she enjoyed together, especially after the long night of feasting that led to this moment of passion.

It never bothered Thorvald, of course. And it certainly wouldn't tonight after all the ale he'd drunk. It was Astrid's duty to give pleasure to him, hoping as always that she might be blessed by another son as a result of his exertions.

Thorvald thrust away, caring little as to how his wife might feel. In any case, it was unlikely he'd last very long until his passion was defeated by his inebriation. But this was their last night together for so many months and Astrid had been waiting for this moment for so many hours. As she tended to the domestic duties of the hearth: spinning flax, gutting fish, and comforting young Hromund, she had wanted this moment of lovemaking to be special. When next would Thorvald cross the threshold and take his wife in his strong arms, carry her to their bed and thrust inside her?

She'd listened to the distant echo of the drunken carousing he and the other men enjoyed after the feast of venison and shark steak they partook together before it was time for the women to take their leave. It was only right that the men should so celebrate while their womenfolk attended to their domestic duties. After all, the men would suffer many days of privation until the longships reached their destination on the Hibernian shore. And now, along with the other women on the village, whose gasps of passion Astrid could hear carried on the chill spring air, she could enjoy the carnal passion of her husband. This was her moment of the evening, her last duty before the menfolk of the village launched their longships to sea to bring back the

promised riches from the lands of those who worshipped other gods and spoke a different tongue.

Soon, and too soon for Astrid, Thorvald released his seed, his penis shrank inside her, and he collapsed on her bosom. His long hair and beard became a second comforting blanket under the elk-hide she pulled over their naked bodies. As Astrid lay on her back, her husband's arms around her and his body slumped on top, she hoped that this time Thorvald had blessed her with Freya's bounty and Hromund would at long last have a brother. She could still hear the passion of the other women of the village whose husbands had more stamina than hers and who had more good fortune than she in providing a reasonably sized family for her man.

The following day, when the menfolk had at last stirred from their slumbers, Astrid stood on the shore with the other women watching the longships set off across the ocean. This was what it was like every spring, as the men set off on the voyages that would bring the men back with many riches and tales of their exploits. She remembered with particular affection the golden cross that Thorvald showed her last year on his return, before it was melted and refashioned into less heathen form. The Hibernians were so rich in gold, just as they were in the grain, livestock and cloth the menfolk traded with the towns and villages along the shore.

She knew the cross was a symbol of the Hibernian religion, but she had heard that theirs was a faith that denied the true gods of Asgard and worshipped instead a Jew who had been killed in a particularly brutal way by the Roman savages who now worshipped him. There was little else she knew about Christians, but she thanked Freya that the land of the Midnight Sun had been spared the cruelties of a faith that denied women their freedom and whose men took from them the keys to the

household that was every Norse woman's right. Surely there was something perverse about a religion that worshipped a dead man rather than the living and immortal gods who feasted in the great halls beyond the rainbow.

The menfolk waved bravely at their wives and affianced when they had at last rowed the longships out into the deeper waters away from the shore. Astrid focused her gaze on the distant silhouette of Thorvald whose eyes she was sure were equally on her and young Hromund.

"And that's them gone for another summer!" said Gudrun, who stood beside her and was no longer waving.

Astrid turned towards her neighbour, tears streaming from her eyes as they were from all the other wives. She was shocked to observe that Gudrun's eyes were not damp at all. Did she not miss her man? Or was it men, such was her reputation in the village. Gudrun was a woman who had no permanent man in her life, but was known to have enjoyed the attentions of many men, including, of course, the chief himself. Her hearth was hers alone. Her goats were her own and shared with no husband. The daughter she had borne had no father's name to honour. The flax she spun she exchanged for goods her smallholding didn't provide.

"The summer days will be long, hard and lonely!" wailed Astrid.

"Long, I agree. But hard and lonely, not at all," said Gudrun, with a smile. "They are my favourite days. The birds sing. Nature is bountiful. The gods rejoice. Fair recompense for the long cold nights of winter."

"By the great tree, Yggdrasil, do you not miss the menfolk?"

"Not at all, sweet Astrid. And why should I worry about them. They'll have fun: pillage, murder and rape. It's what the men like to do most and what they like to

sing about.”

“Rape?” said Astrid aghast. “My Thorvald? Maybe the younger men, but not Thorvald.”

“And why not? Do you think he honours the chastity of the women of Hibernia any more than he does the lives of the men he slaughters, the farms from which he brings back the grain and livestock, or the pagan shrines he desecrates? Men are beasts when they have their sword unsheathed and ale in their stomach. Your Thorvald is no different from other men. Indeed, as an older, experienced warrior he has to set the example.”

“Not my Thorvald!” wept Astrid.

Surely Gudrun’s words were said in jest. Her husband assured her that no heathen woman had tempted him in this way, although he was often rather coarse in his description of their freckled, red-haired beauty. Although Astrid had no great love for Hibernian women, who were mere chattels to their men and worshipped the god of Charlemagne and Rome, she had no wish that they should suffer from the brutish passions of the village’s menfolk, and most of all from Thorvald.

Astrid returned to her home, knowing that until the longships returned she and the other wives would have no one to help them in the duties of the hearth or field. It was true that Thorvald, like most men, was of only marginal use in this capacity. When he wasn’t away in summer bringing back Hibernian bounty, his main preoccupation was hunting reindeer, elk and boar, whose meat, though very welcome, provided only occasional variety to a diet mostly of fish, mushrooms, goats milk and hare.

The summer days were indeed long. Soon the sun would never set and night

become as much day as day became night in winter. These were the days when Astrid gathered together the food that kept hunger at bay in the long night, when it was sometimes too cold to venture far from the hearth for many days, and when a goat might need to be sacrificed to satisfy the clamour of the belly. The long nights when the men were most reluctant to hunt and snow piled high against the walls of their home.

In these summer days, however, when the only men left in the village were the very young and the old and feeble, Astrid came to know the other women more closely and intimately than was possible when the menfolk strode the village paths. The women formed a community of support and comfort: often visiting one another in each others' homes and exchanging gifts and gossip while the sun refused to descend beneath the horizon.

It was in these months that Astrid saw more of Gudrun. Before, she had been very wary about associating with a woman of such easy virtue, even though she was blessed by the favours of the chief, but Gudrun showed sympathy for Astrid's concerns for Thorvald.

One day, she met Astrid weeping by the river when collecting water. While her daughter, Matilda, played with Hromund in the shadows of the trees, Gudrun so entertained Astrid with her wicked jokes and sly observations that Astrid forgot all her worries about her distant husband.

"It can't be," said Astrid when Gudrun speculated again on Thorvald's assault on the virtue of the Hibernian wenches.

"You don't know men as well as I do, Gudrun, do you?"

"I've known one man only and one man is enough for me," said Astrid sternly.

“If only that fidelity were so true of Thorvald!” said Gudrun, but refused to elaborate.

Astrid measured her wait by the phases of the moon, high in the sky and sharing the heavens with the ever-present Sun. There were normally two full moons before the men returned and life would return to normal and the days became shorter. After that, there would be the threat of winter when the autumn equinox heralded the difficult long nights to come. However, it was with alarm that Astrid observed the moon creep through all the phases of death and renewal, much like her own stubbornly consistent menstrual cycle, and the longships still hadn't returned.

The wait extended beyond one moon and through the entire cycle of the next. The subject of the men's delayed return was the only topic of conversation the women of the village ever discussed. What was delaying them? How long could it take to sell the riches they had taken from the Hibernians? It surely couldn't be that they had been bettered in battle? Or had the gods of the sea claimed the menfolk for their own?

It was better to hope that the men had perished in battle, if they were not merely delayed, than that the men had died a less than heroic death. Perhaps they were now dining in Valhalla with the immortals: laughing and joking with Thor, Baldur and Odin in the kingdom beyond the rainbow.

The women's misery was compounded by the shortening days and the worsening weather. Soon, the first flakes of snow arrived, not, thankfully, to settle, as the strong winds and rain that followed drove away the thin coating of white. But a later snowfall was more permanent and the isles were now adorned in their winter coat. Without the men to comfort them, the prospect of the night that never ended held a particular dread.

Although Gudrun mourned no man, she was clearly as anxious as Astrid of a winter where the village was run only by women, without the excitement of the men preparing for their hunting expeditions and the welcome meat with which they returned, although Gudrun commented that the reindeer they found were more likely stolen from the nomads of the inland plains than hunted down with quite the valour recounted in the tales they regaled their grateful womenfolk.

“Where *is* Thorvald?” Astrid wailed. “Where *are* the longships? They honoured the gods before they left. Surely the gods would protect them!”

“Perhaps they’ve been having a more fruitful time in Hibernia than on earlier expeditions,” Gudrun speculated. “Perhaps they’ll return next year, when the sun appears on the horizon again.”

“I hope so. Oh! I hope so!”

“That’s if they haven’t settled down with freckle-faced Hibernian wives...” Gudrun muttered bitterly.

Astrid stared at her friend, totally aghast.

“I don’t believe you said that! Our menfolk, especially not Thorvald, would never abandon a good Norse wife for heathen chattel.”

Gudrun smiled. “I’m joking, Astrid. There’s every chance the gods will bring them back eventually. Remember the women of the southern isles. Their men returned the following spring bringing back bounty from distant Andalusia ruled by the men of the camel.”

Astrid smiled. She nursed the same hope that the expedition had merely taken the men further south to the mythically rich lands where even the winters were warmer than the Norse summer and the natives had permanently sun-darkened skin.

Gudrun and Astrid spent much more time together, not just through the day when they helped each other in their domestic duties, but at night when they kept each other company. Their children had become such good friends. They played together in the claustrophobic confines of the hearth when the blizzards were most intense. To stay warm, the two children slept together under the same hides, as did, on the other side of the fire, their mothers.

Most women of the village shared their homes in much the same way as did Astrid and Gudrun. It was one less fire each night to tend and domestic chores were less burdensome when the work was divided between two or more women. It was natural for the womenfolk to express their solidarity for one another and it kept at bay the privations of the long sunless days just as it lessened the agony of loneliness and anxiety.

“I miss Thorvald *so* much!” sighed Astrid one day as the two women sat together around the fire, whilst outside their two children were playing in the dusk of the few minutes of midday sun that heralded the end at last of the worst days of winter.

“I miss the men too,” agreed Gudrun. “I miss their company. I miss my lovers. I miss the richer meat than hare and lemming they bring back from the hunt.”

“It’s not men I miss. It’s Thorvald!”

“And why is that?”

Astrid raised her skirt to reveal the thick triangular bush of blonde hair between her thighs. “It’s here I miss him most,” she said, indicating the rich flesh that swelled through the knotted strands. “There is not a night I don’t wish Thorvald could satisfy the itch I feel.”

“You want a man’s cock inside you again?”

“Yes,” said Astrid, blushing at the strange intensity of Gudrun’s stare and hastily rearranging her skirt. “But not any man’s. It’s Thorvald’s I want!”

The question occurred again when Astrid and Gudrun settled for sleep beneath the hides piled over them. In these winter nights, people slept and rested for many more hours just as in summer they would often forego sleep altogether. When Astrid slept she did so with a depth that escaped her in summer, but she would also often simply enjoy the warmth of her bed. She felt no more guilty at her idleness in winter than did any other woman. There were fewer chores to attend to in the months when no crops were to be tended or gathered, and good reason to conserve what warmth there was.

“It’s here you most miss Thorvald?” asked Gudrun, placing her hand over the linen-covered mound of Astrid’s crotch.

Astrid nodded.

“My womanhood itches too,” said Gudrun, pressing Astrid’s hand on her own crotch which she was shocked to find was not covered by thick cloth. Gudrun had pulled up the linen so that Astrid’s fingers were pressed against a thick tangle of hair. “It burns. Feel the heat it gives. If only I could use the warmth of my cunt to warm my toes. At best it can only warm my fingers.”

“It’s *very* hot!” remarked Astrid with wonder.

“Is yours equally as hot, dear Astrid?” wondered Gudrun, who tugged at her friend’s skirt.

“No!” said Astrid sharply, pulling her hand away from Astrid’s crotch which seemed slightly moist as well as hot. She rolled over on her side and faced away from

Gudrun, though she didn't resist her friend's comforting arms around her shoulders where they normally rest each night.

Throughout the following day, Astrid remembered the sensation of her fingers on Gudrun's crotch as they sat together spinning flax or skinning hare. She sometimes caught Gudrun's eyes as they wandered towards Astrid's crotch hidden under coarse linen. She knew well the sensation of damp warmth that burnt from her own vagina, but, although she had no reason to doubt that other women didn't also burn in the same way, it was a revelation to know for sure.

The following night, when Gudrun's fingers again found their way to Astrid's crotch, pulling her dress slowly up her thighs, this time there was less resistance, although Gudrun, as much as she, was not at all sure whether a comforting stroke of the tangled hair should be all this invasion amounted to. As Astrid slumbered after this brief adventure, her crotch itched uncontrollably and she was obliged to use her own fingers to extinguish the heat that normally Thorvald was best equipped to handle.

Neither Gudrun nor Astrid had words to describe the turn in which their relationship took. At first, it seemed merely like friends comforting each other, though Astrid was aware that their exploration of each other's crotches became steadily more adventurous and more sensual. Soon, every night was spent in urgent mutual masturbation, their fingers digging deep inside, as deep, it sometimes felt, as a man's penis might venture. And every day was spent looking forward to their passionate fumbling.

All the while, the brief dusk of midday became steadily longer until the sun was wholly above the horizon. Even though these were normally the days of worst

hunger and misery as the rations were spent and yet to be replenished, Astrid enjoyed these winter nights more than she'd done since Thorvald and she were newly wed.

Gudrun was as uncertain as Astrid. Their new affection was as strange to her as it was to Astrid. Their first kiss was a shared revelation for both women. The passion they felt when they shed their clothes was equal to any they ever felt with a man. They ignored the chill on the side of the bed not facing the fire, as they replenished the missing warmth with the heat of their conjoined flesh. This was the first time that Astrid had ever seen a woman's naked body so close, except for those few balmy days of summer when it was warm enough for the women of the village to brave the chill water to bathe together in the river. Astrid wasn't sure how much her feeling of desire as her friend shed her clothes was because she admired a woman's body so much as she very much admired Gudrun's. But admire it she did.

The beautiful bosom, with nipples erect with desire rather than from the chill of a river's flow. The skin that matched her own for paleness. The rich odour of Gudrun's vagina that filled her nostrils, while her lover's tongue reciprocated below. The smells that were so much Gudrun's, different from those of Thorvald, but different again from her own.

"Listen!" said Gudrun, one night as the two of them lay naked in one another's arms under the elk-hide.

"Listen to what?" wondered Astrid, hearing the distant hoot of an owl.

"I'm not sure," admitted Gudrun. "A kind of panting, grunting noise."

Astrid frowned, but in the unnatural silence of her heightened attention she listened as hard as she could. Although the snow was turning to slush and there was less often the fragile crunch of distant footpads, there were, she was sure, some

strange animal noises. She hoped it wasn't a wolf or bear visiting the village on the prowl for a child to snatch away.

As her ear became attuned to the night silence, she recognised it at last as a sound she was most familiar with when amplified by proximity. It was much like the sound of urgent lovemaking she heard on Thorvald's last night when the men and women of the village marked their final hours together with connubial passion. But it was a sound only of women. There were no men's voices in that chorus.

She and Gudrun were not the only womenfolk who had learnt to comfort each other in the pleasures of the flesh. Indeed, as Astrid's ears strained yet further, could there be a woman in the village who had not overcome the anxiety of the longships' delay in this way?

Now she had reason to believe this was so, Astrid soon saw more evidence that she and Gudrun were by no means unique in the way their friendship had changed in character. She saw women holding hands and exchanging sly glances that signalled greater affection towards one another than just shared grief and loneliness. She even saw Bolla and Ingeltore kiss each other in the shadow of a tree when they thought no one else could see them.

A gradual recognition of the new order soon became widely known, but it wasn't spoken of. The women knew they should honour their husbands whether they were alive or not, and it was not right to have relationships that would not, and could not, bring forth children; but there were no men, at least not of the age or fitness to be good fathers, and the survival of the village needed the women to pool together their resources. And if there was pleasure to be gained in the companionship of other women, was this not fair compensation for the loss of the men who normally fulfilled

this need?

As the days became longer and spring gave way to summer, Astrid was sure that the village was actually a better run and more prosperous place than it was when the men spent their time drinking or hunting. In fact, some women even took on themselves the task of hunting boar or deer, and were no less successful in their efforts than the men. On the whole, she was happy in her life of passion and love with Gudrun, though she sometimes missed Thorvald. After all, Matilda might be a child with no father, but didn't Hromund deserve better?

It was more than a year since the longships' departure and the sun now refused to set, when news at last came back of the fortune of the men's expedition. Astrid hastened with all the other women, Hromund and Gudrun in tow, when word spread that one of the menfolk had returned. The worry that gripped Astrid as she ran to the village square was that only one man was there. Where were the others? And where, above all, was Thorvald?

The sole survivor was Sigfast who sat in the middle of a circle of concerned wives who clamoured for good news. But alas it was not to be! Sigfast was but a shadow of the warrior he once was. He was lame in his right leg and there was a cavernous emptiness where once his left eye shone. He leaned on his staff that had accompanied him for many leagues along the Norse shores and recounted the news the wives had feared so much.

"We were sailing back from Hibernia," he said. "We had gold and meat aplenty. We were full of good spirits and had imbibed heavily of ale. Thor had been generous to us, we thought. He had brought us victory in battle and the spoils of our valour were great. But as our ships steered north of the land of stone circles, we were

cursed by the demons of the sea who brought upon us a vicious storm.

“Our seamanship was tested to the utmost, but the winds from the icy North were unkind. They tore our ships apart and one by one they were smashed against rocks at sea. I saw the ship in which sailed valiant Leiknir, brave Thorvald and the chief break into splinters on the guano-painted rocks. Our ship fared better and we prayed to Odin and Thor that we should be spared. Unfortunately not! The waves crashed high, the wind blew strong, and the rain lashed hard. We were pulled and thrown from side to side, water coming in over the bows. And then, struggle as we did against the oars, we too met our fate on the rocks.”

The women moaned in misery, Astrid amongst them. Thorvald dead, not as she might have hoped as a hero in battle, now to be feasting in Valhalla, but the more wretched death of a sailor. His soul was lost and he would not serve the honour and distinction of fighting with the gods in the last great battle of Ragnarok.

“I was carried by the waves to the Orcadian shore: the last of our company. I thought I would die, but the gods spared me. The sea claimed only my eye and the strength of my leg. Fortunately, there are many blond-haired Norse settlers in the land of the stone circles who tended me and kept me alive through the long days of winter, but months much less cold than here. The snow settles but lightly and the midday sun remains above the horizon even during the midwinter solstice festival. And soon a passing longship took me back to Norse shores many leagues to the south from whence I have come.”

So it was to be only Ingulfrid, Sigfast’s wife, for whom this homecoming brought good tidings. For all the other wives and those who had hoped to be wives on the longships’ return, it was the news they had dreaded most throughout the long

Winter night.

Gudrun comforted Astrid as best she could. Their bodies glistened with the perspiration of their conjoined passion, compromised as it was by the knowledge that Thorvald, nor any other village man, would satisfy them again.

The two lay together on their backs: Astrid weeping once more with Gudrun's arms around her shoulder. Her lover smiled at her.

"Perhaps this is how the gods meant it to be, Astrid," said Gudrun softly. "Our love was meant to be. It is truly blessed by Freya."

Astrid nodded sadly. But she wasn't sure how much her tears were for the grief she felt for Thorvald or how much was secretly relieved that she and Gudrun could remain together. The ways of the gods were mysterious, but she was sure Gudrun was right. As sure as summer would become winter once more, theirs was a love that was meant to last.