

Excerpt: Reykjavik: A Novel

by Tom Maremaa

2. Reykjavík - 1986

Rain falling in sheets.

Bitter cold biting my lungs, like raven's claws.

I am jacked into the matrix of this Summit, waiting for President Reagan's plane to arrive and for General Secretary Gorbachev to step off the Soviet ship docked in the harbor. Expectations are running high. Perhaps some kind of agreement on nuclear weapons will be reached. Don't hold your breath, I am told by my editor who has assigned me to cover the event. Do something behind the scenes. Tell me the true story. As if I can, as if it belongs to me and no one else. Then again, *maybe it does*.

The President left Andrews Air Force Base on Air Force One at 9:45 this morning, Eastern time, and is expected to arrive at Keflavick airport at 7:05 at night, Icelandic time. I am told he will be greeted by members of the government in Iceland and stay in the house of the US ambassador for the duration of the Summit. The US delegation, as many as two hundred and sixty people, led by Secretary Shultz, will meet and discuss the agenda with the President, ensuring he is prepared with any last-minute items for his talks with Gorbachev next morning toward noon.

I am holed up in a downtown hotel with legions of other journalists here for the Summit. The chatter among us is buoyant, hopeful, yet deeply skeptical if anything will come of the talks, aside from a thrashing out of issues that are under the President's and the General Secretary's respective skins. Reagan hates nuclear

weapons, almost as much as he hates communism, although with Gorbachev's recent policy shifts and the introduction of *glasnost* (defined as *openness*, though with a Russian twist, no doubt) and *perestroika* (another concept that translates as some kind of *restructuring* or re-arrangement of the existing order with the implication that all things holding the Soviet empire together will become freer, looser, cooler, one hopes) and the simultaneous buildup of US military forces putting pressure on the Soviet economy, Reagan may see an opening, or if this is the matrix, *many openings*. Portals to the future, better relations, an end to the dreaded arms race.

The leaders will meet at Höfði House, the former French embassy, an abode with a dark past. I am curious what it looks like and if I can get inside. The other journalists at the hotel are probably curious too and might tell me about it but I want to see for myself. I hail a cab. And do not have to wait long before a driver stops and picks me up. He speaks perfect English, though slightly accented in the way Scandinavians speak with that low, deep tonality coming from the gut. He welcomes me to this fabled land of his, where he can trace his ancestors back hundreds, if not a thousand years. He asks if I remember the chess match of the century, the battle between the irascible Bobby Fischer and his dour Russian counterpart, Boris Spassky. The match, like this summit, had geopolitical implications, even consequences (he speaks the word *consequences* with affect, as if it has great meaning to him). I tell him I was too young to remember, though I have studied the moves made by each player in the match: I am only twenty-four, a foreign correspondent for a New York paper, traveling to distant parts of the world, a global nomad of sorts, and I have the battle scars on my face to prove it. He is more impressed by the scars than anything else. You are a warrior, then, he says. I try to laugh but I am still cold from the driving rain.

I ask him to give me his take on the Summit. He chuckles a bit under his breath, then shakes his head. Well, he says, it's good for

business. We need tourists. And while they are here, my friend, they cannot blow up the world. *Perhaps they can*, I think to myself.

President Reagan must be carrying the nuclear suitcase, the one they call *the football*, which contains the codes for launching intercontinental ballistic missiles against the Soviets, either in response to a Soviet launch, or God forbid, a first strike, or worse, an accidental launch. I am told that once the missiles are launched they cannot be stopped in flight; no mechanism exists to halt the gravity's rainbow of their descent and horrific destruction to follow. The end of the planet as we know it. An unimaginable nuclear winter. The death of millions. I try to be simpatico with my voluble Icelandic driver and laugh a bit at his feeble joke about not blowing up the world while engaged in bilateral talks for nuclear disarmament. Moments later, I regret laughing: it is no joke.

When we get to Höfði House on the outskirts of the city he stops in front, turns his head around and hands me his business card, telling me to call him if I need another ride. *Vertu blessaður*. Goodbye, he waves. I might need him again. *Takk*. Thanks, I say. For sure. He could take me to places other journalists have not seen, he says, and enable me to write the kinds of atmospheric pieces my editor likes me to produce as I hunt the world in search of news and events and personal stories. Slices of time, slivers of history, chronicles of deceit, deception and corruption, *if I can find them*, if they can find *me*. I climb out of the cab, pay the driver and wave good-bye with a wink and a smile.

Höfði House is like nothing I could possibly imagine for a summit between the leaders of the superpowers. My notes tell me it was built around the turn of the century and once housed the French foreign delegation during their tour of duty in this ancient capital. The house has a kind of weird style of Dutch architecture, to my mind, painted white with a slack roof. I am half-expecting to see Dutch windmills in the distance, spinning freely and generating electricity, but such is not the case. The house, I am told, is *filled with ghosts*, many ghosts, roomfuls of ghosts, as a matter of fact. This does not bode well for the Summit.

Outside the House I've spotted a pair of ravens, black as night sky, exchanging glances with each other, heads bobbing, beaks pecking, no doubt, as they size up the situation at the Summit, and look deep into the eyes of Reagan and Gorbachev who are due to arrive soon. Icelandic folklore, I'm told, has it that one of the Vikings, whose name was Hrafna-Flóki or *Ravens-Flóki*, used a pair of ravens, as the god Ódinn did, to find and eventually settle this magical land of fire and ice.

A pair of Praetorian guards stand out front and stop me from going inside and looking around. I am not about to challenge them, and assert my rights as a member of the free and independent American press to enter. I could engage in a mock scuffle of some kind and get arrested and make myself part of the story but I figure it is not worth it. I am hopeful other story leads will appear in the matrix and whisper in my ear to write them. My trump card, as it were, at the Summit and why my editor at the paper was able to provide me with press credentials is that I am fluent in Russian, thanks to a Berkeley education and a teacher who inspired me to learn how to speak, read and write the language with confidence. That fluency has helped me as I've written about exiles from the Soviet Union who've fled to the West, risking life and limb to taste the sweet elixir of freedom. Perhaps it will help me here, too, if I encounter any Soviet diplomats or members of their delegation who might have loose lips. So be it.

I take a few photos with my camera of the house and the guards and walk around the circular driveway leading up to the front entrance, as if to get a better feel for the place. Legwork is important, I am always told. One of the first principles they teach you in journalism class. (I tend to forget the rest.) In any case, never sit around in your hotel room, which I do at times, like all journalists, and think you'll get a story.

The rain keeps coming down in proverbial buckets. Sheets of it, like I was saying. Buckets and sheets—I guess I'm mixing metaphors again: *a bad habit*. The guards don't like me hanging around like this, I must look suspicious, a shady character out of central casting,

on location with a crew of spies and subversives, determined to do harm.

So, one of them, a big bruising man with a shock of Nordic blond hair, a man whom you don't want to mess with, moves toward me and shouts in Icelandic, *Góðan daginn*. Good afternoon. *Hvað heitir þú?* What's your name? *Hvaðan ertu?* Where are you from? *Talar þú íslensku?* Do you speak Icelandic? He sees that I'm completely baffled, so he then cries in English: *Hey, buddy. Whoever you are, get the hell out! Leave! Right now!* I linger for a bit, then retreat and ask if the guard would be so kind as to call me a cab so I could return to the city. Kindness sometimes works in my profession, and sometimes it has the opposite effect: you get into trouble by being cool, nice even, when authority wants to crack your head wide open and let you bleed to death on the ground. Okay, I'm exaggerating. Anyway, I flash the business card of the driver who dropped me off here and he obliges by calling the number. All the while I'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of either the American or the Soviet delegation arriving on the scene, a phalanx of black vehicles with bulletproof smoked windows pulling up and climbing out with umbrellas held for them before disappearing inside the house. No such luck, alas. At least I gave it my best shot. That's what I'll tell my editor when I return to New York.

Back at my hotel an hour later I am standing in the lobby, drenched to the bone, shaking off the splatter of drops on my coat when I am stunned by the person I see.

She is coming out of the elevator, this tall, blondish woman wearing a forties-style fedora, tilted rakishly as if in the movies, as if she is Bacall in stark black and white, Bacall about to meet Bogart and parry with him verbally while Bogie lights up a cigarette and takes a long, deep drag, his eyes squinting in the shadows, his trench-coat collar turned up a notch, his presence rangy and dangerous. *Pure noir*. Her raincoat is white, or a light shade of grey like the one Reagan will wear when he meets Gorbachev the next day. There are big buttons and wide lapels on her coat that I can't, for some reason, take my eyes off. She is swinging an umbrella in

one hand and carrying a brown leather briefcase in the other. Very slick, very professional.

Who is she? Can it really be my Russian professor from Berkeley? The one who helped me master the fundamentals of this most difficult of all languages? Yes, I tell myself. But of course. It's Nathalie Campbell, so British in name, yet so polyglot in her mastery of languages, a savant, perhaps, I remember, with a command of a half-dozen tongues, each spoken as if she were a native. Professor Campbell, I am having a difficult time coming to terms with her presence here, and yet it seems so natural, so appropriate. Why not?

I rush up to her, like the boyish reporter I am, eager to talk to her, perhaps hustle a story out of her. Surely, there's a story to be had about her arrival and presence and involvement in the Summit. I can make it personal, introduce myself into the narrative and tell all. Yes, it's been two years, a good two years, since I graduated from Berkeley and took her classes at the university. She might even remember me.

"Dylan Rose," she says as I come toward her.

"Ms. Campbell. Professor Campbell. Hello, hello. What brings you here?"

"I should ask you the same question," she replies with a kind of British formalism. And I realize, but of course, she was educated in England, then Harvard before coming to Berkeley to teach.

"Reporting on the Summit. And you?"

She hesitates and says nothing. An awkward silence falls between us. I try again:

"Mind if we talk and catch up a bit. I mean, about the Summit?"

"My lips are sealed," she smiles as she begins to turn and walk away.

"Listen, anything you say would be strictly off the record, you know?"

"We have instructions not to talk to the Press," she says. "Sorry."

"Well," I pursue her, "I'm trying to write a piece contrasting the leadership styles between Reagan and Gorbys, more of an

atmospheric type piece, setting the scene, the elements, the players, and the background against which there'll be a breakthrough in the Cold War. That's what I'm going for."

It all sounds like bullshit to me, and probably to her. She stops and laughs. "You're a funny man, Dylan. I remember you very well in class. You were always making jokes. How long have you been here?"

"Only a day but I'm getting the hang of the place already," I lied. I had no idea what Reykjavík was really about. "Flew in from New York. Lots of journalists are here covering the event. Listen, how about if we sit down and have a drink? It's great to run into you, Ms. Campbell. Can't be a coincidence, you know?"

"No drinks for me. Sorry. I'm working."

"With the US delegation?"

"Yes. Doing some much-needed translations of Soviet papers that are crucial to the Summit."

"Didn't know you were involved with the government. That's important. You've got an important role to play, no doubt."

"Dylan, you don't have to charm me," she says with a wink and a nod. "At any rate, our delegation is very busy right now with preparations for the talks. The President arrives tonight."

"That's what I've heard."

"There's still much work to be done. Sorry, but I must get going. My date is sure to arrive at any moment."

"How about if we meet tomorrow when you're free. I'll make time. Talk for as long as you like."

"I don't think so, Dylan. Oh, look. My date has arrived."

Sure enough: he has. When I turn around I am seeing a tall, broad-shouldered man with short dark hair and piercing blue eyes, cerulean, that look as if they can see right through you. A Superman kind of guy, I am thinking. Clark Kent here. Black horn-rims, ordinary suit and tie. Then once he changes in the phone booth around the corner, he steps out in his blue-and-red tights with his cape flowing in the breeze. Truth be, I can't tell if he is Russian or German, even though during my travels and reporting I have

become fairly astute and accurate when sizing up somebody's nationality by outward appearances. When I look a second time I notice something odd about his clothes: not Western at all. They are clothes worn by Soviet diplomats, party apparatchiks, drab government officials and the like. Factory-made suits without style or panache, utilitarian in the extreme, produced by workers who have little interest in their jobs and are living on the edges of poverty. I've also seen them on those peripatetic Russian chess grandmasters shuffling from city to city on world tours. His suit is ill-fitting, badly tailored, bulky and somehow made of cheap material. He has on a starched white shirt and a striped tie that appears as if it was bought at a second-hand clothing store with stains of food on its tip. The man's presence makes me feel ill at ease, maybe even a little paranoid. Yet Professor Campbell is absolutely transfixed by the man who pulls her arm under his and whisks her away. Go figure.

Minutes later when the waiter at the bar comes up to me and asks if I want to order a drink, I look him straight in the eye and ask, point blank, like I'm a private dick, like I'm Bogie in the *Maltese Falcon*, if he's seen that big guy before, the one who left with the blond lady, you know, the lady with the leather briefcase in one hand, that broly in the other, wearing that Lauren Bacall-style fedora, rakishly tilted across her forehead, and he looks back at me, raising an eyebrow, appearing very conspiratorial. "Yes, but of course, my friend. He's with the Russians. A very important man, indeed."

Indeed. I like the way he uses the word *indeed*, one of my favorite words for emphasis. All reporters like to say indeed: it elevates the conversation. I order a drink, then another and when the waiter slaps the bill on the table, I nearly fall over. It's huge, more expensive than any drinks I've ever had in the City or elsewhere; my editor will cringe and curse and throw a fit when I hand him my expense report. I'd better have a story, a good one, to make it all worthwhile. There are days when I think writing fiction would be much easier, although I have no idea why.

Think about it, Dylan Rose, there's your Russian professor from Berkeley, a remarkable woman, age around thirty or thirty-one, hanging out with a member of the Soviet delegation: what the hell is going on? My curiosity now whetted, I pull out my reporter's notebook from my breast pocket and scribble a few lines to keep an eye on my Russian teacher-turned-translator for the American delegation and her companion, allegedly with the Soviet delegation, and if I get a chance, be sure to follow them around the streets and shops and hotels of Reykjavík while the Summit is taking place.

The hunger for a good story is soothed a bit by the power of these Icelandic drinks: I am having a hard time thinking clearly. Before I know it, a reporter buddy of mine from Chicago interrupts my train of thought, showing up at the bar and offering to buy me a drink, so we can trade notes on the events of the day, whatever they are, scant, suppressed, hidden from view, he tells me, and without much further ado, if that makes sense, my head spinning a bit from the two drinks I've already had, I decide to give it all a rest, maybe grab a bite to eat at the hotel around 7:30 and spend some time at the bar with another buddy who is covering the Summit for a Washington, D.C. magazine. It pays off. He confides in me from his inside sources, unnamed, of course, that Gorbachev is *under heavy pressure*, as he puts it, from his comrades in the Politburo: he has to come to some kind of agreement with Reagan, perhaps cutting as much as half of the Soviet arsenal of weapons, because the Soviet Union cannot, he repeats the word, *cannot*, with emphasis, afford another arms race with the Americans. Reagan is outspending the Soviets with new military deployments. The Soviet economy is in shambles as a consequence; military spending is killing everybody, so I hear from two different reporters who have spent time in Moscow, he tells me as we toss back another drink. What is Gorbachev thinking coming to the Summit? What does he want? What will he be willing to give up? Many unanswered questions riddle our thoughts.

Reagan by contrast is in the driver's seat, my buddy tells me as he tosses back a shot of whiskey. Reagan, he claims, wants this Summit, by all accounts, more than anything, following up on a

previous meeting in Geneva with Gorby. He can sense an opening, a gambit on the geopolitical chessboard, particularly when it comes to the subject of intermediate range ballistic weapons, as well as issues surrounding the deployment of weapons in space, and likewise, agreements on defense, much of which has already been discussed by the US and Soviet delegations in Geneva.

It is no secret that President Reagan wants to rid the Earth of nuclear weapons: he hates them with a passion, a deep passion beyond anything ideological. Being a man of the movies, as many of us agree, Reagan likes to see the world in terms of a Hollywood script. That's how he wants the Summit to play out, according to the script he and Shultz have written.

My fellow reporter has a good memory and lifting his head in the air quotes verbatim Robert McFarlane, Reagan's national security advisor. The quote sticks in my head, too: "President Reagan sees himself as a romantic, heroic figure who believes in the power of a hero to overcome even Armageddon. I think it may have come from Hollywood. Wherever it came from, he believes that the power of a person and an idea could change the outcome of something even as terrible as Armageddon. This is the greatest challenge of all. He doesn't see himself as God, but he sees himself as a heroic figure on Earth." At the same time, I'm told, Reagan is a man who believes in the power of negotiation, even compromise, to accomplish his objectives. He likes to talk face-to-face with his adversaries and convince them of the validity of his beliefs.

He also knows time is running out to reach an arms deal: The Soviets might just wait until his term is over and choose not to compromise or come to any kind of deal. Reagan's dream of eliminating all nuclear weapons would then fail and his legacy suffer. So, timing for the Summit is critical; Reagan is motivated and like a chess player looking at the pieces on the board spots an opening with the Soviets that could benefit both players, and rid the world of these terrible instruments of mass destruction.

Night falls ever darker and when I glance out of my hotel room window, I am seeing the moons of Reykjavík in the distance above

the mountains and volcanoes of the cityscape. I am seeing not one but many moons against the night sky, imperial and foreboding, as if in some kind of orbit around the island. Is it possible? Can it really be? But of course, I tell myself. Nathalie Campbell is here and she'll bring the warring parties together when the sun rises at dawn.

3. Friday October 10th

Next morning, I start coughing as soon as I roll out of bed: the damp, chilly weather beginning to get to me and take its toll. My lungs ache, my nose stuffed up. In a bout of coughing and wheezing that lasts about twenty minutes, I am feeling as if I am about to die, a slow, agonizing death like in a horror movie before I turn into a flesh-eating zombie.

The rain outside, with the scent of a petrichor, I don't mind. It is almost welcoming, soft as silk, tender on the lips. What gets to me, however, is the way our Secretary of State George Shultz has muzzled the mouths of the American delegation: no talking to the press. Not a word, understand? Why? All two hundred and sixty-seven members of the delegation are off limits to journalists, even if we try to ambush them one by one outside their hotels, the American embassy, on the streets of Reykjavík. Nothing falls our way, except what we can get from each other, reporters digging for stories from other reporters, an infinite loop of circular speculation. A couple of my buddies begin handing out these cans that they've

marked up: Iceland Waters Blackout. You are supposed to open them up if there is a news blackout, but when you do, you find the cans are empty, like the talks themselves between Reagan and Gorbachev. That is the feeling we get hanging out together in the hotel bars, waiting for something, anything to happen.

4. Saturday October 11th

By early afternoon, word finally leaks out that Gorbachev has proposed a fifty percent cut in all nuclear weapons between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, along with a complete elimination of these intermediate-range missiles from Europe. There is also another leak that Gorbachev has agreed to Reagan's terms for verifying compliance of the agreement, and pulled back from his original demand that the Brits and the French also cut their nuclear arms in Europe.

President Reagan has certainly worked his magic for arms control with the Soviets, not an easy task. How much of this will actually come to pass is another matter, I hear from one of my fellow journalists who has a skeptical view of the entire summit. As it happens, I'm hearing from other sources that Gorbachev's proposal—reducing weapons by fifty percent—is actively taken into consideration by the American delegation. Secretary Shultz and the others have worked most of the night to come up with a counterproposal because they have calculated the consequences for

the Americans will be disproportionate: we would give up too many missiles compared to the Soviets. The counter is this: we cut the number to six thousand missiles with nuclear warheads and sixteen hundred missiles for both sides. The other kicker is: The Soviets should cut all those intermediate-range weapons in Asia.

In my hotel room while the rain hammers against the window panes, relentlessly, I pull out my portable chessboard, my sturdy companion during my endless hours of waiting and attendant boredom that are typical of my work as a journalist abroad. I am wondering how Bobby Fischer actually beat Boris Spassky, the reigning world champion at the time, a win that defined Fischer's entire career and one he accomplished at the tender age of twenty-nine.

No easy feat, indeed. Is President Reagan also going to employ some of Fischer's strategies to win over Gorbachev, who probably looks down on Reagan as simply a Hollywood actor, a hero of B-rated cowboy movies, a gunslinger in the mythical Old West, now turned politician, party ideologue and amazingly popular president, a man without enough intellectual strength to handle the wily Russian? Isn't this what Spassky did when he encountered the brash, young Fischer, namely, underestimate the player who was completely predictable in his opening moves on the board, though hardly that in real life? If memory serves, and is later confirmed by one of my fellow journalists, Fischer had always favored the King's Pawn Opening when he played White and the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian Defense when playing Black. Those were his standard moves.

And yet, against Spassky, in the match in 1972, he changed his opening moves, constantly, game after game, like using the English Opening, which was positional by definition, not tactical. The King's Pawn Opening is an attacking move, designed to control the center of the board while the English Opening is not. When he played Black against Spassky he relied on Alekhine's Defense, the Pirc Defense, and the Paulsen Sicilian, which doubtless threw his opponent for a loop. Is Reagan doing the same thing with Gorbachev? I am

convinced he is. If I could only be there in the conference room, sitting in one of those big chairs, next to the translators. Hey, wait a minute. Maybe that's what Professor Campbell is doing. She's there, isn't she? A witness to the biggest chess match of the century, the one where the fate of mankind, humankind, if you will, is being decided.

5. Sunday October 12th

On the last day of the Summit, when the meetings resume, incredibly, Gorbachev says, Hey, okay: we'll cut the missiles we have in Asia down to one hundred and, surprisingly, we'll also accept discussions of human rights to be included in any other meetings between the US and the Soviet Union.

Reagan has pressed hard on the human right issues, as there are many instances of serious violations on the Soviet side, particularly in dealing with Russian Jews and other political opponents of the system. By early afternoon, the Soviets hastily call a press conference, pulling all of us into the picture on short notice, and announce a major agreement is ready to be accepted by both sides. We scramble to hear the news, waiting with bated breath, ears pricked, tongues panting, lapdogs that we are. But nothing comes of it. We are put on hold while the delegations return to the Höfdi

House to continue their deliberations. I shake my head in disbelief: something is not going well. Or is this not the case? All of it too good to be true, a real agreement to cut the massive arsenal of nuclear weapons on both sides. The leak comes that Shevardnadze, the Soviet Foreign Minister, wants the Americans to yield and agree on the issue of the Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan's Star Wars program: cut the program. Shultz says, We'll keep doing research and testing on SDI for ten years, going forward, and then after that time, the US and the Soviets will be free to resume their defense systems. Reagan says, We'll share our SDI work with you but Gorbachev replies, firmly, No. SDI should be restricted to the lab, no testing or research.

Reagan disagrees. "It's a question of one word," he says. Gorbachev counters, "It's laboratory or goodbye." The thinking on the Soviet side is that Gorbachev won't be able to sell this agreement to the Soviet Politburo: he can't go back to Russia and tell everybody, I agreed to eliminate all nuclear weapons but I let the Americans continue with Stars Wars. Reagan walks with Gorbachev back to his limo and Gorbachev tells him bluntly, "I don't know what more I could have done." Reagan is angry, frustrated and scoffs, "You could've said yes."

One word: the fate of the world hinges on one word. The power of language, I am thinking to myself. Words really matter, what I do really matters, all of that.

The debate continues later on: Had Reagan and Gorbachev come within a hair's breath, a single defining word of ending, once and for all, the absurd madness of the nuclear arms race? Did we miss it? Was this really the end of the Cold War? Both men came to the Summit carrying their respective suitcases, which they and only they were authorized to unlock, fingers dancing across the keypads, punching in the codes to launch a nuclear attack on each other. At least neither Reagan nor Gorby got riled up enough to do something stupid: respect for each other seemed to come across in long, grueling exchanges, technical and complicated that filled the

meeting room in the haunted house. Perhaps I'm overdramatizing the situation. Perhaps my imagination has run wild. Whatever.

Meanwhile, on Monday, feeling better from that brutal cough and wheezing, I do some further research into the origins of the Höfði House, mostly out of curiosity and boredom. Built in 1909 as the residence of the French consulate general, Jean-Paul Brillouin, and even now it still bears the emblem of République française, or R.F. The roots of its design and architecture were Norwegian, not Dutch, in a so-called Dragon Style known as *Dragestil*, and when I get to look inside after the Summit ends I spot these carved dragons on the walls. The house is painted arctic white, with this weird style of overhanging, flappy roof that has a kind of metallic grey color to it. *Höfði* means *cape* in the Icelandic language, I discover, and that's what its roof appears to have, if you look up and beyond. The locals are telling me, in all seriousness, the house is still inhabited by the ghost of a young woman who, it is not alleged but certain, had died of drowning or committed suicide.

The talks are deemed a failure by all concerned: no real agreements reached, no reduction in nuclear arms made, no victory laps taken by Reagan and Gorby, despite all the fanfare and posturing and heavy negotiations. I file my story with my editor and craft a few, finely-honed paragraphs describing the haunted house, which I hint, has doomed the talks from the beginning. The mystery of my Russian professor from Berkeley still lingers: I never see her again, even though I'd hoped to sync up with her at the hotel, or anywhere else near the talks. She has vanished fittingly, perhaps, into the cold, wet nights of Reykjavík.

