

# Bragi Olafsson

## NARRATOR

Sögumaður, novel, 2015

On a rainy day in the middle of June, the same day that England and Costa Rica play a match in the World Cup in Brazil, a thirty-five-year-old native of Reykjavik is standing in a downtown post office.

His errand is to mail an envelope containing the manuscript for a story he has written, a story that takes place during one day in the life of a thirty-five-year-old man. But while he's waiting in line, he notices a man that he knows. Or rather, that he knows of, as that man was, about a decade ago, the boyfriend of a girl that he himself loved from afar—a girl who, in his mind, is the only person he's ever truly loved. And when he looks at her former boyfriend in front of him in line, all of his hatred for him comes rushing back—all the foolish feelings that he'd had at the time, when he'd even wished the man dead.

As if involuntarily, he follows the man out of the post office and doesn't realize until he's gone into the bookstore on the other side of the street, the bookstore where he's followed the man, that the envelope with the manuscript, the story, is still in his hands. 171 pp

### Chapters in English available

**BRAGI OLAFSSON'S** (b.1962) novels are undoubtedly among the most original and remarkable Icelandic stories of recent years. Olafsson's novel *The Ambassador* received the 2006 Icelandic Booksellers' Prize and was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize and the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2008.

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Braedraborgarstig 7; 101 Reykjavik; Iceland  
[ua@forlagid.is](mailto:ua@forlagid.is) & [vala@forlagid.is](mailto:vala@forlagid.is) [www.forlagid.is](http://www.forlagid.is)



# NARRATOR

Four friends decide to spend a weekend together in a villa in Paris, with a view to eating themselves to death. Perhaps that's not their original intention, but it seems to be the underlying goal, and once they enter the house it soon prevails. They're middle-aged men, or a bit older, called Ugo, Marcello, Michel and Philippe. The house they'll stay in is owned by Philippe's family: a beautiful, stately house, or a sort of small mansion, somewhere outside the city center. Ugo is a restaurateur and chef. There's some tension between him and his wife: we get an insight into their feelings as we watch him sharpen meat knives inside their restaurant before going to meet his companions; she, his wife, asks just what he is planning to do with all these knives this weekend. Philippe is a judge, unmarried, and lives with his old nanny, Nicole, who looked after him as a child and still seems to take care of all his needs, including those which, to her way of thinking, save him from any yearning to seek out other women's graces. In other words, she over-protects him. The third friend, Marcello, is played by Marcello Mastroianni. He is Italian, whereas the others are French. He is an airline captain for Alitalia, a womanizer who has begun to worry deeply about his declining sexual prowess. The fourth is Michel, a television producer, divorced and tired of life. They are all rather handsome men, especially Marcello. They are elegantly dressed and sophisticated. Their refinement is especially visible when it comes to food. The day after they arrive at the house they decide to hire some prostitutes, Marcello's idea. They only hire three women, however, because Philippe doesn't approve of the notion; he's mindful

of what his old nanny would say. But at the very moment these gentlemen are organizing their liaison with the prostitutes, a group of schoolchildren stands in front of the house, accompanied by their teacher, a handsome and plump woman, whose role in the story, we can see at first glance, will obviously not be confined to that of school teacher. Her name is Andrea. One of the boys in the class is sent to knock on the front door and ask that they be allowed to see a certain tree in the garden, a linden tree which is connected with an eighteenth century French poet Boileau. At the conclusion of the class trip, the aforementioned four invite the children and their teacher in for some little snacks Ugo has prepared. And from that it follows that the men invite Andrea to come to dinner. She accepts, and sits down to dine with them and the prostitutes. Her visit stretches on until you might say that she's finally one of the group. In fact, she becomes the life and soul of the house, the person who best appreciates the craft of Ugo's food, and she is no less appreciative of the men who have invited her to visit. Without any great preamble, Andrea and Philippe decide to form a holy union. Yet she still gets into bed with all four of them, and in that sense takes care of them far better than the three prostitutes, who find things overly debauched and make themselves scarce. The first of the four friends to die is the pilot, Marcello. The night after they abandon ship—the prostitutes, that is—he freezes to death in the open-top Bugatti racing car he had been working on getting running in the garage beside the house. It's a cold night—winter has arrived—and his companions place his corpse in the kitchen, in a cold storage room with a window through which his closed eyes look at his surviving comrades. The next to go is Michel. His death is no less figurative than Marcello's death. He dies on the balcony, the one leading into the garden from the living room. In fact, you could say that the reason for Michel's unusual death was that, from an early age, his stern mother forbid him from ever passing gas if anyone else might hear it. He confesses that weakness to his companions once it becomes clear that he will end up jeopardizing his health. His mother's strict rules have continued to govern him into adulthood, and well into middle age, which means he never lets himself release the inner pressure. Even when it becomes a nuisance, and suppressing it becomes very evident, especially in comparison with the way his friends deal with the rich copia of food and drink

of which they partake, the whole aim being to get the greatest amount of food through one's body. Marcello, for example, shamelessly allows himself to break wind at the dinner table, in front of Andrea and the prostitutes, but Michel gets up from the table and goes outside, where he expels so violently that it is, to put it bluntly, uncomfortable to hear. And to see. As time passes, other similar incidents become more painful, and it is difficult to imagine that it's possible to exceed this in the medium of film. In the wake of the death of Marcello, it might be said that Michel's deflation was absolute. It happens as follows: the remaining four, Michel, Andrea, Ugo and Philippe, are gathered in the living room so that they can taste Ugo's latest concoctions and remember Marcello. A weight hangs over the group, though their appetite hasn't diminished. True, Michel has no appetite for food; it isn't sitting well in his stomach. He goes to the piano and begins to play the song which resounds throughout the film, like a theme of sorts. A song at once sensual and melancholy, a slow rumba beat, a song it's hard to dislike. Michel's playing does nothing to diminish that effect. But suddenly a harsh sound escapes from him as he sits at the piano wearing the late Marcello's white cardigan. In light of what has already happened, perhaps the sound doesn't strike the others as entirely surprising, but they are uncomfortable. Michel rises from his chair, to try to set himself more at ease, but continues to play. Soon the magnitude of the sounds becomes such that the others, who at first find it funny, begin to find it rather alarming, and you imagine they fear their companion is about to float into the air. The soothing melody begins to tighten a trifle, to run ahead of itself. When the camera zooms in on Michel, standing at the piano, it shows sweat streaming down his face; it's obvious how much he's suffering, that he feels tremendous pain. He knows these are his last moments, that his body can't endure. Indeed, the song pauses. But the rumbling continues. Not for long, though. There's a deathly silence in the room. Michel turns around and looks desperately at his companions. Then he seeks out, almost involuntarily, the door to the balcony, heading towards the only fresh air available. When he steps out on the balcony floor, his feet keep him going for three or four steps, but then, and this happens very quickly, he dives forward, like he is swimming, and lies with his stomach on the balcony's wide railing. Right away, all strength leaves his body. Ugo, Philippe and Andrea

come out of the door, terrified. These are, to put it mildly, swollen moments; we hear dogs barking on the gravel drive in front of the house. Michel's head and feet seesaw on the railing. His feet jerk almost imperceptibly. And the barking of the dogs intensifies; they fully understand what's happening. When the camera goes back to Michel, the consequences of his tragic flatulence become apparent. His beige pants are now green. Philippe and Ugo take his hands and lift him up so he can sit up against the balustrade pillars. They retreat to a safe distance inside, along with Andrea, and watch Michel from the doorway as he sits in a puddle of his own liquid feces. He inclines his head slightly forward and his hands, which are lying open-palmed on the concrete balcony, invite us to approach him. There is a tranquility to this image, though the dogs keep on barking. It's as if eternity itself has been captured on film. And yet it is here, at this moment in the cinema on Hverfisgata, that the thread of the film breaks off in eyes of the particular viewer in the theater who will shortly take over as narrator. Because he, the narrator, leaves the movie theater. The reason being that another person, someone who the narrator has pursued all afternoon, from the post office in Austurstræti into the cinema on Hverfisgata via stops at several other places, had stood up from his seat and walked out of the room. He couldn't take any more. That man is called Aron Cesar. It took the narrator, however, a brief moment to decide whether he should continue to sit and watch the movie or else follow Aron Cesar. He chose the latter option.

## FIVE OR SIX HOURS EARLIER

He had taken a number. It took him a moment to realize that he needed to do so in order to get on line. And while he waited for his turn to come, he wondered about the best words to describe the color of fire. Would you use yellow or red? Orange? Blue? He had clapped eyes on a postcard with a picture of a volcanic eruption that was on the sales stand at the door to the post office, and though it was a color photograph, he couldn't decide what colors it showed, and moreover the eruption on the postcard brought other images of fire to mind. Or metaphors. "Thirty-five," called a sales clerk. "Thirty-six," the other clerk soon called. But he was not number thirty-five or six. *I'm thirty-five years old*, he thinks, but it's not yet my turn. "Thirty-six?" the woman called again. "No-one is number thirty-six?" A little period of silence. "Thirty-seven?" Is no-one number thirty-seven? he thinks. The black woman standing behind him gives herself up. She's wearing a crisp white long dress, and he can see how it will take on a different shape once she goes out in the rain later; the shape will cling to the woman, making her outline clearer. From the back, he judges she is about thirty years old. When she turns around and beckons with her index finger, for a moment it seems to him that she's gesturing to him—but, however, it's soon

apparent that she's addressing her child, a girl he guesses is six or seven. A young mother, he thinks. She will be forty years old when her daughter is fully grown. It must have significantly different effects on the personality of a child, he muses, to grow up with parents who are just under fifty when they have a child compared, say, to growing up with people who are in their twenties. And worse, he expects, especially for an only child. To spend the first years of your life, and indeed all the years to date, as is his own case, in the home, or, rather, the house of a man and a woman who are in no way prepared to have a child: that must mold the child in a rather decisive fashion. And not just must: actually does. He is still thinking about himself. This young, dark-complexioned girl is not forced to listen to 19<sup>th</sup> century violin sonatas over breakfast, he thinks. But how had that affected him? Offspring naturally disturb all existing forms, if the parents have some form or pattern to which they are trying to hold. What's more, in their eyes, it takes the child too long to form a comprehensive image, never mind the frame around the picture, he thinks.

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I think. G. thinks. The one I call G., because his name displeases him, and always has. The one who is himself constantly thinking about form.

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I'm still waiting for number 41 to be called up. I've finished looking at the postcards on the stand across from the white cardboard boxes on the wall shelves to the left. They are different sizes, but together they form a very beautiful whole, a family of five boxes, each placed into the other, the smallest into the next smallest, and so on. The dark-skinned mother and daughter have completed their task, and leave the room. I follow them with my eyes. But when I turn back towards the clerks I notice a man I know, or rather know whom he is. He stands a little way inside the room, near the counter, somewhat

obstructed by an elderly woman. Strange to see this man here, I think. But what is so strange about it? He's my contemporary, and although he for his part has no idea who I am, or shouldn't have, I can say that I know all too well who he is. More than once, more than twice, I had wished that this particular individual did not exist. Or, at least, was not standing in the same spot as me, at the same time, with the same people. Of course it was very foolish thinking, and it was a while ago now. I had at the time even devised strategies to get this man out of the way, get him removed in some manner, although the implementation of this plan never got beyond the idea stage. But here he is, as I said. I had not seen him for a while. And I have also not been contemplating him very long in the post office when his phone rings. Apparently he is a busy man. The ring on his mobile phone can hardly be called a ring; it is more like some kind of music with an obtrusive beat. As soon as he starts talking on the phone, he realizes it's his turn. When he walks up to the counter, still with the phone to his ear, it makes me aware again of his peculiar gait, which I'd perpetually allowed to get on my nerves, decidedly because of the incredible self-confidence it implied.

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*Perpetually. Decidedly.* That's how G. puts it. How he thinks. But it's unthinkable that this man, who has now surfaced here, all of a sudden, in the post office, has had such words pass through his head. *Decidedly* and *perpetually*. How did the line in the poem go? *In my distastes above all I have elegant tastes.*

**Translation: Lytton Smith**