

THE THINGS OWEN WROTE

The
Things
Owen
Wrote



JESSICA SCOTT KERRIN



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Stephan G. Stephansson Homestead Restoration Committee, 1987.

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For Peter and Elliott who traveled all the way
around the Ring Road with me.

Það er rúsínan í pylsuendanum.

ONE

Another casserole has been left on Owen Sharpe's front porch. This one is in a dish with a school of fish printed in turquoise around the middle. Its loose-fitting glass lid is all steamed up. The casserole is warm and smells faintly of cheese, onions and beef.

"Pops!" Owen calls out after he eases past the screen door, bringing the casserole inside with both hands. The door slams shut with a bang behind him, yet nobody yells at Owen about the jarring noise. He smiles to himself because of the relaxed house rules. Then he hollers, "Where's all this food coming from?"

Silence.

But Owen knows that his granddad is there somewhere. Neville Sharpe has moved in to take

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care of Owen while his parents are in Las Vegas, celebrating their anniversary.

“Pops!”

“In the kitchen!” his granddad calls back.

Owen steps over the tossed and abandoned shoes that have piled up this past week and heads to the kitchen. His granddad is sitting at the table, which is covered with cardboard filing boxes. There are even more on the floor.

“What’s all this?” Owen asks while sliding the warm casserole onto the stovetop.

Owen’s granddad flips the lid off one of them and peers inside. He scratches his head, leaving his feather-white hair sticking up at the back. His black-framed glasses rest heavily on his long, pointed nose.

“This is Gunnar’s life’s work,” Neville says with a grand sweep of his hand.

“Who’s Gunnar?” Owen asks.

“My friend Gunnar. Or, I should say, my late friend Gunnar. You probably don’t remember him. He died a few years ago.”

“Why do you have his boxes?”

“His wife has decided to sell her house and move to Edmonton to be closer to her son. She asked me if I could sort through Gunnar’s office and see if

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any documents should be donated to the archive he worked closely with in northern Iceland.”

“What’s so special about Gunnar’s stuff?”

“He translated Icelandic poems and stories into English,” Neville explains. “He was even recognized for his work by the Icelandic government. They gave him a medal, which I’m sure to come across in one of these boxes.”

“Hey, I know of an Icelandic poet. He moved to Alberta as a homesteader,” Owen recalls. “His name was Stephansson.”

“Stephan G. Stephansson. How do you know about him?”

“My grade-seven field trip last year. We visited his historic house.”

“That’s right. Stephansson House. Near Marker-ville. I haven’t been there in years.”

“I took some photos. Want to see?”

“Sure,” Neville says, sitting back in his chair.

Owen’s granddad gave Owen a camera for his last birthday. Owen has been taking photographs of practically everything ever since.

He drops his knapsack to the floor and roots inside it for his camera. He clicks through the files until he finds what he is searching for. His granddad leans in to watch on the screen.

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Owen lands on Stephansson's little pink house, which is pretty with its green gingerbread trim. Owen took the shot at a rakish angle, a simple photographer's trick to make something look more dramatic than it really is.

"I remember it now," Neville says.

He continues to look at Owen's photographs, now of the inside of the house: the woodstove in the kitchen, the dining table set with china dishes, the butter churn, the upright piano, the spinning wheel. Owen clicks through to Stephansson's study, the room where the poet would write at his homemade desk. There was also a cabinet filled with Icelandic books and a horsehair-stuffed sofa to lie down on and think.

Owen keeps clicking through his tour at an even pace until he comes to a photograph of a bat. Its tiny body is wedged into the flowery wallpapered corner of Stephansson's dining room, near the plaster ceiling.

"Is that a bat?" Neville asks, peering closer.

"Neat, huh?" Owen says. "The guide told us that the attic is full of them. Hundreds of them, maybe. They fly out in a great big cloud every night to hunt for bugs, then return in the morning. This one probably left from the attic the wrong way and got trapped inside the house."

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“I didn’t think a bat could get confused like that.”

“Oh, sure,” Owen says. “The guide told us that it can happen whenever a shaft of light from inside the house shines into wherever the bat is roosting. It tricks the bat into thinking that the light marks the way to go outdoors.”

“What happened to the bat?” Neville asks.

Owen shrugs.

“Maybe the guide turned out all the lights and opened the door at dusk so that the bat could find its way home,” Neville suggests.

“Maybe,” Owen says.

He is not sure why his granddad cares so much about one confused bat.

Neville takes his glasses off and cleans them with a cloth from his pocket. He puts his glasses back on.

“Let’s see more pictures of the historic site,” Neville says.

Owen clicks through more photographs, only now each one features the bat. Just the bat.

Bat.

Bat.

Bat.

Then selfies with the bat.

Then photographs of his best friend, Kevin, posing near the bat.

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“Looks like you boys got distracted,” Neville says drily.

Owen grins as he leans back in his chair. When he does, he spots dirty plates that have been stacked from breakfast along with three empty casserole dishes in mismatched patterns on the counter.

“Seriously, Pops. Who is sending all these casseroles?”

“It’s the ladies from the Red Deer River Readers Book Club,” Neville says.

Owen’s granddad gets up from the table and digs out a fork from the cutlery drawer. He lifts the steamed glass lid from the dish on the stovetop and pokes at the warm contents.

“Ah. This is Pauline’s work,” he muses. “An abundance of mushrooms.”

Owen gets up to have a look.

“You like mushrooms?” he asks. He hates them.

“Not particularly,” Neville says, frowning.

“I don’t get it,” Owen says. “Why is she making you food? And why so many mushrooms?”

“I guess she forgot that I don’t like them, but she’s well-meaning,” Neville says. “They all are. Pauline. Jóhanna. Marjorie.”

“The ladies from the Red Deer River Readers Book Club?” Owen guesses.

“Yes.”

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“Don’t they think you can cook?”

His granddad shrugs.

“Because I’ve seen you cook. You’ve cooked plenty. Especially since Grandma died.”

Heavy silence.

Oops. Owen wishes he had not said that last part. It has been over a year since his grandmother, Aileen Sharpe, passed away, but still.

Neville stares at Owen, a boy with a nose like his own and gray eyes that are spaced widely on his freckled face.

Owen stares back. Whenever he is unsure, his left eye is slower to blink than the right. He is blinking like that now, which makes him look like an owl.

His granddad pats Owen’s shoulder, then returns to the table and starts sorting through a new box.

Glad that the awkward moment has passed, Owen glances out the kitchen window. Beyond the backyard shed and the solid wooden fence that separates the Sharpes’ garden from the neighbors, the endlessly flat prairies roll under a giant blue sky.

Owen returns to the table. He’s got nothing better to do. There hasn’t been any homework this past week because it’s near the end of the school year. All his classes have been reviews so that students like Kevin can catch up before exams. Owen is an A student, so he can afford to coast.

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“Have you found anything for the archive?” Owen asks.

“Yes, indeed,” Neville says as he rummages through piles of documents on the table. “Have a look at this.”

Owen’s granddad plucks a small narrow notebook from the jumbled mess. Part of its marbled blue cover is worn right down to the cardboard beneath, and its loose binding is barely holding the pages together. He hands it to Owen as if he is handing him a little baby bird.

Taking his granddad’s cue, Owen opens the notebook carefully. The water-stained pages contain lines of cursive writing in delicate spidery penmanship.

“This was the travel journal that Stephansson kept as he crossed the ocean during his emigration from Iceland to North America. You can see how he’s teaching himself a new language,” Neville explains.

Inside are lists of words that Stephansson translated from Icelandic to English.

Boat words.

Weather words.

Farm words.

“Gunnar tracked down this journal as part of his translation work. I’m sure that the archive in Iceland would dearly love to have it.”

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Owen's granddad rummages some more and comes up with a modern-day notebook like the kind Owen uses at school. He hands it to Owen, who begins to flip through the pages.

"That's Gunnar's notebook about Stephansson's travel journal. He writes about how he came across it. I thought I'd send it to the archive along with Stephansson's journal. The two seem to go hand in hand."

Gunnar's notebook is mostly in English, but he has cramped chicken-scratch writing, which Owen finds difficult to read. Plus, there are no sketches or drawings to make the notes interesting. He hands the notebook back to his granddad, who places it with Stephansson's travel journal off to the side.

"I didn't just take photos of Stephansson House. I also took notes during our field trip," Owen recalls, "along with some sketches."

"Really? Can I see them?" Neville asks.

Owen goes to his bedroom and pulls open his desk drawer. He finds his field notes among his other grade-seven notebooks, which are stacked on top of his grade-six ones and so on all the way down to his earliest efforts, a perfect record.

After returning to the kitchen table, Owen opens his field notes and scans the first page. It

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starts with a list of facts that the costumed guide told them about Stephansson: when he was born, when he emigrated from Iceland, when he moved to Alberta to start a farm. Owen keeps scanning, then selects an excerpt to read out loud to his granddad.

“Look here. It’s about the color pink. ‘During restoration of the house, some of Stephansson’s descendants thought that the heritage people got the color wrong, but the heritage people did tests on paint chips from the house and proved that pink was the color back in 1927, the year that Stephansson died.’”

His granddad nods along.

Owen flips the page and studies the sketch he completed of the floor plan for Stephansson’s house, a house that was built in stages over many years as Stephansson’s family grew. He turns the notebook around so that his granddad can better see the sketch.

“Nicely done,” Neville says, adjusting his glasses.

Owen reads another excerpt out loud. “Stephansson couldn’t sleep. He farmed in the day and wrote his poems all night long.”

“An insomniac. I forgot about that,” Neville says. “I wonder if he knew about drinking warm milk. That always does the trick for me.”

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At the mention of milk, Owen realizes that he is thirsty. He gets up and goes to the fridge. He reaches for the chocolate milk. He shakes the container and discovers that it has just enough.

When Owen's granddad sees what Owen is doing, he goes to open the cupboard to retrieve a glass. Only he sets down a coffee mug in front of Owen instead.

Owen holds the milk carton uncertainly.

"That's for coffee, Pops," he says.

Owen knows what to use. Why doesn't his granddad?

Owen blinks, owl-like.

His granddad clears his throat.

"I know that. I'm getting *myself* some coffee."

He strides to the counter and makes a big show of pouring a cup from a pot of coffee that sits on the stove.

"Now, let's hear more from your notes," he says as he sits down at the kitchen table.

Owen takes one sidestep over to the stove. He lifts the coffeepot. It is stone cold.

"Do you want me to heat that up for you?" Owen asks delicately.

"I like it cold," Neville declares, but he winces after he takes a sip.

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Owen shrugs, then finishes off the milk carton by drinking directly from its spout. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he returns to the table and reads out loud from the next page in his field notes.

“Stephansson was possibly one of the best Canadian poets who ever lived.”

“Gunnar told me that, as well,” Neville says. “But not too many Canadians know about Stephansson because he wrote everything in Icelandic. That’s why Gunnar’s translations are so important. He had Icelandic roots himself and Stephansson was one of his favorite poets.”

Owen’s granddad grows quiet. He takes a sip of his cold coffee, winces again and puts the mug down.

“I’m hungry,” he says. “Let’s call it a day. I’ll go through the final boxes in the morning.”

But Owen is no longer listening. He has flipped ahead in his notebook and now pauses. He remembers all the poetry assignments that followed his class trip and he also remembers why he doesn’t want anyone to see his work, especially his granddad.

Owen’s cheeks flame red.

As soon as his granddad gets up and goes to the sink to dump his cold coffee, Owen quickly closes

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his notebook and shoves it underneath some of Gunnar's paperwork strewn on the table.

"How about you get us some plates," Neville says.

Owen gets up on shaky legs to fetch some dishes from the cupboard. His pounding heart slows down as his granddad scoops casserole onto their plates.

When they sit down at the table, Owen's granddad pauses with his fork halfway to his mouth.

"Gunnar wanted your grandmother and me to visit Iceland. When he passed away, his wife gave us a travel voucher for two free tickets to go there, which is what Gunnar had written in his will."

"You didn't go?"

"No. That was right about the time your grandmother got sick. She couldn't travel because of her treatments, but she would have liked to. The Icelandic landscape is supposed to be spectacular."

"I've been photographing landscapes around here," Owen says, picking out the mushrooms and moving them to the side of his plate. "I submitted some to the yearbook committee today."

"What of?" Neville asks.

"Prairie things. You know. Water towers. Hay bales. Combines."

"I'm sure one of your photos will get picked for the cover," Neville says confidently.

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Owen grins. He can always count on his family to say something along those lines.

When they finish eating, they get up to rinse their plates. Owen notices that only his plate has a pile of rejected mushrooms. His granddad's plate is scraped clean.

"I thought you didn't like mushrooms," Owen teases.

"Who told you that?" Neville asks.

"You did," Owen says.

"No, I didn't. I love mushrooms."

Owen hesitates. His granddad ate all the mushrooms, so maybe he does love them. Perhaps Owen misunderstood earlier, and Pauline from the Red Deer River Readers Book Club got it right after all.

Owen tries to let the confusing moment go. It's only mushrooms, he reasons, as he scrapes the uneaten ones from his plate into the compost. Still, his doubt niggles at him for the rest of the evening. Even when he goes to bed, there's no escape. He dreams about the poor befuddled bat at Stephanson House, and forgets about his notebook hidden on the kitchen table that he wants no one to read.