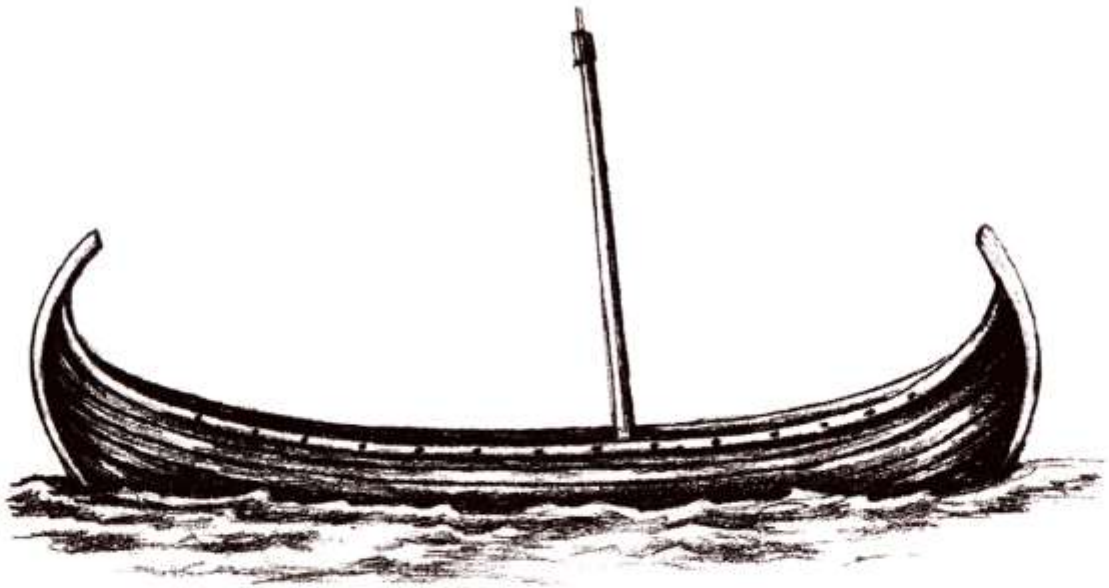


Prologue



The Gulf Stream is part of an oceanic river that flows beneath the equatorial sun, and thus becomes a reservoir of warmth. After crossing the Atlantic from Africa to the Caribbean, this warm river flows through the Gulf of Mexico, then angles north past the beaches of Florida, enabling tourists from New York to go swimming even in January.

The Gulf Stream flows further north along the American coastline, influencing the weather as far north as Newfoundland. The great river of warm water—roughly a hundred kilometers wide and 800 to 1,200 meters deep, flowing at the surface at 2.5 meters per second—then veers northeast across the North Atlantic toward Europe, losing some of its warmth along the way. But not all of its warmth; the river branches into several smaller currents—flowing northeast, flowing east, flowing southeast—currents which caress Europe with warm moist air, and water that rarely freezes.

The branch of the river heading northeast flows beneath the tall rocky cliffs of Iceland, then, further across the sea, meets a long wall of rock, which sends the river northward. This vast wall of granite contains many fissures which penetrate deep into the rocky land. These fissures, filled with seawater, are called fjords. Because of the warm current flowing north along the coastline of Norway—here the river is called the North Atlantic Drift—the fjords rarely freeze.

Tall jagged mountains stand almost shoulder to shoulder along the coast, and along the shorelines of the fjords. Part of the Norwegian coast reaches far above the Arctic Circle, where winter lays a deep snow upon the land. Even during the summer, the mountains wear patches of old snow and ancient ice. Streams pour abundantly down the steep mountainsides, into lakes, into fjords, into the sea.

With water to drink, and water to travel on, and patches of green grass and berry bushes along the shore, people—eons ago—made this coastline their home. Even in the far north, there were trees enough—white birch, shorter and shorter the further north one went—to build with, and to burn. In the south, there were great forests with many different trees, one of them so strong that its hard wood, when fashioned into a boat, could stand up to the pounding waves of the sea.

It was enough: water and wood and grass, cows and goats and sheep, abundant fish, abundant berries, and the meat of a bear, of a moose, of a reindeer. Yes, it was enough: eggs from islands where the birds laid them by the thousands. Salmon leaping up the streams, easily caught with spears and woven baskets. The wild chickens in the mountains, brown in the summer and white in the winter; they could be caught with a

snare. It was enough, to enable a man and a woman to bring forth children and raise them on this rocky coast where the sea rarely froze, and the streams flowed from the heights even in winter. And where a house built of timber could be wrapped with chunks of turf from a bog, forming walls two meters thick.

A child could be raised here, a family could grow here, a community could weave together. The men honed their axes and built better and better homes, and, especially, they built better and better boats.

They built small boats that could be rowed by a farmer inside the protected fjord. Such boats were good for fishing and trade. A man could transport two or three goats to a neighbor's farm up the fjord, and return with two or three sheep, or a spotted calf.

As a community grew, its boats grew as well, with four pairs of oars, eight pairs of oars, becoming ships that could venture out from the fjord onto the rolling sea.

For building their ships, carpenters valued the hardest wood of all, oak. They cut a long beam from a trunk of oak, a beam which they hewed with their axes until the lower edge was narrower than the upper edge along its length. This was the keel, the foundation of a ship. Both ends of the oaken keel curved upward, for the keel became a runner when the ship was pulled up on a pebble beach, then pulled down again.

Carpenters honed their axes and cut long thin planks of oak. They shaved and shaped the boards into strakes; overlapping strakes, fastened with iron rivets, formed the growing hull. One of the strakes, between the waterline and the gunnel, was thicker than the others, because oar holes were cut into it.

Once the hull of the ship was completed, the carpenters could admire what they had done. A man with an axe in his hand—and shavings on his wool tunic and in his beard—could stand at one end of this oaken vessel, still without its internal bones, and run his eye along the graceful curves of the hull. The strakes at the bow reached up to meet the tall rising curve of the stem. The strakes at the stern reached up to meet the tall rising curve of the stern-piece. Here was a ship that would not plow through the water, but coast lightly over it.

Searching in the forest for branches of oak with a certain curve, or angle, or thickness, shipwrights carved ribs that would fit along the inner hull of strakes, to strengthen them. The carpenters carved crossbeams, then fastened them from inner hull to inner hull, giving the ship even greater strength. The crossbeams would serve as the frame on which the carpenters would lay the boards of the deck.

Oars were carved from pine, a lighter wood. When, over the passage of centuries, a mast and sail were added, the mast would be carved from a trunk of pine, a strong and flexible wood.

Every boat was built a little better. A little stronger, a little longer, a bit more graceful to the eye. The sail was made of woven wool, the work of many women over the course of a winter, strengthened with crisscrossing strips of leather. The lines that supported and controlled the sail were made of braided walrus hide. Sailors learned to use a long rounded spar, carved from pine, to hold one corner of the angled sail ahead of the mast, thereby tricking the wind into the backside of the sail. Thus could they set a course much closer to the wind.

They rowed within sight of land, and they sailed within sight of land. They had no compass, and clouds often hid the sun and the stars. During good weather, they rowed from the shelter of the fjord out to the open sea, where they hoisted the sail and followed the fish, and the seals, and the whales, to wherever the fishing and hunting were best, while remaining always, or almost always, in sight of land.

They learned how best to set their sail to the sea winds. They learned to steer with a rudder lashed with willow roots and leather to the right side of the stern, the steer-board. They learned to bring dried fish, and hard flat bread, and maybe some cheese, maybe some berries, stowed in a pine box beneath the unnailed boards of the deck. They brought water in a tightly lidded barrel. They wore wool tunics and trousers, wool socks inside leather boots, wool caps, wool mittens. In the cold driving rain that sometimes carried more frozen drops than wet ones into their eyes, they wore seal skin coats and walrus hide trousers, and the thickest wool mittens that the missus could knit.

The time eventually came, for such is the manner of men, when the sailors, hearing tales of great islands to the west, began to think of stowing provisions that could sustain a crew for a much longer voyage. They would sail not north or south along the rocky coast, but instead they would venture west, toward they knew not what. Shipwrights began to build ships long enough for a crew of thirty-two at sixteen pairs of oars. Honing their axes and their draw-blades, they built ships able to ride the oceans waves in good weather, able to survive the ocean waves in a sudden storm.

They honed their swords as well. When the Norwegian Vikings plundered the monastery on Lindisfarne Island, off the coast of England in 793 A.D., they showed

no mercy. Some of the priests were murdered, others were bound and taken aboard the warship to be sold elsewhere as slaves. The island sanctuary of Christian thought and history and art was plundered for anything that might have value. The raid was so successful that it could only encourage further raids.

The Vikings found islands scattered across the sea, some small, some large, some that disappeared into the northern mist.

How far west did they ultimately sail? Where did they drop anchor, where did they settle, where did they bury their dead? Their traces are few and scattered.

The old Icelandic sagas and modern archeology piece together a picture of one notable Viking. Around the year 1,000 A.D., Leifur Eiriksson, born on Iceland, now living on Greenland, sailed with a crew of thirty-five men on a journey to the west, to see if he could find the land that had been sighted by another Icelander, who had been blown far off course.

Leifur and his crew sighted a coastline of rock and ice. They sailed south along another coastline of deep forest and long white beaches. Then they sighted a flat tip of land partly covered with grass. A stream came winding through the grassy flats to the sea. Here could their sheep and three cows graze, perhaps through the winter. The shoreline was heaped with driftwood, enough to build with, enough to burn. Leifur Eiriksson dropped anchor.

He and his men, and their livestock, and perhaps a few women unrecorded by history, spent a year on that grassy tip of land. They built houses of timber and turf, smoky but warm during the long winter. Though icebergs drifted along the coast in the current from the north, the snow was light and the livestock flourished. Berries were abundant, and the salmon were bigger than the salmon back home.

On an excursion south along the coast of "Vinland", Land of Meadow Grass, as they called their home, Leifur and his crew cut timber, tall straight pines, which they would lash to the deck and carry home as cargo to treeless Greenland. They met no other people, though their swords were ready.

Among the crew of thirty-five was a young shipbuilder who had been born in Norway. Wanting to see more of the world, he had hired aboard a ship bound from Norway to Iceland as a carpenter who could repair that ship and any other. He did the same from Iceland to Greenland. He did the same from Greenland to the grassy tip of some New World. Leif Magnussen spent the winter repairing Leifur Eiriksson's Viking ship with several new ribs, several crossbeams, and a stronger *kerling* to

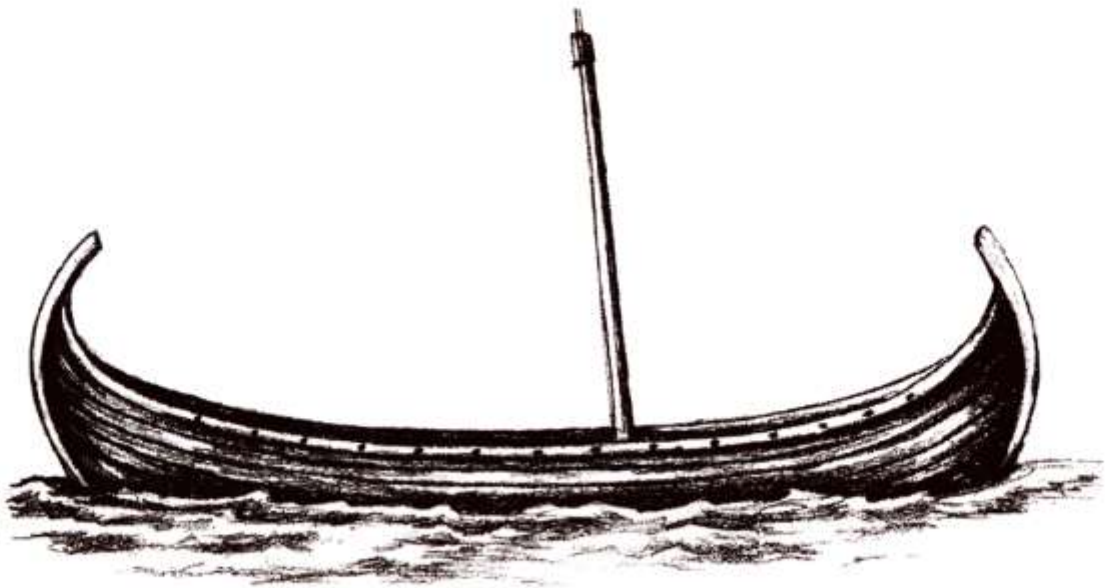
support the mast, made not of Norwegian oak but of New World pine. Using pitch and wool as caulking, he put a patch over a broken strake.

He did his job well, for the ship carried Leifur and his crew safely home to Greenland the following summer.

That was a thousand years ago, an almost unnoticed footstep in human history.

Part One

Homecoming



Chapter 1

Johannes admired the freshly whittled peg, its birch wood strikingly white in the dim boat shed, especially beside the darker peg, the two of them standing like a pair of thumbs, forming an oarlock on the gunnel of a rowboat that was now repaired and ready for Saturday's outing.

Johannes put his whittling knife into the sheath that always hung from his belt. You never know when you might need to cut something.

He patted the starboard gunnel of the old oaken rowboat, as he might have patted the shoulder of an old and trusted horse, then he stepped out of the *naust*, swung the big red door shut and locked it with a padlock.

Standing in rubber boats on the slope of a pebble beach, he ran his eyes along the length of a nearby pier that jutted into the fjord. A seagull was sitting on one of the outermost pilings.

The wind had settled. The surface of the fjord had calmed from whitecaps at midday to a gently rolling sheen that reflected the range of mountains beyond the far shore. The orange sun would soon disappear behind one of the southwestern peaks.

Johannes thought he might walk out to the end of the pier, for he liked to rest his eyes on distant reaches of water. But he had taken only a couple of steps across the sloping beach toward the foot of the pier . . . when he saw, pulled up on the beach fifty meters from where he stood, a long, sleek replica of a Viking ship, its prow and stern rising with proud curves toward the sky.

Was someone making a movie?

But when had they pulled the ship up onto the shore? He hadn't noticed it half an hour ago, when he walked down from the house to the *naust* to whittle a new peg.

There didn't seem to be anyone around the ship. Its mast stood about ten meters tall, braced with rigging fore and aft, but without a sail.

Johannes walked along the upper edge of the beach, his boots crunching through pebbles and bits of shells, his eyes never leaving the graceful ship with clinker-built lines sweeping along the hull. As he approached, he saw that the ship had done a lot of sailing. It was no movie-set replica, but a properly built vessel with green algae and scattered barnacles below the waterline. He could see where the hull

had been dented and scraped. The oarlocks, sixteen pairs of holes cut along the third strake below the gunnel, were well worn.

Stepping closer, he peered over the gunnel. The oars lay in two neat bundles lengthwise, flanking the mast. The rough gray sail, rolled around a spar, lay beside the oars. Otherwise, the ship was bare. He saw no orange life jackets, or radio antenna, or any other signs of modern life. The lines rising from wooden cleats to the masthead were not made of nylon, nor even hemp, but what looked to be tightly braided animal hide.

The ship had been pulled far enough up the beach that high tide would not reach it. The bow was tied with ten meters of woven hide to a stout pine further ashore.

Whoever had guided the ship to this spot along the fjord must have known well the underwater rocks, and the skerries that barely surfaced at low tide, and the narrow but sufficient channel that wove among them from the fjord's deep water into a shallow bay and finally to the beach on which Johannes stood.

Johannes walked along the starboard hull toward the stern, rubbing his hand along the smooth worn oak of the upper strakes. The iron rivets looked solid, with little rust. The rudder had been pivoted back to an almost horizontal position. He looked closely at the rudder's attachment to the hull, but saw no brass swivel, no stainless steel; everything was made of wood, roots and leather. The rudder was battered and scraped, especially toward the bottom of the blade. It had guided this ship into many rocky harbors.

He walked slowly around the stern, admiring the stern-piece that rose above his head, though it did not curl into a dragon's tail. He walked along the portside of the ship, rubbing his hand along a strake warmed by the late afternoon sun. He was not sure what it was that he had discovered on his beach, but the ship certainly did look real. Ancient real. As if it had just arrived from a thousand years ago.

He was running his hand up a curving strake in the prow . . . when he heard something stirring atop the grassy bluff above the beach. Close to the pine tree to which the ship was tied, a man sat upon among the withering wildflowers and yellow ferns of autumn, a man with a full reddish beard, and tangles of dark blond hair that fell to his shoulders. The man stared around him, as if he had awakened in some strange place.

He stood up for a better look. He wore a dark shirt and baggy trousers, and tall leather boots. He barely glanced at the ship in front of him, and seemed not to notice

Johannes at all, only ten meters away, as he gazed out at the fjord, and then at the range of mountains beyond it.

His eyes lit with recognition, and now he laughed. He laughed with surprise, he laughed with delight, as he stared at a flat rocky island near the mouth of the bay; at the slender white veil of a waterfall dropping down a gray-green mountainside across the fjord; and then at the red-orange sun just touching a jagged peak. He pointed at the peak and called out to it, as if saluting an old friend, but Johannes could not understand the strange words.

The man turned slowly in the knee-deep grass, staring at the mountain peaks that flanked the fjord, their lower slopes clad with September-yellow birch, their upper slopes rough-hewn flanks of gray rock, tinged radiant red-orange by the sun.

Now he looked toward Johannes's yellow house, further up the sloping shore in a meadow of grass and heather, overlooking the *naust* and pier.

Thirty meters beyond the home which Johannes had shared with Astrid since their wedding day, stood their son's home, red with white trim.

Johannes's house was a classic old box, two stories, simple roof, built before the war.

Bjørn's house had been built during the prosperity of the 1980s. Its two stories were much broader, especially across the front; the roof was gabled, with five windows facing the sea, and five in back facing the mountains. Best of all, Bjørn's house had, with theatrical elegance, a balcony wrapped around all four sides of the upper floor, so that people could step from inside to outside and still remain under a protective roof while they gazed across the fjord.

The stranger now turned toward Johannes, peered down at him and asked him something while gesturing toward the two houses. The man was young, twenty-five maybe. Johannes could not understand his strange words.

The stranger continued to speak, explaining something about the houses, or, as Johannes gradually understood, about a house that had once stood where these two modern houses now stood. About the house that had once belonged to this voyager from some distant time, who had just come home.

The young and ancient man now slid on the heels of his boots down the sandy edge of the bluff, then he walked down the slope of the pebble beach until he stood beside Johannes. He swept his arm toward the range of mountains across the fjord, pointed at one peak, and then another, his hand movements very definite, as if—

perhaps—he was speaking about the peaks and the sun moving across the sky above them as his daily clock. An Icelander might have been able to understand the Old Norse, but Johannes, a speaker of modern Norwegian, caught not a word. Or if he did catch a faint echo of something familiar, it was all but buried beneath the rolling rrr’s and a strange th- that sounded more like the burp of an oyster than any th- which Johannes had ever heard.

Every now and then, as his story continued, this fellow would pause to marvel that he was actually *here*. It was clear to Johannes that the fellow knew every landmark in this part of the fjord. He pointed at a steep green slope across the fjord, half a kilometer to the east, his finger waving up and up and up; Johannes understood that the fellow knew about the trail winding from the shore up through the spruce and then birch to the plateau highlands.

Johannes reached out his hand. “Welcome home.”

The stranger looked at Johannes with puzzlement; he did not understand these words. But he took Johannes’s hand and the two men shook, one hand young and strong, the other a grandfather’s hand, but strong.

Johannes said, “I am Johannes Jakobsen.” He patted his hand over his heart. “Johannes.”

The stranger nodded with understanding, then he patted his hand over his heart. “Leif,” he said, his blue eyes confident, with a tinge of humor.

“Leif Eriksson?” asked Johannes, ready to believe anything.

The stranger laughed and crisscrossed his hands with denial. “Leif Magnussen.” He patted his hand over his heart. “Leif Magnussen.”

“Well, Leif.” Johannes was just about to say how much he admired the Viking ship . . . when he heard Astrid calling from the front door, “Johannes, supper is soon on the table.”

He looked across the sloping meadow and waved to her to let her know where he was. “We have company, Sweetheart.”

“Well, bring him along. I hope he’s got an appetite.”