Agnes Ravatn

The World is a Scandal: A Little Book About Life in the Countryside

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The Crack in the Ore

I had a friend at high school with no concept of irony. There must have been some kind of harmless faulty wiring in her brain that simply made it impossible for her to turn any kind of idea on its head in mid-air. Harmless, but highly impractical.

For all of us others, irony was simply a pre-programmed factory setting, and so her life consisted of being terribly hurt by every little thing that was said to her before anyone had a chance to explain that it was only ever intended ironically.

I think of her today, the temporarily returned west coaster that I am, scarcely a decade on the east coast of Norway behind me. Until now, I've found that the repetitive party games where people circle the differences between those from the east and west coast or list distinctive features of westerners versus their eastern counterparts' sense of humour to have become a little tiring. Entirely fabricated and not very imaginative, and one reason to re-evaluate my subscription to *Syn og Segn* magazine. However, since returning to the west coast, quite to the contrary, I've found the issue to be remarkably relevant.

When we were visiting my grandmother-in-law in her nursing home just a few days ago and a nurse was preparing to let us through the barrier, she stopped by the pram, the baby inside resembling a full moon with his little hat on, and cried: 'Goodness me, what a tiny little scrap you are! Isn't your mother feeding you?!', and before I had a chance to process her words I swooped into the conversation, my face red and blotchy: 'Of course, he just fed, just this moment in fact!' The nurse looked at me with an expression that said: How daft *are* you? And it was then that it clicked: I'm completely out of shape. I've spent far too long living on the east coast of Norway.

Who'd have thought that irony is something that has to be practised and performed again and again, like mowing the lawn or doing the dishes? Certainly not me. Now it wasn't the case that I'd lost my sense of irony. On the contrary, I'd lost my ability to hope or expect *others* to express irony.

In a very fine piece of writing on the specifically western sense of humour (which may or may not actually exist), my neighbour Einar Økland gave a very nice description of what it's like to walk into a shop here on the west coast on the hunt for an umbrella, for example. Among the responses one might risk receiving are:

'Gosh, I know we had some in yesterday!'

'Shall I put it up for you, or is it a gift?'

'Oh yes, the umbrellas are over there – and the changing room is just in the corner to the left.'

'Ah, of course! The holidays are just around the corner, after all.'

'Of course – what size do you take?'

'Oh no – the weather forecasts are so unreliable these days, so we don't tend to keep any in stock, I'm afraid.'

'This is not "humour",' Einar writes. 'This is an everyday event and a social inflection. It is simply how you establish rapport with your customers around here.'

And the worst thing is that it's entirely true. If I were to take a bird's-eye-view of myself as I collect my post, go to the shop, take a walk or chat with my neighbour, I'd see that in each and every single situation, conversation is a mystery that I'm required to solve at lightening speed. You must be permanently primed for action, your internal interpreting mechanism freshly-oiled for use at a moment's notice.

I'll work my way back to my old form before too long, but what about the refugees who wish to integrate in this cacophony of deliberate misinterpretations and parodies and ironies? First you must learn the language, and then you must learn the fact that the language you've just learned means

something entirely different when in use than whatever it was that you initially learned. A tip for all refugees: bring your own umbrella!

And it was here that I acknowledged something important, at any rate: I had only just come to appreciate the insincere friendliness so characteristic of the Oslo inflection. The tone that says *it's SUCH a pleasure to meet you!* when you know all too well that it couldn't be any further from the truth, paired with the smiles and gentle hand-squeezes of a female bishop, acting as if *you* were the very person they were waiting for, whether at a party or in the supermarket or at a meeting.

To begin with, I objected to this clammy, overly-sentimental pleasantness. When someone said *it was so good to see you last time we met!,* I'd agree, and when they inevitably followed this up with *so lovely!* and then *how exciting*, I'd find myself desperately seeking out a fellow westerner so we could roll our eyes together.

But after a while I realised that Oslo is a place where lots of people are thrust together in close proximity, and it's all about making sure things flow with ease. My hard-bitten, ironic, western pride and my silent protests against the tyranny of *hygge* represented nothing but trouble in the works. Increasingly more often in those situations in which I refused to play along, it felt as if a director walked in from the wings and cried 'Cut! Please, the extra over there in the corner, we're not supposed to notice you! OK, let's take it from the top'. I took direction. And the truth is that as enough people said *How lovely!* with big enough smiles on a sufficient number of occasions, I started to think that it was all rather nice after all.

But not just that. On the east coast, I learned the art of giving compliments. I only do so when I really mean it, but still, I say them aloud and to the person concerned, without any tremor in my voice or faltering of my gaze. It's a very simple way of practising utilitarianism: the person on the receiving end of the compliment feels good, and the person who gives it feels good. An acquaintance once told me that he lived by the following rule: when you think something nice about someone, you owe it to that person to tell them – within reason, of course. I've tried to adopt that approach, and with it, to raise the happiness level in the city and country as a whole by several notches.

But bringing that approach over a mountain range to the west coast! Goodness, so many suspicious exchanged glances and whispers it has produced! 'What's she selling, did you catch what she said?' 'Isn't she a bit unkempt for a Jehovah's Witness?' I don't mean that ironically! I've had to add, like an opposite version of what we always had to assure our friend back in high school.

Out here, where there are fewer of us spread out over a wider geographical area, you're not quite as dependent on seamless and effective interaction. Is one then to understand the local variety of irony as an innate language that strengthens solidarity and serves to exclude menacing interlopers? As Einar's analysis of the western sense of humour continues, he writes that this manner of communicating 'is put to use in order to conceal one's own temperament and feelings, all whilst working as a vital means of communication and form of entertainment amidst the boredom. It's an imagination-expanding brain-twister – and it has a tactful peace-making effect, too. Schadenfreude paired with an overly critical eye, these features are utterly fundamental. If Job can't laugh at himself, as we would have done, then at least we are able to laugh at him. The majority of our comments, questions, suggestions, quotations and imitations burst forth from the joy and comedy to be found in failed, ridiculous, tragic or unfortunate situations. Your own misfortune or somebody else's, it's all the same. Everything is fair game.'

Schadenfreude as the glue that holds society together – oh, these west coast paradoxes, will they never end?! And can it really be true? Perhaps we find an answer in historian Narve Bjørgos' article 'Western Norwegian identity from a historical perspective', taken from the compulsory three-volume work *The History of the West Coast*. Aasmund Olavsson Vinje is quoted on something similar

– the westerner's ability and resolve to force himself to laugh in the face of his own tragedy: 'The westerner must make his way into the mountains and wilderness in all manner of wind and weather conditions. This sharpens his thoughts and turns them inwards. This means that he is never left helpless, conjuring up a playful quip (wit and humour) and foul feats of farm work.'

Hans E. Kinck, one of Økland's favourite authors, is depicted by Bjørgo as a foremost representation of west coast character: 'Well-defined, unredeemed contrasts set within a maudlin temperament, these are his most fundamental and persistent general characteristics,' Bjørgo writes. 'Sincere feelings and deceptive manners, horse-trader logic paired with a poetic infatuation, brutal force within a sensitive soul, yet tender in his ruthlessness – that is Kinck's westerner in a nutshell.'

It also reads like a personal ad in the local newspaper.

The entire thing culminates in the split state of mind that is so characteristic of a westerner, that which Kinck describes as the crack in the ore: 'The ability to love turns to hate, vigour to despondency, a thirst for life to an unending sense of angst, enjoyment in life to a depressive drift, thoughtfulness to a desire to rub salt in the wounds of others.'

Just how someone is supposed to make their way in life amidst this mishmash of fragmented souls of countless contrasts, humour focused on failure and horse-trading mentalities is impossible to say.

My friend from high school who never quite grasped irony rather promptly relocated to Oslo, as luck would have it. She lives there in perfect harmony, understanding every word that's said to her. I did the same thing myself, in a city life sprinkled with compliments and clenched fists. But I knew deep inside that it couldn't last. It was a little too good to be true, and that shouldn't be how things are.

Very much like Michael Corleone, *just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in*.

A Crisp Flake of Civilisation

I'd really rather not admit it, but since the middle of the 2000s, the century of the food blogger, as future historians will refer to it, when it became a categorical imperative in Norwegian homes to bake one's own crispbread, I have experienced nothing but setback after setback. It's not that my crispbread is inedible, but it's never very good. It either sticks to the baking paper or it's too thick, too tough and dense, too rough, unevenly baked, or, worst of all, chewy.

I've tried everything: spreading the mixture in all manner of ways and with all kinds of utensils, softening the seeds in boiling water before baking, experimenting with allowing the ingredients in the mixture to swell and leaving the dough to rise nice and slowly, using a silicon baking sheet, releasing the steam from of the oven midway through baking, rotating the baking tray. I've even replaced the water with Farris sparkling water for extra crispness – well actually no, I haven't tried that, I just want to show off the fact that I know it's something that people do but that it remains beneath my own dignity.

For those of you reading who don't make your own crispbread, and for those without any general familiarity with the subject, this might appear to be a trivial matter. All the same, I'd like to suggest that a truly crisp, thin crispbread represents more than just the sum of its parts in this text; it serves as a representation of the very essence of the baker concerned, as a mother, partner and future member of the local branch of the Women's Village Society. It is for this reason that so much is at stake here.

And as any particularly wise and loyal reader will long have been aware: 300 metres south, down a cart track and through two gates, or *le*, as I've learned that 'we' call them around these parts, the tastiest, crispiest, finest of all homemade crispbread is served and consumed at all hours, crispbread so perfect in every way that it would cause Scandinavian cooking sensation Trine Sandberg, mother of food bloggers up and down the country, to delete her blog in mere seconds and return to her position as senior advisor at the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, never again to return to the cookery sphere.

I've no wish to put Einar Økland on any kind of pedestal where his skills in the kitchen are concerned: he struggled with his crispbread for a long time and came close to giving up entirely, and it was also the spreading of the mixture over the baking sheet that stumped him, as is the case for so many others. That was until one day, when he discovered the optimal method and everything changed.

But first: the ingredients. We find ourselves in the white kitchen, purchased on Bygdøy allé sometime back in the 1980s and transported here, where Einar was required to knock a hole in the wall to accommodate it. He turns the fan-assisted oven to a temperature of 160°C. I was born here, he tells me, nodding in the direction of the cooker top. Right here, where the oven is, that's where my parents' yellow double bed once stood.

He pulls out the kitchen scales and mixing bowl and opens the cupboard containing the flour and seeds.

Einar Økland is capable of pulling one of the most hateful, loathsome facial expressions I've ever come across, an expression that crosses his face whenever he discusses something or someone he dislikes, and this expression appeared very suddenly as he bent down to pull something from the drawer: his eyebrows form a large V in the middle of his forehead, and his eyes burn with abhorrence.

This! he snarled, picking up a packet of wheat bran and holding it at a distance from his body.

This ruined *everything*!

I gasp. I've never baked a single batch of crispbread without adding a generous handful of wheat bran. But Einar tells me that he's used it in crispbread only to find that the batch has failed, he's used it in bread only to find that the batch has failed, and now he has an almost full pack of the stuff

that he can't get rid of. It's no good at all, and Einar is, by his own admission, a hedonist with a desire for only the very best in life. Given this, he tosses the wheat bran back inside the drawer with a thump and instead adds 200g of lovely, plump sunflower seeds to the scales. The recipe is as follows:

Einar Økland's seeded crispbread

200g sunflower seeds
50g sesame seeds
50g linseeds
50g coarse rye flour
2 tbsp fibre husk
1 tsp brown sugar
500ml cold water

He quickly combines the ingredients, then leaves the mixture to swell for 10 minutes precisely. As we wait, he thinly coats the baking paper with cooking oil. This is the first epiphany. Because what baker of crispbread *hasn't* had the experience of the baking paper inextricably sticking to the dough during baking in such a way that, with grim despair and utterly in vain, you've been forced to try to remove the paper with tweezers? By adding a little bit of oil to the baking sheet, the problem is solved.

The kitchen timer peeped: 10 minutes have passed. Now The Poet, as the villagers refer to him, begins to mix the dough vigorously with a tablespoon. After that, he places five spoonfuls of mixture on each baking sheet, before sparking debate with a satisfied look on his face, stating that whilst women would place a large clump of mixture in the middle of each sheet before spreading this meticulously towards each corner, as a representative for *man*kind, he did things in *this* particular way. This statement makes me feel rather cross and I fall silent, all too aware that I've always placed my mixture in the middle of the sheet in one large clump, as described. And then came the highlight: from inside a drawer, he fetches his prized spreading tool: a dough scraper. To my great delight I realise that I have one just like it in my own drawer at home, picked up on my last visit to Clas Ohlson.

And that's not all. Here follows the third significant, and, for me, most conclusive piece of wisdom gleaned that evening, which pertains to the spreading of the crispbread mixture: water. I watch Einar Økland looking just like their cat whenever he's curled up in Liv Marit's lap being stroked – chin and cheeks upwards, eyes like two clefts, ears drawn back – as he talks about the paradigm shift involved in discovering that if you use water when spreading the mixture outwards, it won't seep into the mixture, as one might automatically assume, but will instead remain on the surface before evaporating in the oven. The dough scraper glides across the mixture with the lightest touch, the crispbread becoming smooth and even and as thinly-spread as the plumpest of the sunflower seeds.

Feeling slightly nervous, I'm given responsibility for one of the baking trays, and each of us smooths out our mixture. But how easy it is! I dip the scraper into water and it slides across the surface, as if I were taking a plasterer's tool to a jellyfish.

But afterwards, just before baking, when it comes to dividing each of our trays into squares and I score my mixture differently to Einar (after great deliberation), I catch him watching me at work and realise that a dramatic yet silent conflict is ensuing behind me. Something he shared with me on another evening dawns on me, the fact that he'd had no interest whatsoever in sport as a young man, but that he was nonetheless unbeatable when it came to the standing long jump. 'And do you know why? Because I was much more capable of relaxing than the others!' Sitting at the time, he demonstrated just how he was able to sink right down, his entire body relaxed, only to leap upwards

with explosive energy. ‘I can command my largest muscle groups to relax at will, even today!’ And now, as he watches me dividing up my crispbread, I cast a glance back over my shoulder and see that his whole body is as heavy as a sack of flour on the floor, his face expressionless, his eyelids heavy, and I realise that he’s actively willing himself to relax in order to prevent himself from commenting negatively on my contribution.

We place the baking trays in the oven, on the highest and lowest shelves, then set the timer for one hour.

As they bake in the oven, Liv Marit serves us blueberries from the garden with vanilla custard, and Einar goes downstairs to fetch some white wine. Hoi! he cries from downstairs moments later, come and have a look at this! We run down the stairs. He’s standing at the window, pointing at the moon. Suspended in the sky, it looms large and full and white just above the mountaintop. That’s what’s so incredible about living out here: there is barely any light to speak of, not a single streetlamp. It’s pitch black outside in the evenings, and never in my life have I seen a night sky like it. I’ve never seen one quite like it since, either, not until tonight. Einar talks about cycling in the moonlight: it might be black around one corner, but around the next there could be sudden, silvery shimmering light all around. OK, ‘silvery shimmering light’ were my words, not his.

We sit by the fire, under the light of the moon, and with a sense of gentle, happy hubris instigated by fine wine and the successful spreading of the crispbread mixture, I take a deep breath and pose a question that I know he’ll think is silly.

Aristotle thinks that happiness is found in realising one’s potential, but what do you think?

I have no appreciation for realising one’s potential in the social sense, he replies in forthright manner.

What do you mean by that?

Gaining the attention and recognition of others by doing so. Inspiring others to say: Gosh, you really realised your potential there!

No, no, of course not.

Forgetting oneself is always better than the reverse. But happiness… I could never picture myself associating with people who have no tendency towards depression.

But doesn’t one need to be susceptible to depression in order to be susceptible to happiness? Doesn’t a person need to know one in order to feel the other?

Yes, but people who are happy all of the time are hard to spend time with.

Do such people exist?

There are people out there who pretend to be, at the very least.

But isn’t there a general consensus that they are simply tragic figures?

Well, yes.

But is happiness something that you relate to at all?

No. Only in a negative sense. I do my best to avoid catastrophes and setbacks and shame and missteps, but I don’t go around thinking ‘everything will be wonderful if I just succeed at this one thing.’

No, but what about a notion of happiness as the greatest good because it’s the only thing that is a goal in itself, and not a means to achieving something else?

Let me turn that on its head for a moment: the greatest good is something that I’ve experienced many a time in my life. And so yes, was that *happiness*, that feeling? I might have sat there feeling quite empty at the time and had that good experience without realising.

You talk about how when you write, you often have a feeling of being ‘transported’. That sounds like a so-called ‘flow’, which is closely related to feelings of happiness. And the fact that you wrote – and wrote at length, it must be said – must relate to happiness somehow.

Yes, there's no doubting the fact that some kind of hedonism is involved there. I do read things I've written on occasion and think: gosh, did I really write that? That's good. That doesn't make me particularly self-centred, though. If anything, I'm disillusioned with any sense of self.

What do you mean by that?

My ambitions aren't of this world: I'm not swayed by competition. I don't have any ambitions beyond having a good life. I'm an egoist and a hedonist, but that doesn't show. I'm a shirker. I've avoided a number of pitfalls simply by doing what I wanted to do in life. I'm so restless, you see.

You're restless?

Yes, I don't wander around twiddling my thumbs, but neither do I ever settle with anything.

I'd always thought it was Liv Marit who was restless while you were happy to sit and leaf through endpapers all day long.

No, I might all of a sudden decide to bake buns before returning to what I was doing. I couldn't do that if I was a teacher. I've a practical disposition, but I'm not a carpenter or a craftsman.

The house is full of your carpentry work.

Yes, but I only do those jobs to avoid things getting any worse. And the world is a scandal.

That's true.

So I like to shift from one thing to the next. That doesn't mean that I'm disorganised. I think that instructions for wisdom are a dead end. Individuals find their own solutions, or the solutions find them. Instructions resemble training programmes, whether in sport or in therapy. If you're sufficiently unwell, it might do you some good, but… I've used Freud's method, as I said. I am my own therapist.

I get that you don't exactly book in for a session with yourself, but how exactly does this type of therapy work in practice?

Generally, I realise it in hindsight. I've never said 'now I'm going to do something about things', but I've realised that it'd do me some good to sort myself out. And the most important thing is to be independent. I've been an extremist when it comes to independence.

In what sense?

I don't want to live up to the expectations of others and take on responsibilities that I know I'll abandon, whether that's a permanent job or what have you – though, at the same time, I've stuck at this job I've created for myself. I stick to my promises, but I don't like to sign up to something I don't like. 'That's often just how life has to be,' some sensible folks might say, but I've managed to avoid that sort of thing. And one reason for this, among others, is that I haven't felt any sense of failure when doing so. Some might call that self-confidence, but I don't need much confidence… I'm very beholden to the things I enjoy, you see. Friends and acquaintances. I'm not worried if I have friends who are slightly ridiculous or behave a little badly from time to time, it's all fine by me. And vice versa, if I haven't enjoyed a job or rubbed along well with the people I've worked with, I've stepped away from it. I've opted for geographical solutions over letters of complaint.

So that's your reason for living out here?

You could say that. A lot of it has to do with financial resources. Because I was so poor, I didn't want to owe anybody anything. I wanted to do things by myself, live a cheap and simple life, manage my own finances, not find myself dependent on banks and other external organisations. I don't need much to get by. I don't have any desire to owe a debt of gratitude to anyone. It's a little neurotic. Sensible words uttered by Dag Solstad himself!

That doesn't surprise me.

He said it in passing – he understood: 'To finally see an end to this financial neurosis.' And my God, that's exactly what I've experienced, financial neurosis! I'd never heard of such a thing before, nobody said a word about it at psychology school!

Yes, he'd no doubt experienced it for himself.

Yes, the very same, poverty-stricken parents who passed away, it wasn't until I was fifty years old that I realised how much we had in common. But there you go, that's often the way. It's certainly best to be satisfied. In a society that wishes dissatisfaction and toil and competition upon us, it's my greatest revenge; I'm living a good life, I'm satisfied. Then you've tricked society. That way, you've won.

Yes, it makes a person quite invincible.

But I can't make a model of it. I've never believed that if I only just did this or that or the other thing, that life would be good. There are any number of resigned folks who've said that minimising pain is as far as any individual can take things.

Epicurus believed there were two strategies for achieving pleasure: one involves fulfilling your desires, and the other involves eliminating your desires in such a way that there isn't much to fulfil.

I'd prefer to define it differently. Because he describes it as if that person is one and the same, and unchanging. I'm not entirely convinced that's the case. I believe more in the idea of free-flowing molecules, and that each situation establishes connections or fragments anew. It's like that thing they say about the structure of the human mind: there are no fixed links, but new connections can be formed in the blink of an eye, whether due to hormones or after some other kind of external catastrophe. No one is walking around with a brain that resembles a static work of crochet. Others say that personality is a spectrum of roles. You select the one that fits. That doesn't mean that you suffer a breakdown or have no character, it's variable and in flux. But there are, of course, certain roles that you will never assume. But this is pointless. It doesn't particularly worry me. Either way, I've taken good care of my own strengths, I'd say. Used them to my advantage and not in a way that harms others, even though that could have been the case.

What strengths are you referring to?

Hehe.

Come on, share your thoughts.

Hmmm… I'm very pluralistic. And multi-sensitive.

And how do you use those characteristics to positive ends?

I see many things at once. I'm not narrow-minded. And that costs me nothing. I don't go around mulling things over for long periods of time, I function on a very quick rotation. And that's what I've written about. My work strikes a blow for individuals as complex and varied creatures. That's generally what I believe to be true. And I've noticed that I am that way myself, though I'm not troubled by that fact. I don't believe that I will discover my style and form. Quite to the contrary, I think I ought to retain my various impulses. I clashed with my friend Espen Haavardsholm on that particular point. 'Einar, you're too partial to your own whims!', he said to me. But if I were to turn that on its head: 'I'm very critical of my ideas, because I'm only going to use a few of them'. Well, don't you accept gifts when they land squarely in your lap? He saw that as a sign of weakness, things were supposed to be focused and in harmony, as far as he was concerned. It's easy for me to have several interests and I'm glad that I do, it makes life varied and entertaining and interesting. And I think that I can see something that others don't see. Though perhaps I'm imagining that. I have a hypothesis that I am not extraordinary in any way, shape or form. I would much rather be the person who is ordinary in the greatest possible number of ways than the person who is ordinary in just one way and nothing else beyond that. Yes… I think, in any case, that happiness as a mental state or existential end point, it's this kind of language that has led folks astray, it's a linguistic fallacy. There might well be positive situations that bring satisfaction and which are overlooked, or notions of these as a prerequisite to having a personality that links with such feelings. I don't have a fixed theory of personality.

But those are your strengths. What about your weaknesses?

My weaknesses? Yes, those are half the fun. I don't even know where to begin.

With something serious?

No, well, many are obvious. They might be so serious that they're impossible to conceal. Hehe. I remember Eldrid Lunden. We were sitting in a car with Hartvig Kiran, and he was complaining about the fact that he had such short fingers. Ha, that's hardly your worst feature! Eldrid said. Look at your nose! I'm not sure I want to be reminded of my worst features. I'm not sure whether you're referring to social aspects, or those relating to personality?

No, I…

It is a weakness to see things clearly and to speak with simplicity and precision, and to do so too often. As a combination, that isn't good at all.

Well, sure. But that could hardly be considered 'serious'.

I'm very anti-social. I don't often mix with others and…

Yes, but that's very superficial, and not really a weakness, as such.

Indeed. The thing that I'm least satisfied with is my voice.

Oh?

Yes, very much so. I don't like hearing it.

I think you do an awful lot of talking for somebody who doesn't like the sound of their own voice.

I don't have an attractive, pleasant voice. I'm very aware of that fact. And in this regard, I have a weakness that has been a great blessing to me: I neither sing nor play any instrument myself. I am simply a consumer. It's a major flaw that I'm very pleased about, because I've seen those people who enjoy playing music and singing, but who don't quite cut the mustard. I've never had that need myself. But that's a major weakness.

Given that you describe this as a weakness, you were very swift to turn it into something positive.

But I *have* turned it into something positive! I'm not troubled by it in the slightest.

Other weaknesses?

I don't think this personally, but I know it's true to say that I'm very critical. You see, I always feel compelled to comment on things, and I always see how something could have been done better. But I don't see that as a negative, more of an impulse to collaborate.

So, you're only ever constructive in your criticism?

Seen from my point of view, yes, hehe. I've no interest in making anyone feel bad, in any case. But neither do I get any enjoyment from flattering people. I can support people if they are worthy of support, but I won't bother helping anyone who I'd rather see the back of.

You've written that there is an unwritten rule among authors that nobody should praise anyone else unless they truly mean it. It's a rule that I try to live by, but it seems that nobody else bothers.

Yes, it's a detestable, insufferable habit. I don't go around telling people: I'm running from this situation! But I do. Otherwise I'm afraid that they'll see what I really think.

It seems that you have an awful lot of strong dislikes!

You're right, I do! But I don't suffer through them; I avoid the things I dislike. But you're asking about happiness… I have very little affinity with philosophers. I can do that kind of thing myself. They were only writers and authors, and they take no responsibility for anything. If I were to say, 'I want to go and hang myself', they'd say, 'well, it's up to you and your own interpretation of the situation'. Some child psychologists claim that young people have thought through the most important philosophical questions by the time they've turned five or seven or whatever age it is.

Not to blow my own trumpet, but that's my impression too, based on my own experiences. I was intuitive and sensible back then, it's only later in life that everything's turned to nonsense.

Yes, I didn't have the articulation and grasp of concepts that I have now, but I had a good relationship to the truth and reality and life and death. But I felt very alone on that front. And I was relieved when I read that claim, it was simply there, without any fuss being made about the fact. Nobody has rejected it, either – they simply don't know what to do about it. No. When it comes to happiness, I want to talk about sleep. Sleep is soothing, problem-solving and entertaining all at once.

You're a sound sleeper, then?

Sound? I'm a *joyful* sleeper! Quite to my family's embitterment, too, they're so envious. I eagerly anticipate going to bed at night, and I look forward to getting up again. But it's like the proverb states, where such happiness is concerned: these things are best left unmentioned. It doesn't mean that I haven't been unhappy, or that I can't become so at a moment's notice. 'It depends what your intentions are,' some of the folks in the village might say in such a case. 'You can't prepare for every eventuality,' others might respond. 'No, we can't control everything,' others might remark.

When you talk about the other villagers, it often sounds a little like a Greek chorus, but with you delivering the replies.

Of course! The Greek chorus wouldn't exist without someone to call upon it and to practise with its members.

All of a sudden: the kitchen timer. Einar rushes to the oven. This is where the great battle will be fought. He opens the oven door and retreats as a large cloud of steam shrouds his face. I have my misgivings as I stand at a safe distance: that much steam still in the oven? Einar sticks a hand in the oven and pinches one corner. I hold my breath. He breaks off a piece.

The sound of crispbread that has realised its potential.