

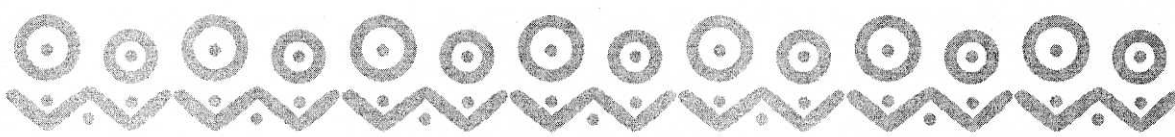
The
TRICKING
of FREYA

Christina Sunley



St. Martin's Press

New York



1

You want a bit of Birdie?

Try this, a June afternoon, early 1970s, on the beach at Gimli: Birdie in a skirted turquoise swimsuit and cat-eye sunglasses, lounging legs crossed at the ankles on her aluminum chaise. Just past forty and still glamorous, on her good days. Not a movie star but a kind of star you don't have a name for. You're just past eight and far from glamorous. Birdie compares you, kindly, to an egret as you stride the beach, your legs long and skinny as stilts, your wispy white-blond hair tufting in the wind, your eyes a blue so light they startle.

"See?" Birdie is dangling something in her hand, something small and glistening, jewel-like. You've played this game before. She's going to throw it and you're going to catch it. By mouth. You stand a few feet from the edge of the blanket, bare toes clenching sand, arms swinging restlessly at your sides. Your eyes fix on the prize.

"One . . ." Birdie teases. "Two . . ."

"Come on!" you shriek.

"Three!" Birdie tosses the thing in the air. It's a single mandarin orange segment, straight from the tin. You're a dog, no, a seal, a trained dolphin leaping up, snapping your jaw, swallowing the slippery minnow whole. Orange syrup dribbles down your chin. You smack your lips in citrus triumph.

Birdie claps and laughs, claps and laughs. "Bravo, *elskan!* Bravo!" *Elskan*

means love in Icelandic. Like honey or dear. Birdie always calls you *elskan*. Then tosses you another mandarin fish.

Gimli is Icelandic for heaven. Except this Gimli isn't in heaven or even Iceland, but on Lake Winnipeg. Manitoba, Canada. Birdie lives in Gimli with your *amma* Sigga. *Amma* means grandmother, *afi* means grandfather. Your *afi* was a hundred and one years old when you were born except he was already dead. Some words are Icelandic and some are English. *Mama* is the same in both. Your mama and Birdie share a mother so they're sisters. You don't have a sister or a brother or a father you remember.

Every year from your eighth on, you and your mother take the train from Windsor, Connecticut, to Grand Central to Winnipeg to spend the summer on the lake at Gimli. With Your People. In an old white farmhouse with song-yellow trim and book-lined walls. The house is called *Oddi*—in Iceland even houses have names, and some in Gimli do too—after a place where famous writers lived, like Saemundur the Learned, a wizard who rode the back of the devil disguised as a seal. And Snorri Sturluson, esteemed historian and saga scribe, was raised at Oddi too. He's one of your ancestors.

Birdie says writers run in the family, all the way back to Iceland, to the greatest Viking poet, Egil Skallagrimsson. You descend from him.

And your grandfather's uncle, the famous farmer-poet Pall.

And of course your grandfather Olafur.

"And you?"

"And me," Birdie admits.

Me too? you want to ask but don't. The ancestor-poets race through your mind in a line, crossing frozen ocean, one after the other, words flying off their heels in a spray of ice, skating all the way back to Iceland, Egil and Snorri and Pall, your grandfather Olafur, who died before you were born, your Auntie Birdie.

"Why not Mama too?"

"It's something you're born with. Your mother can sing and play the piano, embroider and knit, a very talented woman in her way. But she's no poet."

"Does she want to be?"

"Hardly."

You can't imagine not wanting it. Words live inside you, rearranging

