**Svava Jakobsdottir**  
(b. 1930)  
Iceland

Born in eastern Iceland, Svava Jakobsdottir also spent part of her childhood in Saskatchewan, Canada, where her father held a position as minister of the Icelandic Lutheran Church. She lived in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, for part of high school and college, but returned to North America to study English literature at Smith College (Massachusetts). Continuing her literary studies at Somerville College, Oxford, and at Upsala University in Sweden, she concentrated on Old Icelandic and modern Swedish literatures.

From the study of literature, Jakobsdottir turned to its creation, publishing her first collection of stories, Twelve Women, in 1965. She has also published a novel and several other collections of short stories, as well as three plays and several radio scripts. In her writing, Jakobsdottir frequently focuses on women’s roles and expectations in contemporary society.

Jakobsdottir has also served in several capacities within the political and diplomatic profession: first in Iceland’s Foreign Ministry and later as an elected member of the Icelandic Parliament, a delegate to the United Nations, and a member of the Nordic Committee whose goal was the promotion of gender equality. After serving several terms in office, she gave up her political career to be a full-time writer. She is married to a folklorist, Jon Hnefill Adalsteinsson, and has one son.

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**A STORY FOR CHILDREN**

For as long as she could remember, she had resolved to be true to her nature and devote all her energies to her home and her children. There were several children now and from morning till night she was swamped with work, doing the household chores and caring for the children. She was now preparing supper and waiting for the potatoes to boil. A Danish women’s magazine lay on the kitchen bench as if it had been tossed there accidentally; in fact, she kept it there on purpose and sneaked a look at it whenever she got a chance. Without letting the pot of potatoes out of her mind she picked up the magazine and skimmed over Fru Ensom’s advice column. This was by no means the column that seemed most interesting to her, but it was usually short. It was possible that it would last just long enough so that the potatoes would be boiling when she finished reading it. The first letter in the column was short: Dear Fru Ensom, I have never lived for anything other than my children and have done everything for them. Now I am left alone and they never visit me. What should I do? Fru Ensom answered: Do more for them.

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Fru Ensom  
Danish: Mrs. Lonesome.
is with his hands. Just as Sjöandi raised the saw up to her head the image of the children's father came into her mind. She saw him in front of her just as he would appear in a little while: on the threshold of the front door with his briefcase in one hand and his hat in the other. She never saw him except in the front doorway, either on his way out or on his way in. She had once been able to imagine him outside the house among other people or at the office, but now, after the children had been born, they had moved into a new house and he into a new office, and she had lost her bearings. He would come home soon and she still hadn't started frying the fish. The blood had now begun to flow down her head. Sjöandi had gotten through with the saw. It seemed to be going well, and fairly quickly. Now and then he stopped as if he were measuring with his eyes just how big the hole had to be. Blood spurted into his face and a curse crossed his lips. He nodded his head and the young brother went immediately and got the mop bucket. They placed it under the hole and soon it was half full. The procedure was over at the exact moment the father appeared in the doorway. He stood motionless for a while and pondered the sight which presented itself to him: his wife tied up, with a hole in her head, the eldest son holding a gray brain in his hand, the curious group of children huddled together, and only one pot on the stove.

"Kids! How can you think of doing this when it's already suppertime?"

He picked up the piece of his wife's skull and snapped it back in just as she was about to bleed to death. Then he took over and soon the children were busy tidying up after themselves. He wiped most of the blood stains off the walls himself before he checked on the pot on the stove. There was a suspicious sound coming from it. The water had boiled away and he took the pot off the stove and set it on the metal counter next to the sink. When he saw the half-cleaned fish in the sink he realized that his wife had still not gotten up from the chair. Puzzled, he knitted his brow. It wasn't usual for her to be sitting up when there was so much to do. He went over to her and looked at her attentively. He noticed then that they had forgotten to unite her.

When he had freed her they looked into each other's eyes and smiled. Never was their harmony more deeply felt than when their eyes met in mutual pride over the children.

"Silly urchins," he said, and his voice was filled with the concern and affection that he felt for his family.

Soon afterward they sat down at the table. Everyone except Sjöandi. He was in his room studying the brain under a microscope. Meanwhile, his mother kept his supper warm for him in the kitchen. They were all hungry and took to their food briskly; this was an unusually late supper. There was no chance to be seen in the mother. She had washed her hair and combed it over the cut before she sat down. Her mild expression displayed the patience and self-denial usual at mealtimes. This expression had first appeared during those years when she served her children first and kept only the smallest and most meager piece for herself. Now the children were big enough so that they could take the best pieces themselves and the expression was actually unnecessary, but it had become an inseparable part of the meal. Before the meal was over Sjöandi came in and sat down. The mother went to get his supper. In the kitchen she boned the fish thoroughly before putting it on the plate. When she picked up the garbage pail to throw the bones away she let out a scream. The brain was right on top of the pail.

The rest of the family rushed out as soon as her scream reached the dining room. The father was in the lead and was quick to discover what was wrong when he saw
She was moaning and paused a moment and said that she herself was to blame. No
one had asked her to lie down there. She smiled as she got up because what he had
said wasn’t quite right. Her heart had told her to lie there. She had heard the voice
clearly and now, as she watched him walk down the street, the voice spoke to her again
and said that she could still be glad that she had softened his first steps out into the
world. Later on they all left one after the other and she was left alone. She no longer
had anything to do in the children’s rooms and she would often sit in the easy chair
in the living room now. If she looked up, the jar on the shelf came into view, where
the brain had stood all these years and, in fact, was almost completely forgotten. Cus-

tom had made it commonplace. Sometimes she pondered over it. As far as she could
see, it had kept well. But she got less and less pleasure out of looking at it. It reminded
her of her children. And gradually she felt that a change was again taking place within
herself, but she couldn’t bring herself to mention it to her husband. She saw him
so seldom lately, and whenever he appeared at home she got up from the chair in a
hurry, as if a guest had arrived. One day he brought up the question himself of whether
she wasn’t feeling well. Pleased, she looked up, but when she saw that he was figur-
ing the accounts at the same time, she became confused in answering (she had never
been particularly good in figuring). In her confusion she said she didn’t have enough
to do. He looked at her amazed and said there were enough things to be done if peo-
ple only used their brain. Of course he said this without thinking. He knew very well
that she didn’t have a brain, but she nevertheless took him literally. She took the jar
down from the shelf, brought it to the doctor and asked if he thought the brain was
still useable. The doctor didn’t exclude the possibility of its being of some use, but on
the other hand, all organs atrophied after being preserved in alcohol for a long time.
Therefore it would be debatable whether it would pay to move it at all; in addition,
the nervi cerebri had been left in rather poor shape, and the doctor asked whether
some clumsy dolt had actually done the surgery.

"He was so little then, the poor thing," the woman said.

"By the way," said the doctor, "I recall that you had a highly developed heart."

The woman avoided the doctor’s inquiring look and a faint pang of conscience
gripped her. And she whispered to the doctor what she hadn’t dared hint of to
her husband:

"My heart’s voice has fallen silent."

As she said this she realized why she had come. She unbuttoned her blouse, took
it off and laid it neatly on the back of the chair. Her bra went the same way. Then
she stood ready in front of the doctor, naked from the waist up. He picked up a
scalpel and cut, and a moment later he handed her the gleaming, red heart. Care-
fully he placed it in her palm and her hands closed around it. Its hesitant beat re-
sembled the fluttering of a bird in a cage. She offered to pay the doctor, but he shook
his head and, seeing that she was having difficulty, helped her get dressed. He then
offered to call her a taxi since she had so much to carry. She refused, stuffed the
brain jar into her shopping bag and slipped the bag over her arm. Then she left with
the heart in her hands.

Now began the long march from one child to the next. She first went to see her
sons, but found none of them at home. They had all gotten a berth on the ship of state

and it was impossible to tell when they would return. Furthermore, they never stayed
in home port long enough for there to be time for anything other than begetting
children. She withdrew from the bitterness of her daughters-in-law and went to see
her oldest daughter, who opened the door herself. A look of astonishment and re-
vulsion came over her face when she saw the slimy, red heart pulsating in her moth-
er’s palm, and in her consternation, she slammed the door. This was of course an
involuntary reaction and she quickly opened the door again, but she made it clear to
her mother that she didn’t care at all about her heart; and she wasn’t sure it would
go with the new furniture in the living room. The mother then realized that it was
pointless to continue the march, because her younger daughters had even newer fur-
niture. So she went home. There she filled a jar with alcohol and dropped the heart
into it. A deep sucking sound, like a gapst within a human breast, could be heard as
the heart sank to the bottom. And now they each stood on the shelf in their own jars,
her brain and her heart. But no one came to view them. And the children never
came to visit. Their excuse always was that they were too busy. But the truth was
that they didn’t like the sterile smell that clung to everything in the house.

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Translated by
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nervi cerebri Latin: cerebral nerves.