

## HREINN

"Have you ever wondered how words began?" Monica asked.

"I have," Stefan responded.

"Did you come up with any theories?"

"I'm afraid not," Stefan said. "The most I could think of was that perhaps words are what we make up to gather up the silence. That's not much of a theory."

"I have a theory, Monica," I said. "Do you want to hear it?"

The class settled down as if they were expecting a story. "I think words began in blood," I said, looking around to see if my classmates were starting to giggle. No one laughed, so I decided to go on. But not before Jeremy said, "Strange. I thought words came out of the dictionary."

"You must be joking," said Susana. "Everyone knows there were words before dictionaries. Why do you think words began in blood, Hreinn?"

"It just seems to make sense to me," I said. "Look, at first there were no words. They began to grow very slowly in a large body. One day they flew out through the lips and the mouth."

"Why?" Marco asked.

"I know," said Susana. "The person wanted to say something to another person."

"So what came first?" Stefan asked. "The wanting to talk to another person or the words?"

"I think the words," I responded. "It was only after a while that people began to arrange the words in such a way that they could talk to each other with some sense."

"So could we say that no words have meaning by themselves, but only when they are arranged together?" Stefan asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I can just say one word, 'fire,' and you better get out of the house."

"Why did words begin only in one body, Hreinn?" Christina asked, as she began to circle the room.

"I guess because it was that body that was appointed," I responded.

Mr. Richards had been saying nothing. He had been sitting at his desk looking at some of his papers. Now he entered the conversation. "Hreinn, is there anything that happened here at school or at home that makes you think your theory is right?"

"Yes," I quickly responded. "When I was in the slow learners class trying to learn English, I thought we sounded like a bunch of squawking animals in the forest. The words had nothing to do with what I could understand. They only meant something to me when I came to your class and began talking about my ideas. I guess you could say that the words hadn't been born yet in my mouth."

"Do tiny babies make the sounds of language?" Monica asked.

"Not at the beginning," Mr. Richards responded. "At least I don't think so. I know they make signs, but I'm not sure you could say they speak a language. But very soon they're saying words like 'mama,' 'now,' and 'cup.'"

"And they talk to their feet," Susana added. "I remember Tanya when she was a little baby. She used to make wonderful sounds in her crib. It did look like she talked to her feet and her toys. I could always tell when she was happy and when she wanted something."

"Well, if that's so, isn't that a kind of language?" Stefan asked.

"Maybe it would be more accurate to say it's a preparation for what we call language," Mr. Richards said.

"You mean first there are sounds that communicate, then words and then the words turn into sentences?" Jeremy asked.

"I think what happens is that the words fill up with what's happening to you?" Stefan said.

"You don't only speak about what's happening to you," I said. "You could also speak about the world."

"I'm not sure about that Hreinn. How would you ever know if our language describes the world? Maybe language is something we made up to talk to each other and has nothing to do with the world."

"Are they the only possibilities?" Mr. Richards asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Richards," I said. "I wish I did."

"Your theory about words coming from blood makes sense to me, Hreinn," Monica said. "I guess you could say the words are the blood of our ideas. Words tell us what we think."

At this point I noticed Mr. Richards looked like he might have a bad headache. He kept putting his hand to his forehead. Then he got up from his desk and walked over to us very slowly looking down at the ground. Finally he said, "It's possible, I guess that words take on meaning only when they relate to what people experience."

"What's that mean, Mr. Richards?" Marco asked.

"Words express what's happening to you," he said very softly, as if he might be afraid someone might hear him. "There's a connection between language and experience."

"What's experience?" Jeremy asked.

"It's like having a good meal with your mother and father and talking about a lot of things. That's experience," I said.

"Or going to school and taking a test," Gabriela added. "That's experience."

"Or having an idea and sharing it with a friend," Stefan said.

"Maybe that's how we make sense of stories," Christina added.

"What do you mean, Christina?" I asked.

"Take the story that Monica and Susana read to us the other day in class," Christina said. "It made sense because it had something to do with what we have experienced, or imagined, or hoped. If the words had nothing to do with our every day life, the words would sound like a bunch of babbling."

"I like words," Susana said. "When I write them down in my notebook, often they take on a shape. Sometimes, they even take on the shapes of people."

I was dying to ask her which people, but decided against it.

"Words help me to see what I think," Marco said. "When I begin to write an essay, I never know what I'm going to say. Often when I've finished, I look at the essay and say to myself, 'That's interesting,' almost as if someone else wrote it."

"But you did write it," I said.

"I put the words on the page. I just don't know where they came from in the first place. I know I didn't think them up before writing."

"Marco, are you still wondering where language came from in the first place?" asked Mr. Richards.

"I don't think that's what Marco is worried about," Gabriela said. "I think he is wondering where the words come from when he writes his essays for homework."

"Not just the words, but the way the words are arranged," Marco added. "How do I know what order to put the words in and how is it that the order turns out to make sense?"

"It's a mystery," I said.

"There are no mysteries, Hreinn," Jeremy said. "There are only problems. What appears as a mystery to us now, will turn out to be a problem in time. We will solve it in one way or another and then we'll understand."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Why not?" Jeremy asked.

"Because there are things that we don't know and don't even have a way of finding out about for sure?" I said.

"Like what?" asked Jeremy.

"How could we ever find out if there is a connection between our words and the world?" I said.

"Hreinn's right," said Monica. "How would we ever be sure whether our language describes what is outside of us. Maybe language is just something people invented to talk to each other."

Jeremy just stared at Monica and me. He didn't say a word, but turned and went back to his desk. After he was seated, he said, as if to himself, "I like what words refer to. I like the ideas they express."

"We've already talked about that, Jeremy. No sense repeating yourself," said Christina.

"We really didn't talk about ideas," Jeremy responded. "If a story doesn't have good ideas in it, it's like having a sandwich with nothing between the two slices of bread. Empty."

Ann Margaret Sharp