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SNOW

If only Grandfather had been with me. He always knew what to do. I stumbled across the endless Melrakkaslétta plain, hungry, exhausted and smeared in blood, and wondered what he would have done. Perhaps he would simply have filled his pipe and let the pool of blood disappear beneath the falling snow, watching calmly, to make sure no one else would find it.

Whenever a problem arose, he would fill his pipe, and as soon as our minds were woozy with the sweet smoke, things wouldn't seem so bad any more. Perhaps Grandfather would have decided not to tell anyone about it. He would have gone home and not given it another thought. Because snow is snow, and blood is blood. And if someone vanishes without a trace, it's first and foremost their problem. Next to the entrance to our little house, Grandfather would have tapped his pipe against the sole of his boot, the embers would have faded into the snow, and that would have been the end of that.

But I was completely alone up there, Grandfather was 131 kilometres away, and it was a long time since he'd been able to roam the snowy hinterland of the Melrakkaslétta. So there wasn't any pipe smoke either, and because it was snowing, and absolutely everything was white apart from the red pool of blood, and there wasn't a sound to be heard,

I felt as though I were the last person in the entire world. And when you're the last person in the entire world, being able to tell someone else about it makes you happy. So that's why I told after all, and that's how the problems started.

Grandfather was a hunter and a shark catcher. Not any more, though. Now he spent his days sitting in an armchair in the nursing home in Húsavík, staring out of the window – yet without seeing, because when I asked if he was looking at something in particular, he either didn't answer, or mumbled and gave me a strange look, as though I were interrupting him. His facial expression was usually morose nowadays, the corners of his mouth pointed downwards and his lips were pressed together, so that you couldn't even tell he was missing four teeth at the top, the front ones. He couldn't bite anyone now. Sometimes he asked me what I was doing here, and he asked in a curt way, and I would explain that my name was Kalmann, that I was his grandson and had come to visit him, like every week. So no reason to worry. But Grandfather gave me these distrustful looks and then stared back out of the window, completely sullen. He didn't believe me. Then I didn't say anything more, because Grandfather had the expression of someone who had just had their pipe confiscated, and for that reason it was better I said nothing.

A nurse had told me to be patient with Grandfather, as though he were a small, sulky child. I would have to explain things to him again and again, she said, that was completely normal and how life was, because those who are lucky enough to reach an advanced age become, in a certain sense, little children again, and need help with eating, getting dressed, doing up shoelaces and so on. Some even need nappies again! Everything starts to go backwards.

Like a boomerang. I know what that is. It's a weapon made of wood that you fling into the air, then it arcs around and flies back, cutting off your head if you don't pay damn good attention.

I wondered how things would be for me if I reached Grandfather's age. Because things with me had never really gone forwards. They suspected that the wheels in my head ran backwards. That happened sometimes. Or that I'd never progressed beyond the level of a six-year-old. I wasn't fussed. Or that my head contains nothing but fish soup, or that it's hollow, like a buoy. Or that my wires aren't connected properly. Or that I have the IQ of a sheep. And yet sheep can't do an IQ test. "Run, Forrest, run!" they used to shout during sports lessons, laughing themselves silly. That's from this movie where the hero is mentally disabled but can run fast and play ping-pong well.

I can't run fast, I can't play ping-pong, and back then I didn't even know what an IQ was. Grandfather knew, but he said it was just a number used to separate people into black and white, a unit of measurement like time or money, a capitalist invention, even though we're all equal, and then I lost track of what he was saying, and Grandfather explained that only Today counts, the Here, the Now. Me, here with him. Nothing more. I understood that. He asked what I would do if I was out at sea and storm clouds gathered. The answer was simple: Sail back to the harbour as quickly as possible. He asked what I would wear if it was raining. Easy: Rain clothes. What I would do if someone had fallen from a horse and wasn't moving. Child's play: Get help. Grandfather was satisfied with my answers and said I was clearly of firm mind.

I agreed.

But sometimes I didn't get what people meant. It happened. And on those occasions, I preferred to say nothing. There was little point. No one could explain things like Grandfather.

Luckily, I then got a computer with an internet connection, and all at once I knew a lot more than I used to. Because the internet knows everything. It knows when your birthday is and whether you've forgotten your mother's. It even knows when you last went to the toilet or rubbed one out. At least that's what Nói, my best friend, said when the thing with the Quota King happened. But exactly what it was that was wrong in my head – that, no one could explain to me. A medical bungle, my mother once said, back when she still lived in Raufarhöfn. It just slipped out, probably when I shot and dissected Elínborg's cat because I'd learned how from Grandfather and wanted to practise. My mother got very angry, because Elínborg complained to her and threatened to call the police, and when my mother got angry, she stopped speaking and *did* something instead, like taking out the rubbish. Open the lid of the outside container, heave in the bag and slam it shut – and open it again and slam it again. Bang!

But anyone who believes I had a difficult childhood because there's fish soup in my head is plain wrong. Grandfather took over the thinking for me. He looked out for me. But that was back then.

Now Grandfather looks at me with dull, watery eyes and remembers nothing. And maybe I'll disappear too, when Grandfather's no longer here, be buried with him, like a Viking chief's horse. That's what they used to do, the Vikings; bury the horse with the chief. They belonged together. So the Viking chief would be able to ride

across the bridge of Bifröst to Valhalla. That's quite an entrance!

But the thought made me nervous. Being buried, I mean. Trapped beneath the coffin lid. You'd get claustrophobic, and then you'd be better off dead. That's why I usually didn't stay long in the care home. In Húsavík I could at least get something decent to eat. Sölvi's filling station cafe had the best burgers for 1,845 krona. I always had the right change, always, and Sölvi knew that too, he no longer even bothered to count the coins. But sometimes I didn't enjoy the burger because I was sad that Grandfather no longer knew who I was. And if *he* no longer knew, how on earth was *I* supposed to?

I had Grandfather to thank for everything. My life. If he hadn't been there, my mother would have stuck me in a home for the mentally disabled, where I would've been abused and raped. I would be living in Reykjavík now, lonely and neglected. In Reykjavík the traffic is chaotic, and the air is dirty, and the people are stressed. Ugh, yuck, that's not for me. I had Grandfather to thank that I was somebody, here, in Raufarhöfn. He had shown me everything, taught me everything a person needs to know to survive. He took me hunting and out to sea, even though I wasn't much help in the beginning. Out hunting in particular I was like the village idiot, stumbling and wheezing, and Grandfather told me I was tripping over my own feet, that I had to lift them up when the ground was uneven. So I started to do that, but only ever for a few paces, then I would forget again and stumble over the next grassy mound, and sometimes I fell flat on my face with such a loud crash – I was fat, after all – that the snow grouse flew away, startled, and the Arctic foxes took to their heels before we'd even caught sight of

them. But anyone thinking this would anger Grandfather couldn't be more wrong. Because Grandfather didn't get angry. On the contrary. He merely laughed and helped me to my feet, brushed the dirt from my clothes and told me to be brave. "Don't lose heart, buddy!" he'd say. And I soon got used to the uneven terrain, and before long I wasn't so fat any more. I could stand upright on the small cutter, too, and not fall even when the boat swayed from side to side. I started to enjoy bracing my knees against the waves, and didn't even need to concentrate on it any more, but did it automatically, programming the motion into my knees, and out hunting I lifted my feet and no longer scared away prey, which meant we sometimes marched back to the village with two snow grouse or a mink dangling from one of our belts. Sometimes even an Arctic fox. I was so proud! And to make sure everyone saw, we would do a couple of laps through Raufarhöfn. Laps of honour. And the people would wave and shout out praise. You can get used to that kind of thing. Praise.

It's a drug, said Nói, my best friend, back when he was still my best friend. I should handle praise with caution and not get used to it, he told me. Nói was a computer genius, but his body gave him problems. He said he was my opposite, my counterpart, my opponent, and I had no idea what he meant by that. He said that if we were one person, we would be unbeatable. It was a shame he lived in Reykjavík.

And then the thing with Róbert McKenzie happened – he was the Quota King around here – and that was the beginning of the end, and no one likes it when things end. That's why people prefer to think back to the past, to when something has just begun and the ending is still far away.

The days with Grandfather out at sea and on the Melrakkaslétta were the best of my life. Sometimes I was allowed to shoot with Grandfather's shotgun, which now belongs to me. He taught me how to be a good marksman, how to aim, how to pull the trigger very gently, without shaking. When I aimed at a target during a practice run, he placed a tiny stone on top of the barrel, and I had to pull the trigger without the stone falling off. It's harder than you might think, because you have to *pull*, not press! Only once I could do that was I allowed to shoot for real. But under no circumstances was my mother to find out, that's what Grandfather and I had agreed, because my mother thought firearms were too dangerous for me. But she found out anyway when I shot Elínborg's cat right behind our house. That was stupid of me. Someone heard the gunshot and told my mother over at the cold-storage warehouse. She came straight home from work and was hopping mad, even though she'd been annoyed by the cat a few times in the past when it had shat in our potato beds. She got really, really angry, my mother, and maybe she felt offended too, because she said it was time to give it to me straight. And she did. I was different to other people, she shouted, tapping her finger against her temple. I was slower upstairs, and that's why she didn't want me running around Raufarhöfn with a gun, shooting animals, it would cause trouble in the village – and she was right about that, because Elínborg wasn't someone to be messed with; she immediately called the police.

But my mother shouldn't have said it like that. Because when someone yells at me, even if that someone is my own mother, I lose it. My mind switches off. And when I lose it, fists start to fly. My fists. Usually against myself. Which

isn't so bad. But sometimes against others too, if they get in the way. That's worse, but I don't do it intentionally, and afterwards I can barely remember it. It's as though the needle on a record has skipped forwards. And that's why my mother tried to calm me down, assuring me that she trusted me completely to go around with a gun, that of course I was a good shot, which Grandfather could no doubt confirm. He merely shook his head at all the arguing and sent the police away again. He wasn't in the least bit angry that I had shot Elínborg's cat. He said my mother was exaggerating, that I wasn't that goddamn different, and in fact it was barely worth mentioning, because there were far greater idiots out there, it wasn't about school grades but how a person acts towards others, what kind of human being they are, and so on. And he gave an example, which he was good at, because it's important to give examples so everyone understands what you mean. He told us about this athlete who lived in America and who was good-looking and nice and even became an actor, but then he killed his wife because he was jealous. Just because of that. Jealousy. Bang! End of story. And that's why I was a better person than this famous athlete. But my mother said he could stick his athlete where the sun didn't shine, because Elínborg's cat probably didn't give a damn about that, but Elínborg did give a damn that I'd killed her cat, and so did the police and so did the school board. That's how it was, she said to Grandfather, certain behaviour, a certain level of achievement was expected, so he'd better hurry up and arrive in the twentieth century before it came to an end, and he had to stop taking sides, *she* was my mother, after all, and had the last word where my upbringing was concerned. But Grandfather put his foot down. Because

he could get pretty angry too, when he wanted to, and he loudly reminded her that he was *her* father, that we were living in *his* house, under *his* roof, with *his* rules, and that he had the goddamn last word. And what's more, he spent more time with me than she did. When he said this my mother's words got stuck in her throat. She stormed out to do something. To take out the rubbish, maybe. And then I broke something, although I can't remember what it was. But something definitely broke. I have this clear picture in my mind, a scrap of memory: Grandfather, sitting astride me with a bright red face, pinning my arms to the floor, calling out desperately for my mother and yelling at me to calm the hell down.

I shot my first Arctic fox when I was eleven. Foxes are considered pests, even though they were here before the Vikings. You're allowed to shoot them, foxes. It actually happened very quickly, and I was so surprised I didn't even have time to get nervous. We were walking cross-country when one appeared in front of us, poking its head out from behind a grassy mound, spotting us but unable to find a hiding place in a hurry. Grandfather pushed the shotgun into my hand without saying a word. He just squinted at the fox, which stared back at him in shock, and I understood. I took aim, the fox made a run for it, but I kept it in my sights, the tip of my finger on the trigger, then pulled ever so gently until it went off. I didn't even notice the kickback from the butt. My heart beat faster. The fox keeled over, then did a somersault, and its legs twitched as though it still wanted to run away. But it no longer could.

I felt strange. Grandfather still didn't say a word, but he clapped me contentedly on the shoulder, and then we

watched the animal die. It didn't take long before it stopped twitching and lay there, its fur soaked with the thick blood gushing out of its snout. To begin with its ribcage quickly rose and fell, but then its breathing became slower, jerkier, until eventually the fox lay there motionless. I felt sorry for it, but when I received the 5,000 krona at the community office, I suddenly knew what a vocation was. A vocation is when you come to something as though you've been called to it.

Grandfather didn't have much longer to live. Every time I said goodbye to him, I was perhaps seeing him for the last time. That's what one of the nurses had told me. And she had also said I would feel very sad when it happened, but that this was completely normal, as was crying, so there was no reason to worry. Nói once explained to me that my grandfather had taken on the role of father for me, something my mother would definitely have disputed. But Nói was right; my name was Kalmann Óðinsson, after all, after Grandfather, whose first name was Óðinn, and not after my actual father, who my mother sometimes referred to as the Sperm Donor.

Quentin Boatwright. That was his name, her sperm donor. And if I'd been given his name, I would have been called Kalmann Quentinsson. But that didn't work, because this name and the letter Q didn't exist in Iceland. Just like my father. He didn't exist here either. If I had lived in America, I would have been called Kalmann Boatwright. The names there are just plain wrong.

If I had children someday, I wanted to be there for them, like Grandfather was for me. I would tell them all the things Grandfather had told me. I would teach my children how to hunt, how to stalk Arctic foxes, spot snow grouse in the

snow or catch Greenland shark. I would show them how to provide for themselves. Regardless of whether I had a girl or a boy. But if you want children, you need a woman. There's no other way. That's nature.

I was thirty-three years old already, with another few weeks to go until my thirty-fourth birthday. I urgently needed a wife. But I could forget that, because here in Raufarhöfn there weren't any women who would want someone like me. The range of women here was about as extensive as the vegetables on offer in the village store. Apart from carrots, potatoes, a couple of shrivelled bell peppers and some brown salad leaves, there was nothing. And the possibility that my future wife would stumble by chance into Raufarhöfn, 609 kilometres' drive from Reykjavík, was pretty slim.

My mother always said: "When you reach the end of the world, turn left!" I found that funny, but she never laughed. And she never made jokes; usually she was too tired from the long hours in the cold-storage warehouse. She told me I couldn't eat Cocoa Puffs every day, because I would get even fatter and have no chance of finding a wife. But my mother was no longer here, and nor was Grandfather, so I could eat Cocoa Puffs all day long if I wanted and no one would complain. But I only ate Cocoa Puffs for breakfast, and sometimes in the evening, while watching *The Bachelor*. Never for lunch. That was my rule.

People need rules in life, that's important, because otherwise there would be anarchy, and anarchy is when there are no police and no rules and everyone does whatever they want. Like setting fire to a house, for example. Just like that, for no reason. No one works, no one repairs faulty appliances like washing machines, or ships' engines,

satellite dishes and microwaves. And then you end up sitting with an empty plate in front of a blank TV screen in a burned-down house, and people are killing each other over a chicken wing or Cocoa Puffs. But I could have survived something like that, because I could defend myself. I knew how to process Greenland shark so the meat was edible. And I could pluck a snow grouse. My grandfather's house was big enough, and perhaps then a woman would want to live with me, because here in Raufarhöfn anarchy wouldn't be so bad, simply because we would be far away from it. My wife would have to be younger than me, because we would need to have a lot of children to ensure mankind's survival. We would have sex practically every night. Perhaps even twice a day! And we wouldn't hear about the riots in Reykjavík, because the TV would no longer work. What's more, there hadn't been any police in Raufarhöfn since the financial crisis, and in that sense we already had anarchy. It was just that people hadn't realized it yet.