

**KALMANN  
AND THE  
SLEEPING  
MOUNTAIN**

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*For my greatest treasures*  
*Heiðdís Elisabeth and Rögnvald Anton*



Land, steeped in black shadows  
Dark nights, your fate held there  
The path  
the path  
lies ahead, but to where?

*Landið sokkið í svartan skugga  
Sorta nætur þú vígður ert  
Leiðin  
leiðin  
liggur áfram en hvert?*

JÓNAS FRÍÐRIK GUÐNASON,  
*poet, 1945–2023*



# 1

## COFFIN

If only my father had never written me that letter. If only he'd left my mother and me in peace, so we could have spent our time watching movies and eating pizza, just she and I. We were doing fine up here in the Northland, through the rainy summer days and stormy autumn nights, and our grief, it belonged only to us. If my father had never written that letter, the FBI officials wouldn't have twisted my arm behind my back and slammed my face against the bonnet of the black Cherokee Jeep. And I wouldn't have missed the New Year's fireworks in Raufarhöfn either. Because I've never missed them before, it's tradition, and traditions are important, even if sometimes you can't remember how they started.

Just like this story. Maybe it starts with my father's letter, just an email which my mother printed out at work and brought home with her, and which eventually led to me being arrested by the FBI.

Did I scream? Or did I stay silent? I hate it when my mind takes a dive, like a ship behind a rogue wave. It never bodes well. If only my mother had been there. She could have explained everything to the FBI agents, without a doubt. But now I was here, utterly alone, 4,700 kilometres away from Iceland, in a tiny room which contained nothing but three uncomfortable chairs and a little table, no window, no TV, no

pictures – a coffin, and I was locked inside it, lid shut. Bang. Buried deep and soon to be forgotten.

Like Grandfather.

It wasn't really a coffin, of course, but an interrogation room in a giant FBI building, a proper hulk of a thing. My jaw had dropped when we sped up to it in the Cherokee Jeep. Sure, I'd seen buildings before that are even bigger, the church in Reykjavík, for example, or the hotel in *Home Alone 2* – I know that movie off by heart. But with this hulk I had the feeling it might sink into the ground. It was brown and heavy like the basalt rock of the Melrakkaslétta, and so big it could have housed all the inhabitants of Raufarhöfn in individual rooms. Just imagine that: all the inhabitants in one single building, with a school and store and community room and gas station and everything! But here nobody was from Raufarhöfn, and that's why I felt lonelier than ever before.

I used to think a classroom was the loneliest place in the world, when you're sitting completely alone at the desk in the back row and don't understand what the teacher at the front is explaining to the class. Everyone's listening attentively or writing something down, and they sometimes glance back at you, happy there's somebody who's dumber than them. No one wants to be the dumbest. But somebody *has* to be the dumbest, and if you're somebody like me, the smartest thing is not to deny it.

A teacher once said that you couldn't knock knowledge into my skull even with a sledgehammer. That was Sigfús, who was the principal at our school. But our teacher was sick that day, and Sigfús had to cover.

He's pretty old now, but seems to go on and on; he walks through the village slowly and with small footsteps. He leans on ski poles, even in high summer, because he can use them



to shoo away Arctic terns and tourists. He's not so mean to me nowadays, actually he's really nice, as though he's completely forgotten I used to push him to the brink of despair with my stupidity. He once threw a massive Danish dictionary at me over my classmates' heads. But because I ducked at the last moment, the book crashed into the map of the world on the wall behind me. It made a hole in the Atlantic Ocean. Because I was the only one who found that funny, Sigfús sent me out of the room, and I probably broke something out there, smashed in the glass cabinet with the stuffed birds and made them fly, the short-eared owl, the golden plover, the snipe, I can't remember exactly any more. But I didn't touch the raven, definitely not. These predators scare me, because they're sneaky and cunning, maybe smarter than Sigfús, even though they can't speak Danish. Ravens like death, they feed on carcasses. Like Greenland shark or Arctic foxes or wolf fish. The wolf fish isn't really a wolf, it's not even half a wolf, it's a fish. They're striped or flecked and are actually eels that got too fat. The wolf fish is probably the ugliest creature in the entire Norwegian Sea. Its jaw is so horrific that even the best dental surgeon would get a fright. But everything has a purpose, especially in nature, and that's why dental surgeons aren't needed in the ocean, they only exist among us, because the human being is the only mammal that uses its teeth to give a friendly smile.

Luckily, after the incident with the stuffed birds I didn't have to go to school for a while. Grandfather took me out to sea, so I could help him catch shark, spike bait on the hooks and stand at the wheel while he was having a nap down in the narrow cabin or stretched out on the deck. Though I should have been at school, like every other kid. That's the law, after all. But back then I didn't realize that. Grandfather said I'd

learn much more out at sea than in the classroom, because you can't eat the alphabet.

When I eventually went back to my school desk, I had to stay late on my very first day, until it got dark. Until Grandfather appeared in the doorway, stooped, shaking. I remember it well, because I'd never seen him in a classroom before. He asked Sigfús to tell him whether he had a screw loose or something, and Sigfús, who had jumped up from his chair, explained that he'd just wanted to help, a private lesson of sorts, so I wouldn't have to repeat the year yet again. But Grandfather retorted that it wasn't possible to repeat a year, no one could do that, a year could only be lived once, and after that it was over. Period. And with that, my career as a schoolboy came to an end.

At this point, I wouldn't have minded staying late in the Raufarhöfn classroom, because anywhere was better than in this FBI coffin. At school, at least I'd have been able to look out of the window and watch Halldór shovelling snow in the parking lot or leaning on the shovel while he was talking to somebody about the snow. And after staying late I could have gone sledding with the other kids in the Pallabrekka or had a snowball fight. Me against everyone, until someone started crying, because someone always did. Then someone would have sent me home, but I would have wandered through the village instead, until I'd tracked Grandfather down somewhere, at the harbour perhaps or in the curing shed. Grandfather usually didn't care when people complained about me. And besides all that, he would still have been alive.

## 2

### DAKOTA LEEN

The tall FBI agent who had arrested me, driven me to the station and left me sitting here, poked his head in the door and asked whether I was thirsty or hungry. I ordered a cola. That's something I know. When you're being interrogated by the police, you're allowed to order a drink. That's the law.

Half an eternity later, the door opened again, but this time it was a young female FBI agent I'd never seen before, neither during the arrest nor when we'd walked through the giant building. I certainly wouldn't have overlooked her, even though she was quite small. But she was very pretty and younger than me, and her skin was black, though not as black as her hair, which was plaited into a thousand little braids and tightly knotted at the back of her head. She also wasn't wearing a bulletproof vest like her colleagues in the Cherokee Jeep, and in fact she wasn't even armed, her gun holster was empty. A laptop was clamped under her left arm, a notebook beneath her right, and in her hands she was holding a paper cup filled to the brim with coffee and a can of cola. She paused in the doorway and stared at me, gripping the laptop firmly against herself. "Hello, Kalmann," she said, giving me a brief nod. "Can I call you Kalmann?" she asked in English. She gave the door a shove with her foot, without spilling even a drop from her paper cup. Then she stood

there hesitantly. “Do you need an interpreter, someone to translate the conversation?”

I shook my head and, to make it clear I understood, said: “No need to worry.”

“No need to worry,” she echoed, smiling with relief. “Did your father teach you English? He’s American, isn’t he?”

“No,” I said. “*Dr. Phil*.”

“*Dr. Phil*, the talk show?”

“And *The Bachelor*, *Top Gear*, *Gilmore Girls* —” I stopped abruptly, because I hadn’t intended to mention *Gilmore Girls*. I hadn’t watched that girlie crap in ages.

“I love *Gilmore Girls*!” said the FBI agent, leaning over the table to set down all her things, which didn’t look easy. “I’m agent Dakota Leen, but you can call me Dakota or Cody.”

I decided to call her Dakota Leen; after all, she was a proper FBI agent. “And the guy?” I asked.

She glanced over at the door. “Mr García? What about him?”

“He said he would take care of me.”

“Would you prefer *him* to interrogate you?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Good.” She opened her laptop and laid the notebook and a pen next to it, all very neatly. Her shirt was buttoned right to the top.

The light from the laptop cast a blue shimmer on her face, which had a constantly curious expression. Dakota Leen typed something on the keyboard.

“Just a minute,” she said, before standing up abruptly and going to fetch Mr García, who then leaned over the laptop too and explained where to find the programme, where to enter the code, that she needed to turn on the camera and

microphone, here and here, but first she had to select the room – we were in number four – and that he wouldn't show her again. "Got it." Dakota Leen cleared her throat, and I now know that even people with black skin can blush, but you have to look really closely to see it.

"You can do it!" Mr García laid his hand on her shoulder, looking at me while he did so, properly staring, like he'd only just noticed me, and as though by some kind of magic I felt his hand on my shoulder now too. "There's a first time for everything, isn't there?" He winked at me and left the room, slamming the door behind him, and Dakota Leen brushed her hand over her shoulder and exhaled tensely. I took a few sips from the cola can.

"January the sixth, 2020, no, nonsense, it's already 2021! I'm agent Dakota Sage Leen, twelve, zero, two, eleven. I'm speaking with —" And then she looked right at me, and because I stared back as though all my lights were off, holding the cola can in mid-air, she prompted: "Please state your name!"

"Kalmann," I said hurriedly, suppressing a burp. "Óðinsson." She typed on the keyboard again and I summoned my courage. "Can I ask you something?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Am I under arrest?"

She leaned back in her chair and rocked the backrest a little, making her shirt strain over her chest. I did my best not to stare. "Do you think you're under arrest?"

People only answer a question with a question when they don't know the answer themselves. So I shrugged and turned my attention back to the cola can. It was bigger than the ones in Iceland, but otherwise identical. I raised it to my lips and drank it down to the last drop.

“Kalmann.” Dakota Leen bent forwards. “You just have to answer a few questions for me, okay?” I nodded. “Let’s make a start. What were you doing out there?”

I thought of my father and got a lump in my throat, as though I were breathing through a straw. My hands stiffened, making a dent in the cola can. “I was looking for them.”

“Who were you looking for?”

I squeezed the can even harder. “They were all gone suddenly. My father, Uncle Bucky, even Sharon, there were so many people, and I got shoved around, and I lost my cowboy hat too.”

“Where are they now, your father, Uncle Bucky and Sharon?”

I flattened the can so much with both hands that it looked like a truck had driven over it. Dakota Leen shifted a little way back from the table in her chair, keeping her eyes on me the whole time. “Am I under arrest?” I repeated the question quietly, and the FBI agent sighed.

“No, Kalmann, you’re *not* under arrest. You’re free to go at any time. The door’s there. It’s not locked. But I’m the only one who can help you now. For me to do that, you have to answer a few questions, do you understand? Because there are a lot of things I don’t know. That only you know. And after that I’ll help you find your people. Deal?”

I agreed, and with that the interrogation began. It was only the beginning of an hour-long conversation, though, so I had made a terrible deal. But I didn’t yet know that. I told the FBI agent we had wanted to visit the president in order to go for a walk with him. But the president hadn’t come with us, even though he had promised to. “You’re not allowed to break promises,” I explained to her, thinking about the angry mob of people, who perhaps were disappointed

for that very reason, because so many promises hadn't been kept.

There's barely anything worse than disappointment, because it destroys so much: trust and anticipation, fun and hope. And when disappointment spreads like a drought, it ignites rage. I tried to explain that to the FBI agent, but she stared at me thoughtfully and didn't say a word.

# 3

## GRANDFATHER

“Are you taping the conversation?”

“The room’s equipped with everything. Microphone and camera.” Dakota Leen made a sweeping gesture with her arm. “Back to my question. What were you all planning to do? Were you really intending to go in?”

“I wasn’t, but the others were. Just to be on the safe side, you could record the conversation with an iPhone. We always do it like that in Iceland.” I thought of Birna, who is probably the best police detective in the world, and glanced discreetly around me. Up to the left beneath the ceiling was a circular lens, as large as an eider duck’s egg, but completely black.

“Yes, that’s one of our cameras. Kalmann, what happened then?”

“And the microphone?”

“They’re all over the room. Don’t worry about it. Kalmann, please tell me what happened. Did you lose your people in the park, before the steps?”

“Correctamundo.”

“Were they armed?”

“Uncle Bucky...” I hesitated.

“Was Uncle Bucky armed?”

“I’m not totally sure if he’s even my uncle,” I said.

“That’s irrelevant right now. Please answer my question. Was the man armed?”



“Always.”

“With what?” Dakota Leen wanted to know, but because I hesitated, she explained to me that it was important they find out whether he posed a danger to others. That it was entirely possible I was saving lives today! “Perhaps your uncle is angry.”

“He’s probably not my uncle.”

“You’ve already said that.”

“Is it actually against the law to carry weapons?”

“Sometimes, yes.”

I felt awful, guilty, even though I hadn’t done anything wrong. “He always carries a Glock on his ankle, sometimes a Walther too, and an HK under his arm. But you can’t see that one.”

“HK? Heckler & Koch?” She typed it into the laptop.

“And a knife.”

“A pocket knife?”

“No, a hunting knife. Quite a big one.” I demonstrated the size.

“But what’s he hunting?”

“Normally deer, but today lizards and pigs.”

Dakota Leen’s face became paler. She stared at the laptop in concentration, and that’s why she didn’t notice that I was looking around for more cameras. I found another black egg behind me. And in the walls there were these little round spots with holes, which probably contained the microphones.

“Why didn’t you go in with the others?”

I shrugged. Why had my father left me there in the crowd of people and not looked for me? “I was suddenly completely alone. That’s why. And when you get lost, you have to stop right where you are and not move an inch. Everyone knows that.”

Dakota Leen looked at me and bit her lower lip. She was perhaps the most beautiful woman I'd met in the United States. "Kalmann," she said, "do you have a legal guardian? Do you know what I mean by that?"

I nodded and stared at the surface of the table. "My mother."

"And where is your mother?"

"She's 4,700 kilometres away. In Akureyri. That's the largest city in northern Iceland, but it's fairly small."

Dakota Leen stood up and was about to leave the room, but when she opened the door, Mr García was standing right outside. "Leen!" I heard him say in surprise. "Are you done already?" She pulled the door slightly to behind her, which meant I could only hear snippets of their conversation. They were talking about a protocol, the correct way of doing things, rules, and that someone needed to be informed, at least the embassy.

But Mr García sounded annoyed. I distinctly heard him say that Dakota Leen wasn't at the Academy any more, nor at a beauty contest. She was in the field now, and it was war out there. "Welcome to the real world, honey."

When Dakota Leen sat back down with me, she stared angrily at her laptop for a long while. Her chest rose and fell quickly, and her hands trembled almost unnoticeably, but she closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. "Kalmann, let's rewind again. Why were you out there today? Why are you here?"

Well. Why was I where I was? Why is anyone anywhere? It was a question as big as the ocean, and Dakota Leen was sending me out on it in a little boat. But she seemed to want to know at any price. So I thought hard about it. After all, we were in the boat together, she and I. I understood that now.

Grandfather. I pictured him before me in his holey woolen jumper and foreign military trousers, the tobacco pipe clamped between his teeth. He sat with us in this boat and stared out to sea, puffing. The Slétta, as the Melrakkaslétta was known up here, in the far distance. I remembered the many hikes we had done across it. Sometimes I would flop down on the moss because I was so exhausted, and Grandfather said that when you're walking a long distance, you don't do the whole stretch at once but just one step. And then another, and then another. Always just one step at a time, no more.

"Step by step," I murmured, and now I knew where I had to begin, so that the whole story would make sense. At the beginning, in other words. "My father wrote me a letter because my grandfather Óðinn was murdered. That's why I'm here," I explained.

"I'm sorry," said Dakota Leen, though she seemed somehow relieved. "Tell me more."

I told her everything. And right from the beginning. I told her that until a few weeks ago, I hadn't even properly known my American father, that he had been stationed on the military base in Keflavík in the 1980s and had donated my mother the seed for my conception, even though he really shouldn't have, because he already had a wife and two children, and that's why he was pulled out of Iceland when I came into the world nine months later. That my mother moved with me into Grandfather's house and I grew up with him there, the man who had taught me everything, for example how to process Greenland shark or to stand with your back to the wind when you're peeing on the Melrakkaslétta.

Dakota Leen smiled and looked at me again with her curious gaze, and because this made me lose my thread, she said I should go on, that I was doing a good job.

So I told her I'd encountered a polar bear, and if I hadn't had my American grandfather's Mauser with me, I wouldn't be sitting here today. So perhaps the story actually started with the polar bear or with my American grandfather, who had fought in the Korean War and taken this Nazi pistol from a Korean. And a sheriff like me was of course responsible for —

"Sheriff?" Dakota Leen looked back at her laptop in confusion.

I pondered for a few seconds, wondering how to explain to her that a sheriff in Raufarhöfn presumably isn't the same thing as a sheriff in Washington DC. But she waved her hand and said it didn't matter. She would much rather know whether my grandfather had taught me how to handle firearms.

"Correctamundo!" I said proudly, and then I felt sad, because it made me think about him.

I wished Grandfather hadn't been murdered. As I told Dakota Leen everything, word for word, it felt as though he were sitting next to me on the frozen moss and staring out at the straight-as-a-die horizon, and somewhere beyond it was the sea, which never looks the same, it changes its colours almost every day, and there are so many there probably aren't any names for them. Like feelings. Grief has a colour too, a dark one, like the sea during a storm, deep and bottomless. Grief recedes and surges like the ebb and flow of the tide. And it whooshes, not in your ears, but in your chest.

"Tell me about your grandfather," Dakota Leen instructed me, leaning back in her chair and drinking from her paper cup. "And please take your time."

Time.

I sniffed and nodded, thinking about Grandfather.

When you see somebody for the last time, it's better if you don't know. You presume you still have time, that you'll

see each other again soon, you simply say “bless”, and these goodbyes are the best, because they don’t hurt.

Grandfather hadn’t been able to walk for a long while, no longer wanted to eat, and couldn’t go to the bathroom by himself any more, he even needed diapers. And he couldn’t remember how to hold a spoon or a fork, even though I’d shown him a few more times. That’s why I presume he couldn’t see any more, or just very blurrily, because his eyes looked like dead jellyfish on the shore. And beneath the jellyfish lie the grey stones which were once part of a cliff. Grandfather didn’t recognize me any more either. Someone once explained to me that very old people are almost like newborn babies, but Grandfather hadn’t been sweet or curious in a long time, and sometimes he smelled like rotten dulce seaweed, so you had to hold your nose.

The fact that babies are curious and also smell much better than my grandfather is something I can confirm. Because this one time I was allowed to hold one in my arms, a real one, not a doll. It’s really true! Perla, my ex-girlfriend, had a sister called Lilja who doesn’t have a disability. Lilja had a baby when I was still with Perla. And when we visited her once, they put the baby in my arms, there was nothing I could do, no way, because you can’t give back a little thing like that, it would be much too dangerous. You have to wait until the baby is taken from you again. So I made my body stiff, like a statue, and practically forgot to breathe. The baby smelled like vanilla cream. It opened its eyes and blinked at me, probably because it wanted to see who I was. And I blinked back, as though we were communicating in Morse code, which everyone found charming, even though I unfortunately didn’t understand a single word.

Sometimes I knelt right in front of Grandfather on the floor and looked at him or did Morse code with my eyes.

The tips of our noses almost touched, and sometimes a jolt went through him and he would sit up straight, nod at me, say “hmm” or clear his throat and squeeze out a few words that sounded a little like baby language but rougher. His voice was spent, so I didn’t understand a word. Sometimes I laughed, even though that wasn’t at all what I wanted to do.

My mother had explained that Grandfather could still understand me, even though he didn’t react. That his heart was listening, guaranteed.

That’s why I told him everything that came into my mind. Sometimes he laughed, and sometimes he cried, regardless of what I’d just said, and I longed to know what was funny, or how I could have comforted him, but my mother said only he knew what was going on in his head. He had slipped too far inside himself, she said, and wouldn’t come out again, and the only thing we could do for him was to be with him, because then he wouldn’t be so alone, and everything’s better when you’re not alone, like watching TV, for example, or eating, or driving a car, or reading, or dancing, or cooking, or sleeping —

My mother didn’t want to stop listing things that are more fun together. So I interrupted her, because there are some things that are much better when you’re alone. Like sitting on the loo or talking to an Arctic fox or being grumpy. And sometimes it’s also wonderful when you’re alone at sea, because then you can think about who you’d like to have with you, and that could be anyone at all, for example Lady Gaga or Rihanna.

That’s pretty much how I explained it to her, and then my mother looked at me oddly and leaned over to give me a hug, but she didn’t really succeed. We were sitting close to Grandfather, after all, and he was studying us surreptitiously, without a clue what was going on.

“Kalli minn, you’re a wise one,” said my mother, her eyes suddenly damp. To this day I don’t know why. Being a wise one isn’t anything to be sad about, but perhaps my mother was sad because I wasn’t supposed to be the wise one in our little family; my grandfather was, that’s how it had always been, even though my mother had often complained about his wisdom. “It’s a shame you don’t have any hákarl with you,” she sighed, and sniffed. “Perhaps we could take him home with us just once, to say a proper goodbye. Before it’s too late. That would be lovely.”

And then I felt annoyed, because on that particular day I didn’t have any on me; hákarl, that is, the fermented shark meat he loved so much. It was the second to last time I saw Grandfather alive.

Once I knelt before him on the floor and laid my head in his lap, and he stroked my hair as though I were a cat.