

Kalmann

Joachim B. Schmidt

Novel

German



Kalmann, set in Iceland, tells the story of a simpleton, a hunter and fisherman who becomes entangled in a case involving a missing person. At the end of the book, the protagonist finds himself lying under a dead polar bear and is granted honorary citizenship of his village. *Kalmann* is the fourth novel by Joachim B. Schmidt, born in 1981. It is a tale full of droll humour and surprises. A tale that unfolds in a peripheral region - in Iceland - far away from the capital, Reykjavik, and far away from life as we know it. Yet this novel is brimful with warmth, optimism and courage.

“My mother was quite contented too, somehow. We supped our tea, nearly burning our lips, and said as much, but apart from that we didn’t really talk. After all, there’s no need to natter all the time. Once there was a woman who talked a lot, and now she was dead. Magga. Now she wasn’t talking any more. She was silent for ever. Odd, that.”

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Photo: Eva Schram

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Joachim B. Schmidt

Excerpt translated by Jamie Lee Searle

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I

Snow

If only Grandfather had been with me. He always knew what to do. As I stumbled across the endlessness of the Melrakkaslétta plain, hungry, exhausted, and smeared in blood, I asked myself what he would have done. Perhaps he would have filled his pipe and simply watched the pool of blood disappear beneath the falling snow, as calm as you please, just to be sure no one else would find it.

He would fill his pipe whenever a problem arose, and by the time our minds were clouded by the sweet smoke, things wouldn't seem so bad anymore. 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, that's 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 died out in the snow, and that would have been an end to the matter.

But I was completely alone up there, Grandfather was a hundred and thirty-one kilometres away, and it was a long time since he had last roamed the snowy hinterland of the Melrakkaslétta. So there wasn't any pipe smoke, either, and because it was snowing and absolutely everything – apart from the red pool of blood – was white, and not a sound to be heard, I felt as though I were the last person in the entire world. And if you're the last person in the entire world, it makes you happy if you can tell someone about it. So that's why I told someone, and that's how the problems started.

Grandfather was a hunter, on land and sea, and of sharks, too. Not anymore, though. Now he spent his days sitting in an armchair in the Húsavík nursing home, staring out of the window – yet without actually seeing, because when I asked him 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 face mostly looked disgruntled now; the corners of his mouth pointing downwards, his lips pressed together, so you couldn't even tell he was missing four teeth, at the top, the front ones. He couldn't bite anyone anymore. Sometimes he asked me what I was doing here, his tone abrupt, and I explained that my name was Kalman, and I was his grandson and had come to visit him, like every week. That there was no reason to worry. But Grandfather gave me these distrusting looks and then stared sullenly back out of the window. He didn't believe me. Then I didn't say anything more, because Grandfather looked like someone who had just had their pipe confiscated, and for that reason it was better I stayed silent.

A nurse had told me to be patient with Grandfather, as though he were a small, sulking child. I would have to explain things to him again and again, she said, that was completely normal and part of life, because some of 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 I would be when I get to Grandfather's age. Because things with me had never really gone forwards. They suspect that the wheels in my head run backwards. That happened sometimes. Or that I had never progressed beyond the level of a first grader. I don't care. 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 even do an IQ test. "Run, Forrest, run!" they used to cry out during sports lessons, laughing themselves silly. That's from this film where the hero is mentally disabled, but he can run fast and play ping-pong really well.

I couldn't run fast, I couldn't play ping-pong, and 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 actually 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. That, I understood. He asked what I would do if I was out at sea and storm clouds gathered. The answer was simple: Sail back to shore as quickly as possible. He asked what I would put on if it was raining outside. 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, now and then, I just didn't get what was meant. And on those occasions, I preferred to say nothing. There was little point; no one could explain things like Grandfather could.

Luckily, I then got a computer with Internet connection, and all of a sudden, 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 had a wank. At least that's what Nói – he was my best friend – said when the thing happened with the King. 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 all because I had learnt how from Grandfather and wanted to practice. My mother got very angry, because Elínborg had complained to her and threatened to tell the police, and when my mother got angry, she no longer said anything, but did something instead. She would take out the rubbish, for example. Open up the dustbin lid, 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 just plain wrong. Grandfather took on thinking for me – at least when he still lived here in Raufarhöfn. He looked after 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; I'll 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. It must've made quite the impression.

But the thought made me nervous. Being buried, I mean. Trapped beneath the coffin lid. You'd get claustrophobic, and then you're 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. Salvör's petrol station café had the best hamburgers for one thousand eight hundred and five krona. I always had the right change, always, and Salvör knew that too, he didn't even bother to count the coins anymore. But sometimes I didn't enjoy the hamburger, 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 disabled, where I would have been abused and raped. I would be living in Reykjavík now, isolated and neglected. In Reykjavík the traffic is chaotic, the air is dirty, and the people are stressed. Ugh, it'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 in order to survive. He took me hunting and out to sea, even though I wasn't much help in the beginning. On the hunts in particular I was like a hopeless 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 startled snow grouse flew away, and the Arctic foxes took to their heels before we had even caught sight of them. But if you're thinking this made Grandfather angry, you 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. "Courage, comrade!" he said. And I soon got used to the uneven terrain, and before long I wasn't as fat anymore, either.

I could stand upright on the small cutter, too, not falling over even when the boat swayed from side to side. I started to enjoy balancing myself against the waves by bending my knees, and didn't even need to concentrate on it anymore, doing it automatically, programming the motion of the waves into my knees, and out hunting I lifted my feet and no longer scared away the prey, which meant we sometimes marched back into 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 waved to us and shouted out praise. You can get used to that kind of thing. Praise is 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 counter piece, 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 Odds King in these parts – and that was the beginning of the end, and no one likes endings. That's why people prefer to think back to the past, to when something had just begun and the ending was still far away.

The days I spent 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 very gently on the trigger, without shaking. When I got a target in my sights during a practice run, he placed a tiny stone up on 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 about it, 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 the 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 had been annoyed at the cat a few times in the past, when it shat in our potato beds. She got really angry, my mother, and maybe she felt hurt too, because she said it was time to speak plainly with me. I was different to other people, she said, tapping her finger against her temple. I was slower up there, and that's why she didn't want me running around Raufarhöfn with a gun and shooting animals, it would cause trouble in the village – and she was right about that, because Elínborg wasn't someone you could mess with; she did inform the police.

But my mother shouldn't have said it like that. Because when someone yelled at me, even when that someone was my own mother, I lost it. My mind switched off. And when I lost it, fists began to fly. My fists. Usually against myself. Which wasn't so bad. But sometimes against others too, if they got in the way. That was worse, but I didn't do it intentionally, and afterwards I could barely remember it. It was as though the needle on a record had jumped 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 even angry that I had shot Elínborg's cat. He said my mother was exaggerating, that I wasn't that goddamn different, in fact it was barely worth mentioning, there were far greater idiots out there, because it didn't come down to school grades but how a person acts towards others, to what kind of human being you are and so on. And he gave an example – he was good at that, 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 that. Jealousy. Bang! End of story. 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 didn't give a damn about that, but Elínborg did give a damn that I had killed her cat, and so did the police and so did the school board.

That's was how it was, she said, certain behaviour, a certain level of achievement was expected from us, he'd better hurry up and arrive in the 20th century before it was over, and he had to stop taking sides, after all, *she* was my mother and had the last word when it came to my upbringing. But then Grandfather came down hard. He could get angry too, when he wanted to, and he loudly reminded her that he was *her* father, that we were living in *his* house, between *his* four walls, with *his* rules, and that he had the goddamn last word. And what's more, that he spent more time with me than she did, and when he said this my mother's words got stuck in her throat. She stormed out to do something. To take the rubbish out, maybe. And then I broke something, although I can't remember what it was. But something quite definitely broke. I have this clear picture before me, 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 goddamn calm down.

*

I bagged my first Arctic fox when I was eleven. Foxes are considered pests, even if 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 suddenly 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 rifle butt. My heart beat faster. The fox fell on its side, even overturning once, 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 gave me a contented clap on the shoulder, and then we watched the animal die. It didn't take long before it stopped twitching, then it just lay there, its fur soaked with the thick blood that was gushing out of its snout.

To begin with its ribcage quickly rose and fell, but then the breathing became slower, jerkier, until, eventually, the fox lay there motionless. I actually felt sorry for it, but when I received the 5000 krona at the municipal office, I suddenly knew what a calling was. A calling 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 told me. And she also said I would feel very sad when it happened, but that this was completely normal, and so was crying, there was no reason to worry. Núi once explained to me that my grandfather took on the role of father for me, something my mother would definitely have disputed. But Núi was right; after all, my name was Kalmann Óðinnson, after Grandfather, whose first name was Óðinn, and not after my actual father, who my mother had once called Sperm Donor.

Quentin Boatwright. That was his name, her sperm donor. And if I had been given his name, I would have been called Kalmann Quentinsson. But that didn't work, because the 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 name thing is back to front there.

If I had children someday, I would be there for them. I wanted to be like Grandfather was for me, and I would tell them all the things Grandfather had told me. I would teach my children how to hunt, how to lie in wait for 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 wife. There's no other way. That's nature.

I was thirty-three years old already, with just another few weeks until my thirty-fourth birthday. I urgently needed a wife. But I could forget about 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 shop. Apart from carrots, potatoes, a couple of shrivelled peppers and some brown salad leaves, there was nothing. And it was pretty unlikely that my future

wife would stumble into Raufarhöfn by chance, six hundred and nine kilometres away from Reykjavík.

My mother always said: "When you reach the end of the world, turn left!" I found it funny, but she never laughed. And she never did make 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. It's important because otherwise there would be anarchy, and anarchy is when there are no police and no rules and everyone just 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 bowls and microwaves. And then you end up sitting with an empty plate in front of a blank TV screen in a burnt 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 tastes good. 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 have been so bad, simply because we would be too 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 the survival of humanity. We would have had sex practically every night. Perhaps even twice a day! And we wouldn't have heard about the riots in Reykjavík, because the television would no longer work. What's more, there hadn't been any police in Raufarhöfn since the financial crisis anyway, so if you looked at it like that, we already had anarchy. It was just that people hadn't realised it yet.

2

Blood

Grandfather made the best hákarl on the whole island. I made the second best. I know that because a number of people have told me, like Magnús Magnússon, the sheep farmer from Hólmaender, who got his fermented shark directly from me and was good at playing the accordion. He said it every time: "*Kalmann mín,*" he said, "your grandfather made the best hákarl in all of Iceland. But yours is almost as good!" And that made sense, because I did learn from the best, after all.

I wished Grandfather had been with me when the thing with Róbert McKenzie happened. Grandfather would have known what to do. And to be completely honest, I was a bit mad at him for having left me alone in this mess. I wished I hadn't even gone foxhunting that day. I wished Róbert had just disappeared without a trace, like a ship on the horizon. There are no tracks on the ocean, after all. The sea always looks as though it has never been touched by anyone, apart from the wind. Isn't it strange that you can leave tracks on the water just with air?

It would have to be me, of all people, who passed by the spot near the Arctic Henge monument. And yet I was only tracking an Arctic fox, that I had named Schwarzkopf, like the shampoo, but that had nothing to do with the fox. It was a badly-behaved fox, a young male, one that ventured right up to the houses, looking for something to eat. Perhaps that was why I liked him. And if it had been up to me, I wouldn't have shot him. I had a secret pact with him. But Hafdís had asked me to teach the fox a lesson, and everyone knows what that means. And if the school principal, who is also part of the town council, asks for a favour, you don't just say no. Also, Hafdís was a very beautiful woman, even though she wasn't young anymore and had three grown-up children. Sometimes I wondered what Hafdís was even doing here in Raufarhöfn. Because she looked like a TV presenter. She said the little guy was lurking dangerously close to the community hall, and when people shooed him away, he sometimes headed off towards Vogar. I would be able to recognise him by his dark fur and even darker head, she told me.

So he had blue fur – that’s what went through my mind, because at this point in time he would still have had white flecks in his winter coat if it had changed colour. Hafdís didn’t know much about animals, even though she was the school principal. But I didn’t say anything, because you’re not supposed to lecture a school principal. She wouldn’t allow it, in any case.

So Schwarzkopf was an Arctic fox with blue fur. That’s what you call it, even though the fur isn’t blue at all. It’s brown, grey or dark grey. The blue foxes’ fur doesn’t change colour with the seasons, because they mostly stay by the coast. Amongst the black rocks, dulse and driftwood, it’s the best camouflage. White fur would stand out, because there’s usually no snow on the beach, and that’s why the Icelandic foxes don’t need white fur like the foxes in Siberia or in Greenland, where everything is so beautifully white.

I could have explained all this to Hafdís, but I didn’t. I just tapped my index finger on the rim of my cowboy hat – that’s how people in America, where my cowboy hat was from, say ‘okie dokie’ – and picked up the trail behind the community hall, clambering up the slope and gazing down over the whole village, the more recent wooden buildings including the school and sports hall to my right, the harbour and church to my left. The bathing pond was still covered with a slushy layer of ice, but I wouldn’t have ventured out onto it anyway. I walked along the edge of the slope until I was on a level with the school building, climbed back down, went past the school and the empty camping ground, then further on to the coast and from there along the shoreline until Vogar Bay. Apart from a few eiders, lesser black-backed gulls and kittiwakes that were sitting on the water and doing nothing, I didn’t see any animals. I imagined myself scaring the living daylight out of Schwarzkopf. Secretly, though, I hoped the fox would be friendly, so I could befriend him and keep him as a pet. That’s a thing, you know. In Russia, for example. I reckon if I’d had a tamed fox as a pet, I would have had more luck with women.

Schwarzkopf could have done with a white winter coat that day, because it was snowing like mad; thick, heavy flakes, covering even the pebbles on the beach. The water looked dull and grey, almost unmoving; the weather

was calm. Apart from the gently falling snow, it was so quiet that I couldn’t help but sing a little song, because the snow swallowed the sound, and no one could hear me.

I liked singing. No one actually knew that. Schwarzkopf did, perhaps; he must’ve heard me and hid, because I didn’t catch a glimpse of him that day, even though I spent hours on end tramping around out there, along the entire bay, into the Melrakkaslétta, up to the Glápavötn Lakes and in a zigzag over to the Arctic Henge, the half-finished Arctic stone circle which Róbert McKenzie had had built a few years previously. I wasn’t even thinking I would come across any animals, because the weather was unsuitable, the visibility poor. I didn’t even see any snow grouse. But it wasn’t as cold as in winter anymore, it was only around zero degrees. The March brightness was pleasant. And besides, I had promised Hafdís, and if you make a promise to the school principal, you keep it.

People always imagine hunting to be so thrilling, they imagine you reading the tracks, holding your nose to the wind, focusing your senses, then taking the animals by surprise and chasing after them. That’s nonsense. You spend most of the time sitting on the cold ground and hoping that something will appear before your gun barrel. For that you need a good portion of patience. “The hunter’s most important virtue,” as my grandfather always said. He was like a mentor. A mentor is a teacher, but one who doesn’t set you any tests.

But on that day I didn’t feel like sitting on the cold ground, because I suspected that Schwarzkopf was listening to my singing in his warm den and covering his ears. I wonder why I chose to go up to the Arctic Henge on that particular day. Why didn’t I just veer off and go home? That would have been better. Because up there, right by the monument, was where I stumbled across the blood. And there was a lot of it. It’s actually astounding, how much blood there is inside a human being.

The pool of blood glistened red and dark in the white snow. The snowflakes fell unceasingly, melting into it. I was hot from walking, sweating, but because I was now standing still, staring motionless at the blood, I began to shiver. Exhaustion spread within me. My limbs felt as heavy as lead, as though I had just done something

very strenuous. I thought of Grandfather as I watched the blood soak up the snowflakes, until the redness paled beneath the newly-fallen snow. I must have just stood there for a long while, but eventually I gave myself a jolt, stiff with cold, and awoke as though from a dream.