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Snowblind

Written by Ragnar Jónasson

Translated by Quentin Bates

Published by Orenda Books

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Snowblind

RAGNAR JÓNASSON

translated by Quentin Bates



**ORENDA
BOOKS**

Orenda Books
16 Carson Road
West Dulwich
London SE21 8HU
www.orendabooks.co.uk

First published in Icelandic as *Snjóblinda*, 2010
This B-format edition published by Orenda Books, 2015

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-910633-03-8

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

The author would like to thank the people of Siglufjörður for his use of their town as the setting for this book, but would like to make it clear that it is entirely fiction and none of the characters portrayed is based on any real person.

This book has been translated with financial support from



MIDSTÖÐ ÍSLENSKRA BÓKMENNTA
ICELANDIC LITERATURE CENTER

SALES & DISTRIBUTION

In the UK and elsewhere in Europe:
Turnaround Publisher Services
Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate
Coburg Road, Wood Green
London N22 6TZ
www.turnaround-uk.com

In Australia/New Zealand:
Australian Scholarly Publishing
7 Lt Lothian St North
North Melbourne, Victoria 3051
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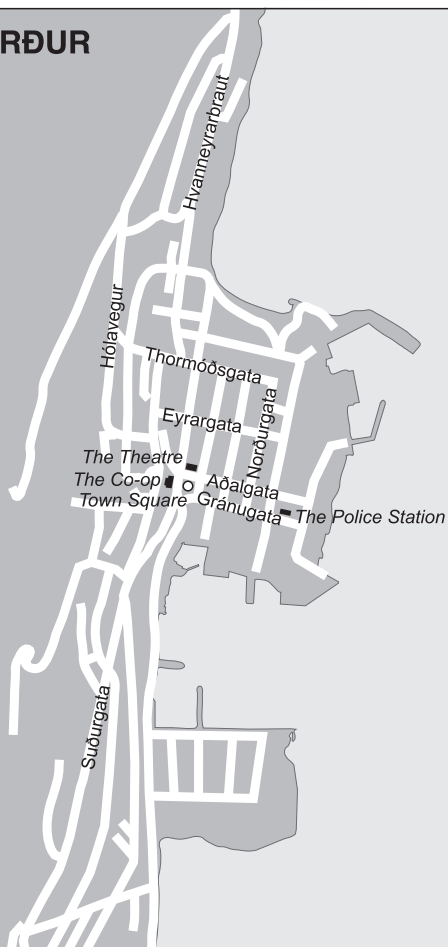
For Kira, from Dad

SNOWBLIND

ICELAND



SIGLUFJÖRÐUR



Prelude

SIGLUFJÖRDUR: WEDNESDAY, 14TH OF JANUARY 2009

The red stain was like a scream in the silence.

The snow-covered ground was so white that it had almost banished the winter night's darkness, elemental in its purity. It had been snowing since that morning, big, heavy flakes falling gracefully to earth. That evening there was a break in the snowfall and no more had fallen since.

Few people were about. Most people stayed indoors, happy to enjoy the weather from behind a window. It was possible that some of them had decided to stay at home after the death at the Dramatic Society. Tales travelled swiftly and the atmosphere was heavy with suspicion, in spite of the town's peaceful outward appearance. A bird flying over the town would not have noticed anything unusual, would not have sensed the tension in the air, the uncertainty and even the fear, not unless it had flown over the little back garden in the middle of the town.

The tall trees surrounding the garden were in their winter finery, taking on shadowy shapes in the darkness that were reminiscent of clowns rather than trolls, decked in delicate white from the ground up, in spite of the snow weighing down some of their branches.

A comforting light shone from the warm houses and the street lights illuminated the main roads. This back garden was far from being hidden in gloom, even though it was late.

The ring of mountains protecting the town was almost entirely white that night and the highest peaks could just be glimpsed. It was

as if they had failed in their duty these last few days, as if something unexplained, some threat, had stolen through the town; something that had remained more or less unseen, until that night.

She lay in the middle of the garden, like a snow angel.

From a distance she appeared peaceful.

Her arms splayed from her sides. She wore a faded pair of jeans and was naked from the waist up, her long hair around her like a coronet in the snow; snow that shouldn't be that shade of red.

A pool of blood had formed around her.

Her skin seemed to be paling alarmingly fast, taking on the colour of marble, as if in response to the striking crimson that surrounded her.

Her lips were blue. Her shallow breath came fast.

She seemed to be looking up into the dark heavens.

Then her eyes snapped shut.

REYKJAVÍK: SPRING 2008

It wasn't far off midnight, but it was still light. The days were growing longer and longer. It was the time of year when each new day, brighter than the day before, brought with it the hope of something better, and things were looking bright for Ari Thór Arason. His girlfriend, Kristín, had finally moved into his little flat on Öldugata, although this wasn't much more than a formality. She had been staying there most nights anyway, except those just before an exam, when she liked to read in the peace and quiet of her parents' house, often far into the night.

Kristín came into the bedroom from the shower, a towel around her waist.

'God, I'm tired. Sometimes I wonder why I went for medicine.'

Ari Thór looked round from the little desk in the bedroom.

'You'll be a fantastic doctor.'

She lay on the bed, stretching out on top of the duvet, her blonde hair spread like a halo on the white of the bedclothes.

Like an angel, Ari Thór thought, admiring her as she stretched out her arms and then ran them gently down her torso.

Like a snow angel.

'Thanks, my love. And you'll be a brilliant cop,' she said. 'But I still think you should have finished your theology degree,' she couldn't help adding.

He knew that well enough and didn't need to hear it from her. First it had been philosophy, until he had given up on it, and then theology. He had packed that in as well, and found himself enrolling in the police college. Roots were something he had never been

able to put down properly, always seeking something that suited his temperament, something with a little excitement to it. He reckoned he had probably applied for theology as a challenge to some god he was convinced didn't exist; some god who had snatched away any chance he had of growing up normally when he was thirteen, when his mother died and his father had disappeared without trace. It wasn't until he had met Kristín and – only two years earlier – been able to puzzle out the mystery of his father's disappearance that Ari Thór began to achieve a little peace of mind. This was when the idea of the police college had first crossed his mind, with the expectation that he'd make a better cop than a clergyman. The police college had left him in fine physical shape, and the weight-lifting, running and swimming had made him broader across the shoulders than he had ever been before. He had certainly never been this fit when he was poring over theology texts night and day.

'Yeah, I know,' he replied, a little stung. 'I haven't forgotten the theology. I'm just taking a break from it.'

'You ought to make an effort and finish it, while it's still fresh in your mind. It's so hard to start again if you leave it too long,' she said, and Ari Thór knew she wasn't speaking from experience. She had always finished everything she set out to do, flying through one exam after another. Nothing seemed capable of stopping her and she had just finished the fifth of the six years of her medical degree. He wasn't envious – just proud. Sooner or later they would need to move abroad so that she could specialise, something that had never been discussed, but of which he was all too keenly aware.

She put a pillow behind her head and looked at him. 'Isn't it awkward having the desk in the bedroom? And isn't this flat way too small?'

'Small? No, I love it. I'd hate to move out of the centre of town.'

She lay back, her head sinking into the pillow. 'Anyway, there's no hurry.'

'There's plenty of space for the two of us.' Ari Thór stood up. 'We'll just have to be cosy.'

He removed the towel and lay carefully on top of her, kissing her long and deep. She returned the kiss, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him close.

How the hell could they have forgotten the rice?

She was livid as she picked up the phone to call the little side-street Indian place that was five minutes from their sprawling detached house. With its two, stylish, brick-built storeys, orange roof and large garage capped by a sunlit patio on its roof, it was a dream home for a big family. They were still happy here, even though the children had all flown the nest and retirement wasn't far away.

She tried to calm down as she waited for the phone to be answered. She had been looking forward to sitting down in front of the television to watch a Friday-night sitcom over a piping-hot chicken curry with rice. She was home alone, her husband away on business and probably now on his way to the night flight that would bring him home the following morning.

The infuriating thing was that the Indian place didn't do deliveries, so she could see herself having to go out again while the rest of her dinner cooled. Bloody mess. At least it was warm enough outside that walking wouldn't be any great hardship.

When someone finally answered, she came straight to the point.

'Who has a curry without rice?' she complained, her voice rising out of all proportion to the apparent offence.

When the waiter apologised and then hesitantly offered to prepare a replacement immediately, she slammed down the phone and, fighting back her anger, set off into the darkness.



It took her longer than usual to find the keys in her handbag when she returned ten minutes later, the rice in a bag, ready for a relaxed evening with something good to eat. It wasn't until the key was turning in the lock that she sensed a presence, something that wasn't right.

But then it was too late.

REYKJAVÍK: SUMMER 2008

Ari Thór came in from the rain. Coming home to the flat in Öldugata had always given him a warm feeling, but this past summer that feeling had never been warmer.

‘Hi, is that you?’ Kristín called from the desk in the bedroom, where she sat over her textbooks when she wasn’t on duty at the National Hospital.

He felt that the flat had taken on a new life when she moved in. The white walls, which had been neutral before, suddenly became bright. There was an aura about Kristín, even when she sat silently over a book at the desk, an energy that Ari Thór found captivating. Occasionally he had the feeling that he had lost control of his own life. He was twenty-four and the future was no longer a blank sheet. He never said anything to her; feelings weren’t the easiest thing for him to talk about.

He looked into the bedroom. She sat there with a book.

Why did she have to sit over these books all summer?

The sunshine didn’t seem to have tempted her.

‘Walking to work and back is enough for me. That’ll do for time outdoors,’ she teased, when he nicely tried to persuade her to walk downtown whenever he had a sunny day off. That summer he was in training with the police force at Keflavík airport, while his final term at the police college approached.

He sometimes wondered what had prompted him, only a year ago, to give up on theology – although perhaps only temporarily – and test his talents elsewhere. He had never been one for spending a

lot of time over textbooks. He needed to have some activity, a little variety. There was something about police work that fascinated him: the excitement and the drama. It certainly wasn't the money. He had been accepted by the police college even though the term had been about to start.

He found he relished police work, enjoying the responsibility and the buzz of adrenaline.

Now his training was almost over; just one term to go and then he'd be qualified. It still wasn't clear what the next step would be once he graduated. He had applied for several posts with the police, had been turned down a few times and still had no offers.

'It's me. What's new?' he called to Kristín, hanging up his damp coat. He went in to where she was absorbed in a book and planted a kiss on the back of her neck.

'Hi.' Her voice was warm, but she didn't put the book aside.

'How's it going?'

She closed the book, having carefully marked her place, and turned to him. 'Not bad. You went to the gym?'

'Yes, and feel better for it.'

His mobile phone began to ring.

He went out into the hall, took his phone from his coat pocket.

'Ari Thór?' said a booming voice. 'Ari Thór Arason?'

'That's me,' he answered, slightly suspiciously as he hadn't recognised the caller's number.

'My name's Tómas. I'm with the police in Siglufjörður.' The tone was slightly friendlier now.

Ari Thór moved into the kitchen to be able to speak without being overheard. Siglufjörður was one post which he had applied for without telling Kristín. This was a place he didn't know much about, only that one could hardly travel further north in Iceland; a place probably closer to the Arctic Circle than to Reykjavík.

'I'd like to offer you a job,' said the man calling himself Tómas.

Ari was slightly taken aback. He had never seriously considered Siglufjörður as an option. 'Well ...'

‘I need your answer now, lots of kids lining up for this one, people with more experience than you. I like your background – philosophy and theology. Just what you need to become a good copper in a small village.’

‘I’ll take it,’ Ari Thór replied, almost to his own surprise. ‘Thanks, this means a lot to me.’

‘Don’t mention it. We’ll start you off with two years,’ Tómas said. ‘A two-year sentence!’ he boomed, laughter echoing down the line. ‘And then I’m sure you’ll be able to stay on if you want. When can you start?’

‘Well, I have some exams this winter, so...’

‘You can do the final ones from here, I think. How about November, mid-November perhaps? Perfect time to get to know the town. The sun will be about to leave until January, and the ski slopes will be opening. We have great slopes here. Then perhaps you can take Christmas off.’

Ari Thór thought of saying that he didn’t really ski, but instead only said thanks again. He had a feeling that he would get along well with this loud but friendly man.



When he went back into the bedroom, Kristín was again deep in her book.

‘I have a job,’ he said abruptly.

Kristín looked up. ‘What? Really?’ She closed the book and turned quickly towards him, this time forgetting to mark her place. ‘That’s brilliant!’

There was pure happiness in her voice. Kristín was always softly spoken, as if nothing ever took her by surprise, but Ari Thór was starting to learn how to read her expressions. Those deep-blue eyes that contrasted so powerfully with the short blonde hair could have a mesmerising effect to begin with, but underneath there was someone naturally determined and assertive; someone who knew exactly what she wanted.

'I know, it's unbelievable. I hadn't expected anything so soon. Loads of us are graduating in December and there aren't many jobs to be had.'

'So where is this job? Here in town? A relief post?'

'No, it's a two-year contract ... at least.'

'In town?' Kristín repeated, and he could see for her expression that she suspected it might not be.

'Well, actually, no.' He hesitated before continuing. 'It's up north. In Siglufjörður.'

She was silent and each passing second felt like an hour.

'Siglufjörður?' Her voice had lifted and the tone gave a clear message.

'Yes, it's a great opportunity,' he said mildly, almost pleadingly, hoping that she would see his side, that it was important to him.

'And you said yes? Without even thinking to ask me?' Her eyes narrowed. Her voice was bitter, verging on anger.

'Well ...' He hesitated. 'Sometimes you just have to grab an opportunity. If I hadn't made a decision on the spot, then they would have taken someone else.' He was silent for a moment. 'They picked me,' he added, almost apologetically.

Ari Þór had given up on philosophy and then he had given up on theology. He had lost his parents far too young and had been alone in a hard world since childhood. Then Kristín had picked him. That had given him just the same feeling he was experiencing now.

They picked me.

This would be his first real job, and one that would carry responsibility. He had made an effort to do well at the police college. So why couldn't Kristín just be happy for him?

'You don't decide to move to Siglufjörður just like that, without talking it over with me, dammit. Tell them you need to think it over,' she said, her voice cold.

'Please, I don't want to risk this. They want me there in the middle of November, I'll take the last couple of exams there, and be back for a break at Christmas. Why don't you see if you can come as well?'

‘I have to work here as well as studying; you know that perfectly well, Ari Thór. Sometimes I just don’t understand you.’ She stood up. ‘This is bloody ridiculous. I thought we were partners, doing all this together.’ She turned aside to hide her tears. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

She left with rapid steps, out of the bedroom and into the passage.

Ari Thór remained rooted to the spot, dumbstruck that he had completely lost control of the situation.

He was about to call out to her when he heard the front door slam shut.

SIGLUFJÖRDUR: NOVEMBER 2008

Ugla the owl perched on a stump.

Ágúst had always recited the old rhyme when they sat in the attic window at her parents' house in Patreksfjörður, overlooking over the road.

The memory brought a smile to her lips. Only recently had she found herself able to smile again when she thought of him. Four years had passed since she had moved – alone – to Siglufjörður.

It was also four years since she had last seen Patreksfjörður.

Her parents came to see her regularly and had been here as recently as October, staying with her for two weeks before travelling back west. Now she was alone again.

She had made some good friends here, but none were especially close and she never talked about the past. As far as they knew, she was just someone who had moved from the Westfjords.

She was aware that the town boys spread gossip about her that was pure fabrication. Not that it mattered now that she had grown a thick skin. As if she cared what the Siglufjörður boys said about her. There was only one boy for whom she had even the slightest care.

That was Ágúst, the handsomest boy in Patreksfjörður – as far as she was concerned, at least.

They had been friends from the age of seven, and their relationship developed into something deeper in their teens. They had been virtually inseparable ever since.

Ugla and Ágúst, names that were inextricably linked – in

Patreksfjörður, anyway. But not here in Siglufjörður, where nobody knew anything about them.

That's the way she wanted it and she decided that she quite liked being this mysterious young woman from the west, the one about whom tales were spun. Although, perhaps it wasn't entirely true that she didn't care about what was whispered about her. One story in particular was hurtful. Somehow word had got around that she was an easy lay and she failed to understand how that piece of gossip had found its way into circulation.

Immediately after the incident that had changed everything, she had made the decision to leave the Westfjords behind her. To begin with her parents had been completely against it. She hadn't finished her studies; she was in her penultimate year at Ísafjörður College.

Ugla managed to get through the spring exams, and then she had applied for jobs in other parts of the country. Soon she had an offer from the fish processing plant in Siglufjörður. Like most people in Patreksfjörður, she had worked in the fish as a youngster and knew that, although her ambitions lay elsewhere, this was work she was used to. After working in the factory for a few months she had been told there might be a part-time position in the office. Having applied, and got the job, she had been able to reduce her hours on the factory floor and was now spending half her time doing clerical duties. She hoped that this miserable recession that now seemed about to blight Iceland wouldn't affect her too much. She needed the work and the last thing she wanted to do was to lose her job and have to go back to Patreksfjörður to live with her parents.

The personnel manager at the fish plant had told her about a short-term lease on a small basement flat – a good place to lay her head while she decided how long she would be staying in Siglufjörður. She was escorted round the flat by Hrólfur, a spry gentleman who looked about eighty, although she later discovered that he was approaching ninety.

Before long she was told that old Hrólfur was Hrólfur Kristjánsson, the well-known writer. She remembered his book, *North of the*

Hills, from her school days. The class was asked to read a book written in 1941 – probably some unbearably dreary, bucolic love story, she had thought. But she had been wrong. She read *North of the Hills* in a single evening, and was, even now, swept away by its beauty. As a whole, the class hadn't been particularly enamoured of the book, any more than any of the other books on the reading list, but there was something about it that Ugly found captivating, undoubtedly the same something that had made the book sell by the truckload during the forties – at home in Iceland and all over the world.

It was a mild, clear day in the spring of 2004 when she found herself facing the author himself. There was a warmth to this slightly stooped man, who had clearly been exceptionally tall and imposing in his younger years. His voice was strong, but somehow paternal, although he had no children of his own. He was lean, his grey hair receding, and had about him an authority of the kind that comes with being accustomed to respect.

He lived in a magnificent house on Hólavegur, with a view out over the fjord. The house had been well maintained and next to it was a large garage containing his elderly red Mercedes. As far as Ugly could make out, the basement flat had been rented out now and again, mostly to working people newly arrived in the town, or to the occasional artist in search of peace and quiet amid the encircling mountains. But Hrólfr had apparently never been inclined to allow just anyone to stay there, making sure he met every potential tenant in person; he had been known to turn people down on the spot if he didn't like the look of them.

'Working in the fish, you said?' He had asked, his powerful voice husky and with a force that made it carry throughout the flat. He looked her up and down, his eyes sharp and enquiring, with both joy and despair behind them.

'To start with,' she replied softly, speaking to the basement flat's floor rather than to him.

'What? Speak up, young lady,' he said impatiently.

She raised her voice. 'Yes, to start with,' she repeated.

‘And your parents know about this? You look pretty damn young.’ He peered at her and his lip twisted oddly, as if he was trying to smile, but at the same time hold it back.

‘Yes, of course. But I can make decisions for myself.’ She was speaking clearly now, more assertively.

‘Good. I like people who make their own decisions in life. And you drink coffee?’ His voice was slightly friendlier now.

‘Yes,’ she lied, deciding that acquiring a coffee habit would be no more of a challenge than anything else.

It was obvious that he liked her. He accepted her as a tenant for the basement flat and she soon settled into a routine with Hrólfur, sitting together to share a pot of coffee once a week. There was no obligation to do this, and it certainly wasn’t a burden. It became a genuine pleasure to talk over the past with him: his time abroad until the outbreak of the Second World War had brought him home to Iceland; the years of the herring boom; his travels in later years overseas and the conferences in which he had taken part as a well-known author.

In turn, Hrólfur prised her out of her shell and she came to enjoy life a little more.

She rarely spoke about the past and never mentioned Ágúst. They talked mostly about books and music. She had studied piano since childhood, at home in Patreksfjörður. He encouraged her to play for him every time she visited. At the end of one such performance, a small piece by Debussy, Hrólfur said, rather surprisingly: ‘Why don’t you advertise for students?’

‘Students? I’m not a qualified teacher.’ She felt slightly embarrassed.

‘You play well enough. Really well actually. I’m sure you could teach the basics?’

She felt the support and belief in his voice. What had begun as an acquaintance had gradually developed into valued friendship.

‘You can use my piano,’ he added.

‘I’ll think it over,’ she replied, self-consciously.

One day when she felt that life was being good to her, she placed

an ad in the Co-op window, a quickly written A4 sheet: "Piano lessons. Price negotiable", along with her name and phone number written on five strips at the bottom that anyone interested could tear off for future reference. This initiative had delighted Hrólfrur, although there had been no enquiries yet.

They didn't discuss only music; she had admitted to having an interest in the theatre while she had been living in Patreksfjörður and at college in Ísafjörður, where she had taken part in amateur dramatics. The subject arose on a June evening when she and Hrólfrur sat and talked over coffee and pastries by the window. The water of the fjord was as still as a mirror and the town sparkled, although the sun was dipping below the mountains, its light illuminating only the peaks on the eastern side of the fjord.

'You know, I'm the chairman of the Dramatic Society,' he said casually but with purpose.

'A Dramatic Society? Here in Siglufjörður?' She could not disguise her surprise.

'Don't be fooled by appearances. This town used to be big, and still is, despite the dwindling population. Of course we have a Dramatic Society.' He smiled. She had become used to his slightly crooked smile, knowing that there was real warmth behind it.

'It isn't a large society, though. One production a year at most. I was thinking, perhaps I should mention your name to the director.'

'Oh, please don't. I wouldn't be any good.'

Her rejection wasn't entirely convincing, and she knew that he would probably do it anyway. He eventually did, and the following autumn she found herself cast in a comedy.

She could hardly believe how easy it was to lose herself on stage.

As she looked into the footlights, it was like stepping into another world. The audience no longer mattered, they could be one, two or fifty, they all merged into one in the glare of lights. When she was on the stage she was no longer in either the Westfjords or Siglufjörður, as she concentrated on recalling the text of the play, and playing emotions that were not her own to the audience. Such was the

intensity of her concentration that she even forgot for a moment to think of Ágúst.

She found the applause at the end of the play exhilarating, as if she was floating over the stage. She made a habit of sitting quietly after each performance to bring herself down to earth, and then the gloom would return once again; the memories of Ágúst. But with each performance it somehow became more bearable and every time it would take a little longer for the sorrow to return.

It was as if the stage had become her way out of the darkness.

Getting to know the old man was a source of great happiness to her, and she was also very aware that she would never have approached the Dramatic Society on her own.

That made it all the more difficult to tell him about her decision to move away from his basement flat. She had been offered a larger, fully furnished flat to rent in the centre of the town, on Nordurgata; what made her mind up was the fact that it included a piano. She was determined to move there, and it was time to find herself somewhere more permanent in the town to call her own. The basement flat, cosy though it was, was never going to be a long-term prospect. The Nordurgata flat was a step in the right direction. Not only was it more spacious and convenient, but it came with a small garden.

Ugla was still single. Of course there were a few men in the town whom she found attractive, but something held her back. Maybe it was the memory of Ágúst, at least to start with, or maybe she simply wasn't ready to decide yet if Siglufjörður was the place she wanted to make her home. She wasn't ready to put down roots, not right away.

Her contact with Hrólfur continued after she moved and she walked up the steep hill from her apartment in the town centre to his house on Hólavegur every Wednesday afternoon for coffee with him, just as if she were still living downstairs. They chatted about this and that, his past and his travels, and her future. A fine old man, she thought frequently, always hoping that he had many years in front of him.

Now her life had taken yet another turn. Úlfur, the Dramatic

Society's director, had recently offered her a leading role in a new play. Rehearsals were about to start, with the play to open soon after Christmas.

Playing the lead? The butterflies began fluttering in her stomach. It was only an amateur society, but all the same, a lead is still a lead.

It was a good part. The play had been written by someone local and with a bit of luck, it might even be shown further afield, maybe in neighbouring Akureyri, the north coast's largest town, or even in Reykjavík.

It was November and she had settled well into her new apartment, proud to be standing on her own two feet, and in particular looking forward to her role in the play. It was snowing; she looked out of the window at the beautiful, pearl-white snow, which gave her such a deep sense of tranquillity.

She opened the door to the back garden to take a deep breath of chill night air, but the sharp north wind forced her to close it quickly, and suddenly she found herself thinking about Ágúst.

Why did this have to happen to her? Why did he have to die so suddenly? Why did she have to experience such tragic loss at such a young age? It wasn't fair.

She closed her eyes and thought of the window seat at home in Patreksfjörður, reciting in her mind the old nursery rhyme.

Ugla the owl, perched on a stump.

Who's next?

One, two,

And it was you.