

REYKJAVÍK GRAPEVINE

Kári Stefánsson:
Decoding Covid-19

The man at the vanguard of COVID-19 screening in Iceland, on surprise discoveries, the future of deCODE's testing programme and the merits of the Icelandic response

Things Are Getting Better, But Things Are Also Getting Worse

It has now been five weeks since Iceland's first confirmed case of COVID-19 and, at the time of writing, the Minister of Health is expected to prolong the current gathering ban to May 4th. Four have now died from the virus in Iceland—an Australian tourist and three Icelanders. Of those, two passed away on April 2nd, the day this article was written. Currently, there are around ten people in intensive care and 80-90 more test positive with the virus every day. This is an increase from the 50-60 patients per day we were seeing in the beginning of the week. At the same time, there are signs the virus is slowing down, so it's hard to truly ascertain where we are right now.

The Directorate of Health believes that the virus will peak around Easter, somewhere close to Good Friday (April 10th). We can, therefore, only hope that we're in for some good news and return to normalcy thereafter, as at the moment, everything in Iceland has stopped. It's safe to say that the whole world has stopped.

It's clear that Iceland's summer tourism season is ruined, which means that we could be seeing unprecedented unemployment

numbers before long. The Minister of Welfare believes that unemployment numbers will be much higher than following the 2008 Icelandic financial crisis. It will take time to turn that around, although Icelanders are notoriously quick to get back on their feet. There's a ray of hope.

One of Iceland's most intrepid soldiers amid this crisis is Kári Stefánsson, the director of deCODE genetics, who we interview in this issue. Kári has stepped in to assist the government's efforts to test the general public and has already produced some interesting findings about the virus that could prove helpful for other nations waging their own battles against

the pandemic. We have now tested 5% of the Icelandic population for COVID-19, putting us well ahead of the global curve.

This special web issue also includes a travel feature, for those who want to revisit the country as they wait out this pandemic from their living room. To be clear, the feature was written well before the gathering ban and virus hit us.

We want to thank our readers for their continued support during this difficult time through the [High Five Club](#). Thanks!

Editor-In-Chief, Valur Grettisson 🇮🇸



Hannah Jane Cohen is based out of Iceland by way of New York. She's known for her love of Willa Ford, David Foster Wallace, and other such "intellectuals."

Her visionary work is known for expanding the definitions of emotion, introspection, and above all else, taste. Hannah is also the current Drag King of Iceland, Hans. Hannah is a Columbia alumni.



Sveinbjörn Pálsson is our Art Director. He's responsible for the design of the magazine and the cover photography. When he's not working here, he DJs as Terror-

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Samuel O'Donnell

Sam is an English major from The United States. He has his Bachelor's Degree, and keeps telling himself that this is the year he will begin pursuing his Master's. In his spare time, he enjoys playing video games, writing short horror sto-

ries, listening to all kinds of metal, and reading.



Poppy Askham is a languages student, fledgling writer, and lover of flared jeans who has fled to the won-

derful nation of Iceland in a desperate bid to escape Boris' Brexit Britain whilst she still can. Looking for a new adventure, she's swapped her hometown Bath with its crowds of tourists and famous hot springs for ... Reykjavik.

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“Next month, I’ll definitely start concentrating hardcore on learning Icelandic. I’m gonna get so good.”



GRAPEVINE GUIDES

Inside Is The New Everything

How to stay cultured while “social distancing”

Words: **Hannah Jane Cohen, a loner**

Well, thanks to questionable food choices in another part of the world, we’ve all got a lot of time on our hands. Yes, in order to halt the spread of COVID-19, governments the world over have encouraged “social distancing,” (i.e. deliberately avoiding physical interactions with people) to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus.

But what’s a gal to do while stuck inside her house? YouTube workout videos? Sensual love letters? Slash fanfiction? Don’t worry, the Grapevine is here to help you stay cultured until the Mad Max gangs begin to rampage.

Study up, idiots

Every foreigner in Iceland has a constant mantra running through their head: “Next month, I’ll definitely start concentrating hardcore on learning Icelandic. I’m gonna get so good.” Well, immigrants, now you have no excuse. **Icelandic Online** (icelandiconline.com) is the premiere resource for this—they even use it as a self-study class in the University of Iceland. It’ll teach you grammar, declination, and more with a mix of reading, writing, and listening exercises. Other than that, download the **Drops** app for a crash course in random vocabulary, like the Icelandic word for hazelnut (‘heslihneta’). Totally useful.

For those who already know Icelandic, or don’t care about learning an only vaguely useful language, there are eight Ivy

League universities offering over 450 classes online for free, from programming to art history to ethics. Personally, I’d recommend enrolling in **Columbia University’s** “The Age of Sustainable Development” taught by the legendary economist **Jeffrey Sachs**. If there’s anyone who can make you hopeful about the world’s massive inequality, it’s Sachs. I—the author—took Sachs’ class at University and got an A. Jk. I did not.

Relax and watch, fans

Just because we can’t have raucous concerts in dingy venues full of wafting cigarette smoke and sticky floors doesn’t mean that the local Icelandic scene is going to halt creating some goddamn culture. No, in fact many local bands and performance groups are taking the event ban as a challenge, live-streaming shows on Facebook or Instagram but also saving them so you’re free to watch at your leisure.

Mispyrming, some of the Grapevine’s favourite animal blood enthusiasts, recently live-streamed a pretty fantastic show from Tallinn, which you can view on their Facebook. On the less gruesome front, **Harpa** is running a series entitled ‘Heima í Hörpu,’ which features almost daily live-streams of lovely classical-ish artists from their Facebook page at 11:00. **Duo Harpverk’s** April 1st show featuring dancer **Félix Urbina Alejandro** was a standout, but with the amount of talent Harpa has at

its fingertips, you can rest assured that everyday’s performance will take your breath away. Hey Harpa—Vikingur Ólafsson next? Pls?

For more future viewing, **Tjarnarbíó** is putting on a virtual extravaganza called ‘Saman í sóttkví’ on April 6th, and April 13th at 20:00, featuring performances by artists like **K.óla, Ásta, Svavar Knútur, Jono Duffy, Margrét Maack** and more. Copy down the bank details on the event page so you can make sure your favourite performers make some \$\$\$ during this difficult time.

Otherwise, check out the Facebook page **‘Kvillist,’** which is acting as a co-host for many livestream events.

On the international front, the **Metropolitan Opera** is live-streaming some of their best operas for free every night over the next few weeks. We’d recommend streaming **Verdi’s ‘Macbeth’**—the best opera ever made in this author’s opinion—on April 4th starring the motherfucking icon **Anna Netrebko**. Pls come to Iceland, Anna.

Otherwise, **Diplo** is livestreaming near-daily two hour sets on YouTube, Instagram and Twitch. **Miley Cyrus** is doing daily Instagram lives with other celebrities at 11:30 LA time. Also, ya boi **Andrew Lloyd Webber** is taking requests for songs on his Twitter, and has already blessed the world with a gorgeous rendition of “All I Ask Of You.” That said, he has not

responded to our cries of doing a livestream with Patti LuPone for a sing-a-long ‘Evita.’ What’s new, Buenos Aires?

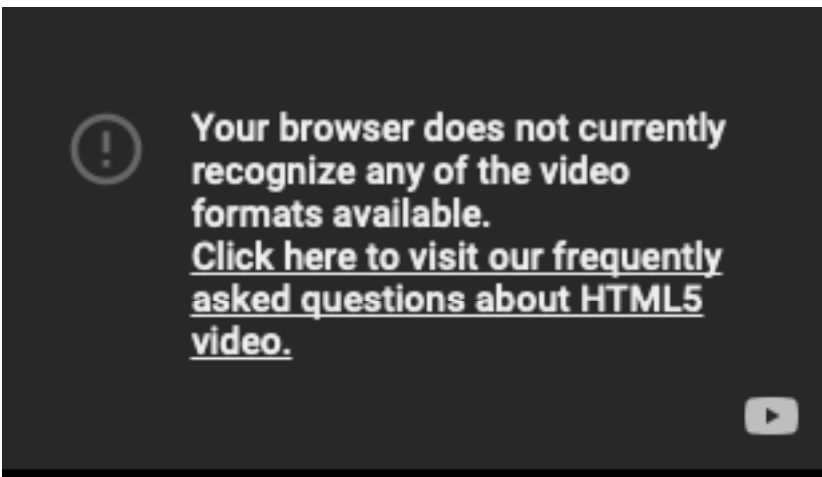
Artwork makes you look smart, losers

Unfortunately, walking the halls of your favourite museum is impossible right now, but some Icelandic museums are getting creative. Most notably, Reykjavík Art Museum - **Kjarvalsstaðir** has erected a new exhibition entitled **‘Outsiders,’** which is on display in the windows of the museum facing the Klambartún park. The exhibition features six artists including **Ólöf Nordal** and **Harpa Björnsdóttir** and explores the worship of nature. Stop by on your daily sanity-walk, but remember to keep a two metre distance from other passerbys.

If you’re sick or in full quarantine, first off, that sucks, but second, there are a ton of international museums and galleries that’ll open their doors to you from the comfort of your computer, so you needn’t feel left out on the visual art front. **The British Museum** is virtually opening up their great hall, so you can peek at the **Rosetta Stone** and **Egyptian mummies** (while hoping this plague doesn’t turn you into one). Afterwards, mosey through the **Guggenheim, Musée d’Orsay, Pergamon,** and **Rijksmuseum.**

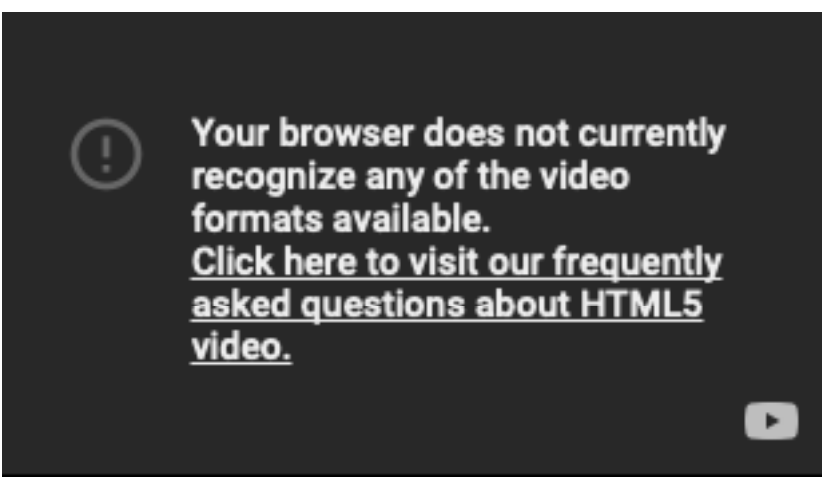
How cultured do you feel now, dweeb? 🍷

The Reykjavík Grapevine Playlist



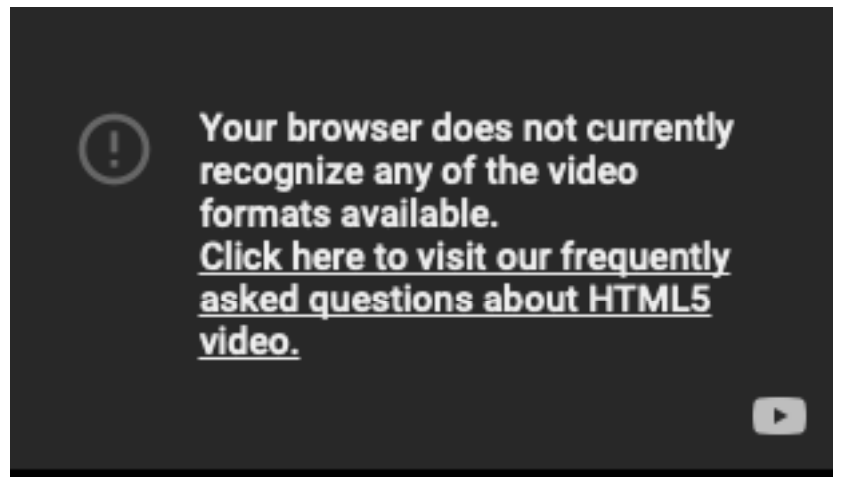
Sam Smith - “To Die For (Ólafur Arnalds Remix)”

Ólafur Arnalds’ remix of Sam Smith’s single serves up a minimalistic take on the heartbreaking ballad. Slow, instrumental, and stripped of the beginning’s audio sample, it sounds like less of a remix than the original. A soft piano introduces Smith’s golden vocals. Cellos come in, honing on the tragic undertones while an electronic arpeggio plays in the background. It picks up before falling back to melancholic slowness at the end. **SPO**



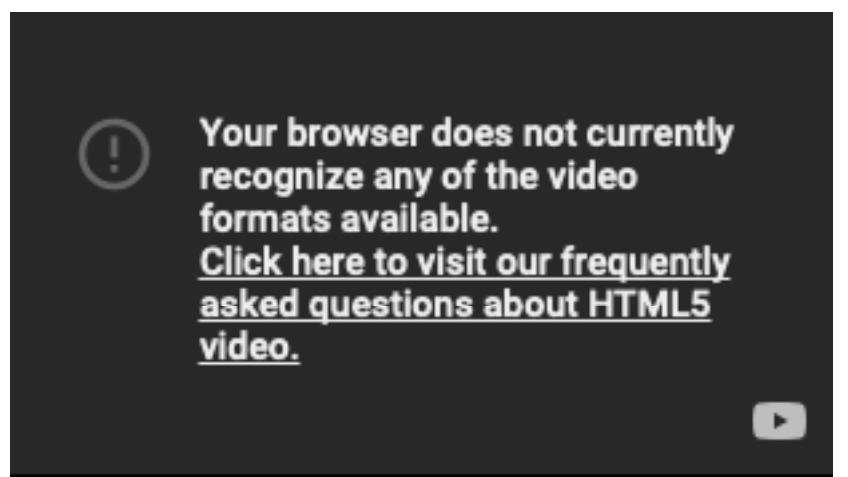
GusGus - “Out of Place”

Legends of the Icelandic electronic scene, GusGus are back with a characteristically trancy new single. With multi-layered synths and smooth dreamy vocals, this track has an effortless feel to it. Don’t be surprised if you find yourself drifting off at your desk whilst listening. **PA**



Jean-Philippe Rameau & Víkingur Ólafsson - “The Arts and the Hours”

The perfect track for these anxiety-inducing times, Víkingur Ólafsson’s virtuoso piano playing will soothe even the most jangled nerves. Víkingur’s arrangement—transcribed from Rameau’s last opera ‘Les Boréades’—is the enchanting centrepiece on Víkingur’s soon-to-be-released album, which will pay homage to two French greats of the classical world—Rameau and Debussy. **PA**



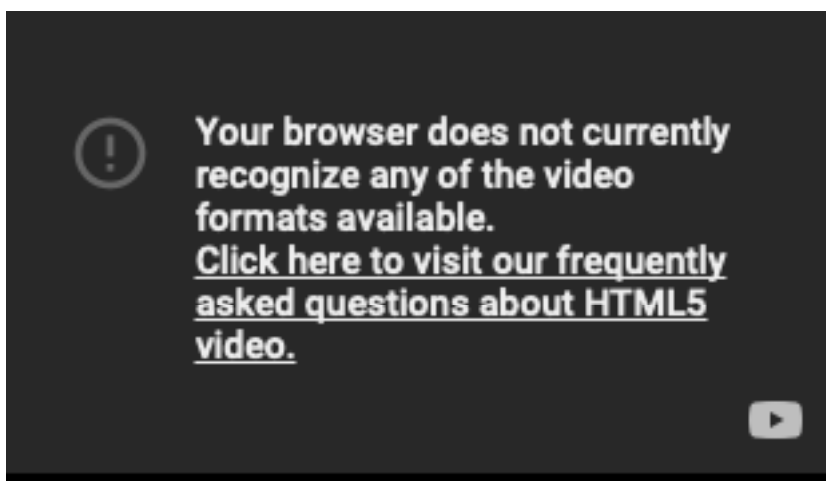
Sturla Atlas - “Hvert sem er”

Sturla’s all grown up! 101 Boys’ first breakout star is back with his fifth release and first solo outing since 2017. His nose for pop hooks and his silky smooth voice are still there but the tounge-in-cheek gangsta rap references are gone, and the trap beat has been replaced with an uptempo electropop beat, reminiscent of The Weeknd’s recent offerings. Somber but driving full steam ahead, just like you and me, baby. It’s a bunker banger. **SP**

The Reykjavík Grapevine Playlist

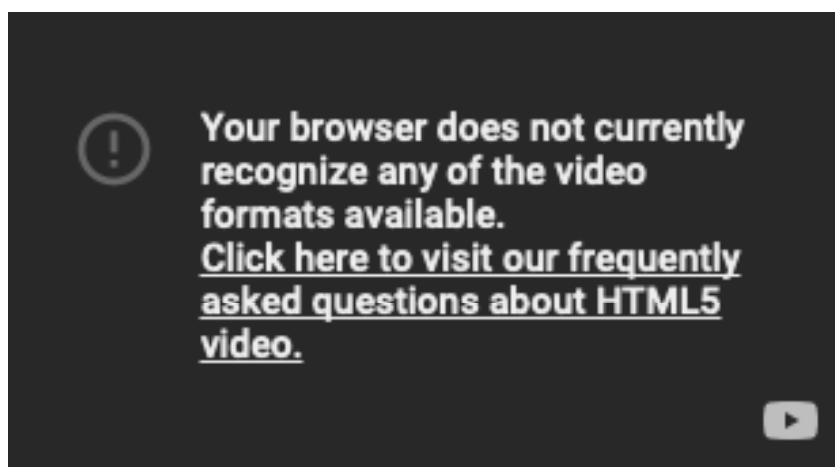


Words: **Grapevine Staff**
Photo: **Hrefna Björg**



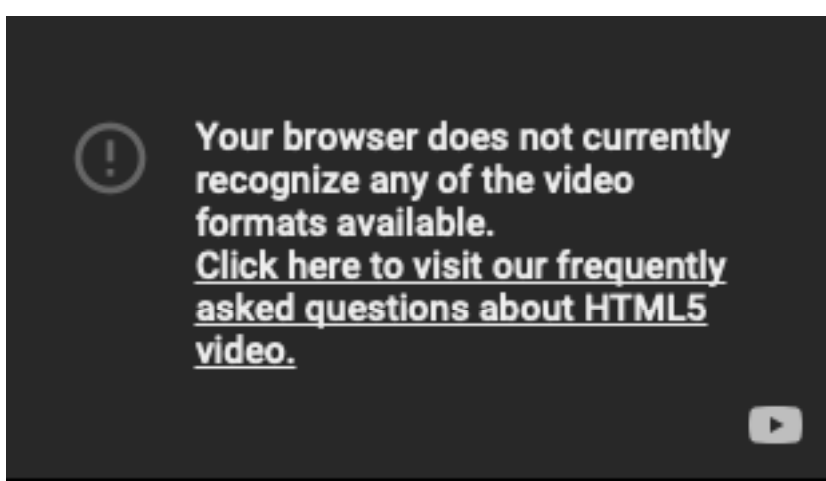
Ásta - “Sykurbað”

Our regular readers know that we absolutely love Ásta. Now, the eponymous song from her 2019 debut album is here with a particularly high production video, starring the singer herself. It’s arguably the best track from the album, featuring a chord progression that spans the fretboard, and Ásta’s distinctly angelic voice. This lady is seriously talented. **SPO**



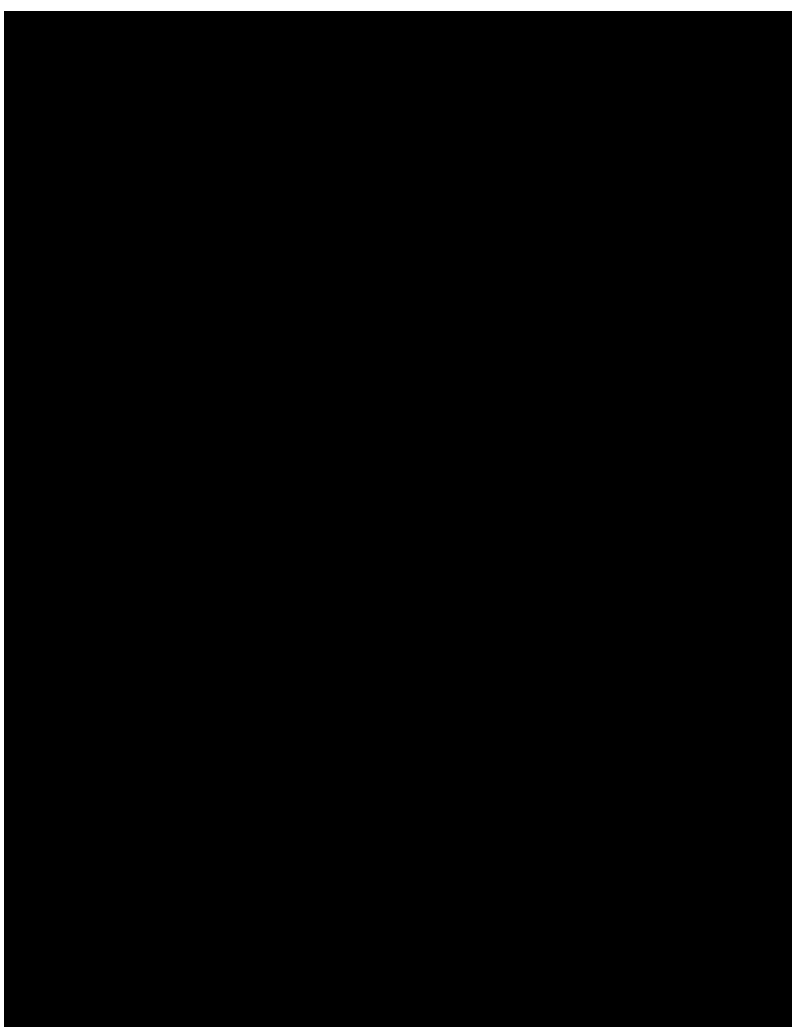
Salóme Katrín - “Don’t Take Me So Seriously”

Post-dreifing starlet Salóme Katrín has an important message in her debut single. The acoustic indie ballad is an easy-going and straight-forward imploration: “Don’t take me so seriously. I’m not being real.” Could this mean that the music she releases forthwith will be sillier? We hope so. **SPO**



Velvet Villain - “I Wanna Know”

This is my kind of music. A thick, heavily distorted riff and a persistent beat on an acoustic drum kit sets the tone for the whole song, which is warped, frustrated, and raw. Remember The White Stripes? It’s a lot like The White Stripes. **SPO**



Words: **Hannah Jane Cohen**
Photo: **Art Bicnick**

FANCIES

Fancies Is Our Compendium Of Reykjavík Street Icons

M.R. MYMY IRIDESCENCE BARK MORPHO 1314 is a long duration performance artist.

Wearing:

- Matriarchy for the next two thousand years—hail Women
- Higher Consciousness Beaming through skulls of absent fathers
- Gift wrapped Belfast love of my life Mint God Highlander Paul Mark
- Hyper Surface Structured to Serve All Elephants and Niger rhythm
- Crystallized and vaporized into Audio bursts in Beats bleeding into everything that feeds on the music of the matriarchal being

Describe your style in 5 words:

Björk. Kate. Sade. Tori. Janet.

Favourite stores around Reykjavík:

Invasion of Scandinavian acrylic uniformity! Where the fuck is the cool wool store, Reykjavík! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! (12)

Favourite piece you own:

My Clann Mhic Leòid jacket from the Isle of Skye, that belonged to my grandfather, Richardt Petersen, 1935-2006. It features round Na Cananaich cigarette burns and the meticulous embroidered repairs of my ultimate style icon, my grandmother Edel Petersen, 1939-2006.

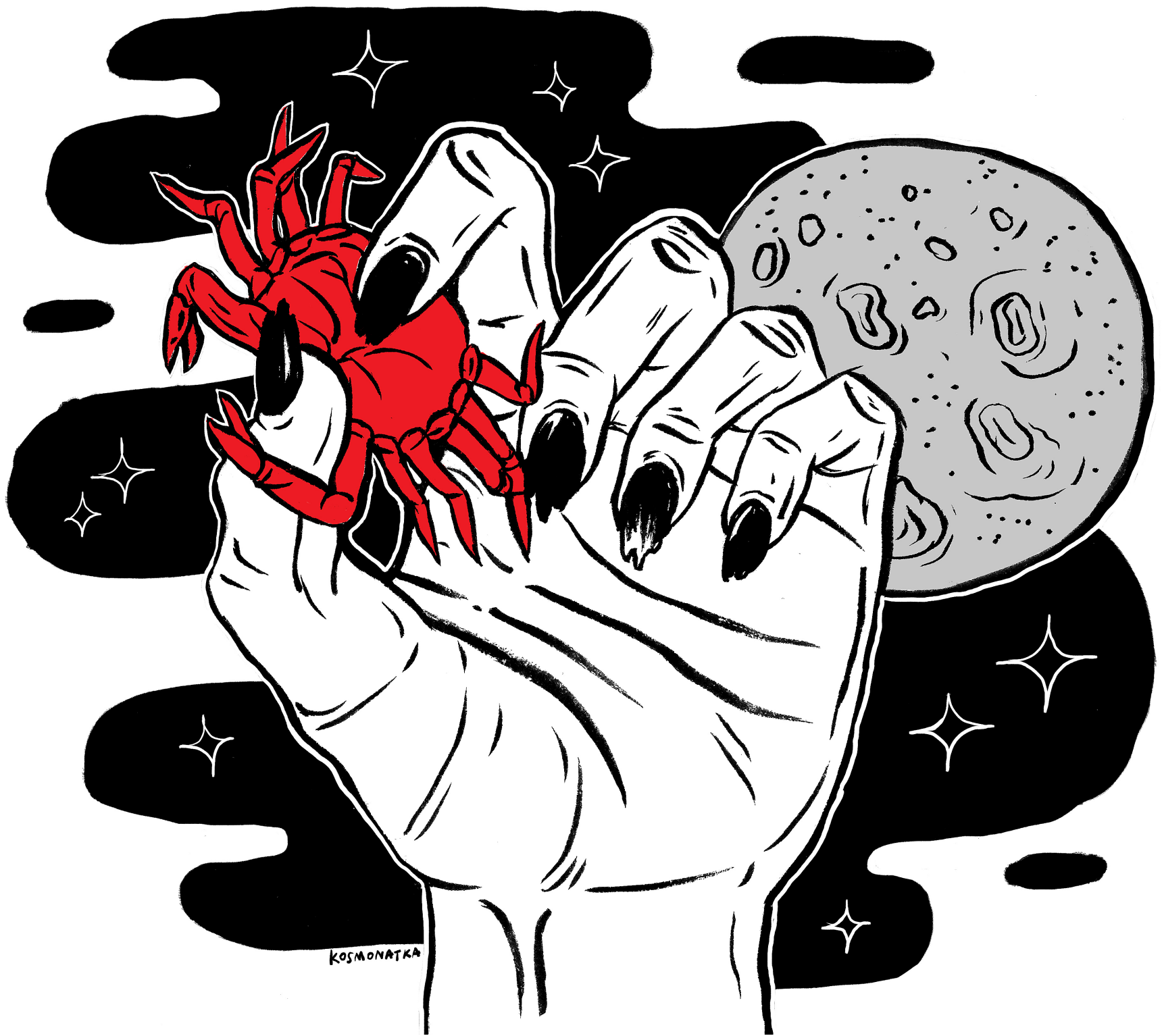
Something you would never wear:

A logo.

Lusting after:

The “Jellyfish” Ensemble from the 2010 S/S collection ‘Plato’s Atlantis’ by Alexander McQueen, 1969-2010, and wings. ♡





HORROR-SCOPES


Never Date A Leo... Seriously


Proof? Look at Pilot Pete... #TeamHannahAnn


Words: **Hannah Jane Cohen, astrologer/life coach**
Image: **Kosmonatka**


In Horror-Scopes, the Grapevine's dedicated team of amateur single astrologists break down your upcoming weeks based on shit like Venus, the home "planet" of womankind.


tic about an 117 year old hanging around outside the window of a 17 year old!" Shut up, and there's something loving about "imprinting" on a "baby"? GROSS!

Aries
 Just because someone gets your name tattooed on them doesn't mean they actually love you. They might just be, ahem, weird.


Taurus
 The reason you're currently single is no doubt due to the fact that you were #TeamJacob when you should have obvs been #TeamEdward. We know, we know, "There's nothing roman-


Gemini
 POV: you show off your TikTok account to your date. Seal the deal.


Cancer
 Next time you have sex, get a lil weird and pump 'St. Anger' by Metallica. He'll love it.

Leo
 "Hit or miss! I guess ya never miss yeah! Got a boyfriend? I bet he doesn't kiss


ya!" This is just an example of cool things you could do on the internet that'll no doubt get you famous. And you know what that means? Chicks with Daddy issues.


Virgo
 That guy your momma warned you about: Guess what, she's wrong! Duh. Go get 'em tiger. Chronic commitment issues, a history of cheating and slight body odour problems are just part of their unique charm.


Libra
 So what if you die alone? What's so bad about lying undiscovered in your cramped downtown studio apartment surrounded by wilting pot plants and empty Ben and Jerry's tubs until your starving family of seven cats resort to nibbling at your corpse?

Scorpio
 Standing outside your crush's house holding a boombox above your head is the only way to catch their attention. Even better if they barely know you. Nothing says romance like trespassing on

private property and mild invasion of privacy. Don't believe us? See Taurus above. Boundaries? What boundaries?

Sagittarius
 Yes, you were right all along. You're a nice guy and that's why you're hopelessly single—it's got nothing to do with the fact you still live in your parents' basement or that you unselfconsciously enjoy Hootie & The Blowfish. Sorry bud, we just prefer a bad boy.

Capricorn
 PSA: 'You' is probably not the best show to model your romantic endeavours on. Just putting it out there.

Aquarius
 "No, I don't want to meet you nowhere. No, I don't want none of your time and no, I don't want no scrub. A scrub is a guy that can't get no love from me." Take the hint, kid. It's an anthem for a reason.

Pisces
 Keep trying? ♡



Kári Stefánsson:
TESTING TIMES

Kári Stefánsson, the man at the vanguard of COVID-19 screening in Iceland, on surprise discoveries, the future of deCODE's testing programme and the merits of the Icelandic response

Words: Poppy Askham
Photos: Art Bicnick



As the rampant spread of COVID-19 outpaces testing capabilities the world over, even superpower nations are left guessing at infection rates and scrambling to test indispensable healthcare workers. Mercifully, it's an entirely different story here in Iceland. Boasting more than 18,000 COVID-19 tests processed at the time of writing, Iceland has screened the highest proportion of its population of any country in the world. Although the nation's minute population is an ace in Iceland's pocket when it comes to per capita statistics, Iceland is undeniably well ahead of the curve for COVID-19 screening, particularly general population screening.

Through its screening service and extensive genetic analysis of the virus, Reykjavik-based biopharmaceutical company deCODE has become a linchpin of Icelandic COVID-19 screening efforts. At its helm is the formidable Dr. Kári Stefánsson, deCODE's founder and CEO.

Gruff, unabashedly opinionated, controversial, and armed with an acerbic wit and searing intellect, Kári is a force to be reckoned with (to witness, he threatens to walk out of this very interview just three minutes in, giving this reporter a minor cardiac before realising it's his idea of a joke).

Though he may seem an unlikely hero, Kári is now the knight in a shining lab coat heading the battle against Iceland's invisible enemy, COVID-19.

Action Stations

The speed with which testing facilities were set up in Reykjavik has been one of the distinguishing features of Iceland's pandemic response. In fact, the National University Hospital started screening for the virus on January 31st, almost a month before the first case was confirmed in the country.

"We are constantly on our toes," says Kári. Just two weeks after the first confirmed COVID-19 case in Iceland, deCODE conducted its first virus screenings and 12 days later the first research paper was sent off to be published. In a matter-of-fact tone that makes the whole thing sound impossibly easy, Kári explains, "I proposed that we should go out and [begin screenings] and we did. That was on March 6th and it took us a week to set it up."

"I was driving to work on March 6th and I heard the news about COVID in China," Kári recounts. "On the news they were commenting on the lethality of the infection and they said that the estimation was that it would kill 3.4% of those who got infected. I was surprised because to be able to do that calculation you needed to know the distribution of the virus in the population in general not just in those who got seriously ill or were in

the high-risk groups." His scepticism about this estimation and empirical instincts as a scientist inspired the launch of deCODE's drive-through screenings.

"I felt that it was necessary, not just in Iceland but for the world in general, to have a population where you knew the spread of the virus in the general population," and so Iceland took centre stage as a case model for scientists studying the ways in which infection is transmitted.

Genetic diversity

Once samples have been taken, deCODE's experts get to work analysing their genetic makeup, comparing their findings with the sequences of the original SARS-CoV-2 genome data from China. "What I'm most surprised by is the sequence diversity in the virus," says Kári. "In Iceland we have found 130 mutations in the virus that have not been found outside of Iceland."

It is unclear what this fast rate of mutation may mean. Kári has been cautious on numerous occasions in the past to make any predictions about this finding.

Much of deCODE's current work involves tracing the origins of infections found in Iceland. The virus is mutating in different ways in different parts of the world. By identifying the distinct strings of genetic variants coming from different regions, deCODE has been able to determine that the majority of infections have come from Austria, Italy, and a little more surprisingly, the UK. A form of the virus found on the West Coast of the US has also been found in Iceland.

"Because we are sequencing the virus from everyone that is diagnosed you can determine on the basis of these the country of origin of the infection in every single individual in Iceland," Kári explains. "One of the things that it does for you is that you can track the infection, you can determine how it flows through society, who is infecting whom, etc. And that is very important when you are trying to track infections, when you are trying to track contacts, to be able to use quarantine in an effective manner."

An "honourable" virus?

It is widely understood that children experience a milder form of COVID-19, although there are tragic exceptions to this trend. However, deCODE's statistical analysis suggests that the truth about the way the virus behaves towards children may be even more surprising.

"Children are not just less likely to become seriously sick if they get infected, they are much less likely to



get infected at all. So when you put the two of these things together, children are relatively well protected against this epidemic.” Kári tells us. “Even though this virus is rather nasty, it occasionally shows honourable behaviour.”

And the virus’ “honour” extends to another demographic of society. As Kári explains, “women are less likely to get seriously ill if they are infected they are less likely to get seriously infected than males.” In a paper released by deCODE researchers on the early spread of COVID-19 in Iceland, targeted testing carried out by the National University Hospital of Iceland showed that 14.6% of men tested positive in comparison to 9.5% of women.

It remains unclear as to why susceptibility to the virus differs between genders and age groups and Kári was cautious not to suggest reasons, instead explaining that “this is the first epidemic by this virus and our ability to predict the ways in which a new virus behaves is limited, so everything we are seeing is sort of new and surprising.”

Test, test, test

deCODE’s published research into the early spread of COVID-19 in Iceland concluded with a stark warning: “The 0.9% frequency of the infection in the population screening indicates that the virus is spreading to the extent that unless we increase the screening effort we are likely to fail in our efforts to contain it.” This is a statement Kári stands by.

“Unless we increase testing, we are not going to be able to contain the infection,” he confirms. “We need to continue to test because our earliest results show that there is a substantial spread of the virus outside the high-risk groups in the material we tested. I think [the infection rate] in the population is closer to 0.5%. We need to identify a substantial proportion of those [cases] in order to be able to contain the infection.”

Kári believes 50,000 to 100,000 tests will be needed if Iceland is to contain the virus. Although testing up to a quarter of Iceland’s population may seem ambitious, he assures us it is entirely feasible. “I’m absolutely convinced

that we will succeed in doing it. We have to do it, we have to continue the screening or else we will not succeed.”

There is a small obstacle between Kári and his goal: availability of the supplies required for testing. Having recently overcome a shortage of nasal swabs, Kári discloses that deCODE is “a little bit concerned about reagents.” Kári revealed to the Grapevine on March 31st that deCODE only has enough reagent stocks for about 9 days. “We are scouring the world for more and I hope that we will find some,” he said.

Next Steps

The next step in Kári’s plan is to extend testing into rural communities. Although the epicentre of Iceland’s epidemic remains the capital area, COVID-19 has now reached every region of Iceland and deCODE is looking to improve access to tests across the country. Testing kits are due to be sent to East Iceland and the Westman Islands in the next couple of days.

“I think we are going to use exactly the same approach to the people in the countryside as we do in Reykjavík,” Kári explains. Healthcare workers will take samples, which will then be sent to deCODE’s headquarters for analysis. Kári favours drive-through testing clinics even in more remote regions and firmly rejects the idea of home-testing due to the increased risk of unreliable results.

Speaking from personal experience, Kári explains the uncomfortable nature of nasal swab testing could affect the reliability of self-sampling. “It tickles enormously when it’s put up your nose and I don’t think that you can trust that people will do it properly. Bear in mind, the test when [carried out by medical professionals] is only 75% [accurate], so there are about 25% false negatives. I think that the error that comes from self-sampling would cause a bit of a mess.”

Community spirit

The hard work of around 120 deCODE employees has underpinned Iceland’s COVID-19 testing efforts and

“I insist that we are going to come out of this as a better society. Come hell or high water, we’re going to make sure we come out of this better.”

will continue to be vital in the months to come if Kári is to reach his lofty testing goal.

“This is an extraordinarily committed group of people” Kári reflected with obvious pride. “There are people at deCODE who are working 18-hour days. No one asks when they can go home, no one asks to be compensated for these long hours. This is all fuelled by community spirit, which is absolutely boundlessly beautiful. These are good people, it’s very nice to see people come together like this at a difficult moment. It’s beautiful.”

In fact, Kári’s praise does not stop there, he has also been impressed by the behaviour of the general population.

“The world is in a bit of a panic in general. Except for Iceland, people here seem to be taking this with serenity. I haven’t noticed any panic whatsoever. The stores haven’t been raided, people aren’t hoarding food, people aren’t hoarding toilet paper like people seem to be doing elsewhere. I have been very impressed. This is a nation of unruly people in general. People who are difficult to control—typically people who have difficulties behaving when everything is fine—but in the face of a crisis like this, we seem to be performing spectacularly.”

He even had a kind word to say about the Icelandic government. Well, sort of.

“We have very good public health officials, we have a very responsive system and what I think is particularly noticeable about the way in which we have [approached] this is that the government has left it completely in the hands of the public health officials. There has been no instance where the politicians have

intervened in what the public health officials have been doing.” Smiling sardonically, he adds, “We have been fortunate that our politicians have either been wise enough not to intervene or too lazy to do so.”

Looking forward

Although we are still in the eye of the storm, Kári is already looking ahead. An outspoken critic of government health-care expenditure in the past, Kári hopes Icelandic society can learn something from the painful experiences of the pandemic.

“I don’t think that we are financing the health care system well enough. I am hoping that this epidemic will change the balance in our society. I am hoping it will change the way our society works. I’m hoping it will be less materialistic and [the focus will be] on the things that bring us together rather than the ones that drive us apart... one aspect is that we will spend more on community spending things like healthcare, schools etc. But we’ll see.”

“I insist that we are going to come out of this as a better society,” Kári adds in a confidently optimistic tone. “Come hell or high water, we’re going to make sure we come out of this better.”

As deCODE continues to scale up screening, we can only share Kári’s hope that all the hard work done now to track and contain the virus in Iceland and increase global understanding of COVID-19 bring us closer to making his post-pandemic predictions reality. 🍀

TRAVEL

Get Medieval With It

1238 Museum puts you (yes, you!)
in the shoes of a Viking

Words: **Sam O'Donnell** Photos: **Art Bicnick**



Far in the northern reaches of Iceland, nestled in between Mount Tindastóll and Laxárdalsfjöll Mountain, in a town called Sauðárkrókur, lies a [museum called 1238](#). Since opening last year, 1238 seeks to immerse visitors in the experience of the Icelandic Civil War.

Clash of the clans

From 1220-1252, Iceland was embroiled in a political feud between six families vying for power and influence. The most

famous of these clans were the Sturlungar, led by Snorri Sturluson and his nephew Sturla Sighvatsson; the Haukdælir, led by Gissur Þorvaldsson; and the Ásbirningar, led by Kolbeinn the Younger.

Snorri Sturluson was the chief of the Sturlungar clan, and a vassal for King Hákon of Norway from 1220 until his death in 1241. He was tasked with bringing Iceland under the sovereignty of Norway, but he did little to enforce the king's will, which is what ulti-

mately led to his downfall. Snorri's nephew, Sturla, was also a vassal to King Hákon, and although he was much more aggressive in his work for the king, Kolbeinn and Gissur sought to gain power for themselves, and thus joined forces to defeat the Sturlungar, 'Game of Thrones' style.

Time for war

Exciting stuff. Upon entering the museum, I met Steinunn, who would be giving me the grand tour, which began at the "Selfie

Centre," where I garbed myself up in authentic Viking clothes and took a somewhat embarrassing amount of selfies. I must admit, the woolen tunic and cloak made me feel like a badass and I dreaded taking them off, so I set about the museum dressed as a Viking.

It was then time to learn, so I marched off to read the thrilling history of Iceland's civil war on the walls of the museum, which detailed the history of the aforementioned clans and would also set the stage for the museum's

augmented reality (AR) experience, which details the battle of Flóabardagi that happened on the Bay of Húnaflói, and their virtual reality (VR) war experience, both of which allow you to engage in battle.

Where the past meets the future

The AR station is a massive round table with a raised relief map of the Bay of Húnaflói, where Steinunn

says I can experience the last naval battle of Iceland, “Flóabardagi” through an iPad Pro. This battle saw the people of the Westfjörds pitted against the people of the North. The primary weapons used in this battle were large, heavy stones. On the iPad, the viewer can take control of any ship and use it to hurl rocks at another ship. Since the results of the battle are inconclusive even to this day, any outcome

is potentially accurate. I led the people of the Westfjörds to victory.

Following my military victory, I continue into a large room outfitted with display cases full of weapons and armour. Steinunn tells me that even though all of the weapons are enclosed in glass, and replicated from the middle ages, the government of Iceland has the museum on a watchlist. The arsenal

is extraordinary. Swords, spears, axes, and suits of plate armour all look impressive as an ethereal soundtrack plays in the background.

Next, we moved on to the VR room, where, as Steinunn puts it, “the past meets the future.” I had to take all of my Viking gear off at this point; the VR set wouldn’t fit over it. Once Steinunn got me all suited up, it was time to begin the simulation. Steinunn



explained to me that while several artefacts had been recovered from the site of the battle which I was about to experience, Sturla's spear was never found. My objective in the VR was to retrieve the spear.

Valhalla waits

The Oculus device went over my eyes, and the world turned black. Before I knew it, I woke up in the year 1238 on a beautiful summer day. A green mountain stood before me, rising high up into the sky.

The birds were singing, the sun was shining, and it looked like it would be a lovely day. It didn't take long for my fellow clan members to wake up and start the day by polishing their weapons. Today we were to go to battle in the name of Chief Sturla against Kolbeinn the Younger and Gissur Þorvaldsson.

Before we even got the chance to have breakfast, however, we were interrupted by a scout. We're under attack, he said. Kolbeinn and Gissur had staged an ambush. I picked up a shield and moved to my station, where several spears and a pile of heavy stones were ready for me to throw at the attackers.

Stone after stone, spear after spear, I fought valiantly for my chieftain, but our attackers were better prepared—probably because they ate breakfast. Ultimately, Sturla was slain, and the battle was lost. There was a silver lining, though. Sturla's spear stood upright in the ground in front of me. I grabbed it and stepped back through the portal into the real world.

Once the simulation had completed, Steinunn told me that I could still visit the site of this battle. So I did. Kaka-laskáli was entirely covered in snow, but it was still an awe-inspiring sight. A cross to mark a grave stood in the distance, where a raven perched, and the same mountain in the simulation stood before me. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, and I could have sworn I heard the din of a thousand voices, shouting their battle cries. ❧









Car provided by: [Go Car Rental](#)
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ICELANDIC SUPERSTITIONS

Bubbi Morthens And Sadistic Spanking

A journey through the odd
and mystical world of handball

Words: **Valur Grettisson** Illustration: **Sveinbjörn Pálsson**

Let's admit it: Sports are more or less the biggest manifestation of modern superstition. You know, "laces out" and all that. Iceland is no exception. In 2016, scholar Kolbrún Lilja Arnarsdóttir wrote her thesis in ethnology about Icelandic superstitions surrounding handball. According to Kolbrún, there are three main categories—with a sadistic twist—that characterize Icelandic sport superstitions.

Lucky, lucky

To get it out of the way, yes, there are some cliché superstitions about lucky charms. Some players have them—dressing the same way for each game, wearing the same socks, the same sweatband, donning the same number on their jersey, and so on. But most importantly, athletes that Kolbrún interviewed told her they always washed their clothes in between matches.

As far as superstitions go, that one is BORING!

Bubbi's the word

Now, to the odd ones. One professional handball player said that she always listened to the same song before a game. Having a lucky song is not particularly strange, but the

tune of choice of this player is "Háflóð" by Bubbi Morthens. For the foreigners reading, "Háflóð" is a weird Icelandic pop song from the 80s. We dare you to listen to it and tell us how lucky you feel. You probably feel more drunk than ready to run a field.

Another professional handballer said that he always vacuumed his apartment on game day. Productive, yes, but sounds more like something a doctor should check out.

Bleeding butts

Onto the sadistic stuff—finally! Apparently, it's required that anyone who begins playing on the Icelandic National Handball Team must be brutally spanked by the whole team after the first game... in the shower. This blatantly violent act has actually resulted in some rookies dealing with a bleeding ass after the initiation. Some took days to recover.

This BDSM initially might seem like more of a tradition rather than a superstition, but hey—Icelandic handball won an Olympic medal. You haven't seen any other teams do that. So this superstition has the Grapevine's seal of approval. Keep on spanking, boys.