



Atlantica staff writer **Jonas Moody** tails one Icelandic horse from farm to farm as the beast takes the fateful one-way flight out of the nation.

The rain tumbles down in sheets as our captain ducks into the cockpit sporting sleep-tussled hair and heavy bags underneath his eyes. This bedhead look might leave some men looking sprightly and youthful, but I find this unsettling as this is the man who is about to pilot me across the Norwegian Sea from Iceland to Sweden.

Appearances be damned—at 5:00 am the pilot doesn't have anyone to impress besides me and the 19 other passengers currently being loaded into the aft compartment. Even though those passengers will be offered no coffee or tea, no in-flight movie, and no window seats, they won't protest much—apart from pawing the ground or the occasional whinny. Today I take the pony express, Icelandair's weekly direct flight to Norrköping in Southern Sweden, with a dozen and a half of the nation's finest steeds in its cargo hold.

This departure may be routine for the humans in the cockpit, but for the horses, they will be the first in their lineages to leave the country. And they can never come back. Once a horse has left Iceland, century-old legislation stipulates that the animal may never set hoof on the island again. Simply a matter of disease control, it cannot be undone.

Before we seal the hatch I step back out into the rain to observe the ground crew in their full raingear loading the horses. The loader guiding the crates into the hold pulls back his rain-slicked hood to nuzzle a horse pitching his head, trying to calm the animal down. It's



Horsefeathers

PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON





Landing at Norrköping airport.



not until the baggage-slinger's bags come alive with a quickening pulse and worried eyes that the rules of engagement change, and then suddenly his rough hands grow gentle and patient in contact with the smooth, broad coats of his restless ward. The loader manages to soothe the horse and pushes the enclosure, a gambrel-roofed box resembling a miniature silver barn, deeper into the plane's dark belly.

I keep my eye out for one dark bay in particular. I first met Lykill at a farm in South Iceland, just outside Selfoss. He is steady and calm on the lead rope behind his owner, 36-year-old Fjölfnir Thorgeirsson, but as I approach to stroke his muzzle, Lykill grows skittish, drawing his head up, pinning his ears, and dropping his hind legs as if about to bolt. "Lykill is a one-person horse," Fjölfnir tells me as a caveat, kneading Lykill just behind the ears to keep him placid. "He can only trust one person." That's horse sense for you.

Fjölfnir thinks he has found Lykill's match, a 17-year-old Finnish girl named Katie Brumpton. The chemistry is evidently strong enough for Katie to put down the millions of ISK it will cost to call this horse her own. Each animal is issued a passport, which identifies its registration, pedigree back six generations, and a detailed system of markings and colorations wherein a veterinarian inspects the horse's body to locate swirls in the animal's fur, the equine fingerprint. Once the animal is assigned a registration number,

the information is imprinted onto a microchip no larger than a grain of rice, which is inserted under the skin on the horse's neck. But more primitive techniques have not been abandoned. The horse's number is also clipped into its coat with a pair of kitchen shears.

The flight to Norrköping is uneventful, so I try to talk to the other human passenger on the plane, Siggí the horse handler. The thick, middle-aged man accompanies each cargo flight transporting horses, just so someone on board knows the fillies from the colts. This has garnered him the moniker *Siggí, the Horse Stewardess* among the Icelandair Cargo staff. The largish, dour man doesn't find this funny, but despite himself he is the one who plays mother when the time comes to hand out the sandwiches and cans of coke. I take this as an invitation to chat, but my attempts at conversation are all rebuffed with humorless, one-word answers. Perhaps he only turns on the charm with the horses.

Flying in the cockpit is almost identical to flying in coach: legs cramp, clouds roll by, gas is passed, but our landing is an eye-opener. Before this trip I was under the impression that there was endless technology behind navigating a commercial aircraft to its destination runway. Extrapolation. Triangulation. Wind velocities and something to do with vectors. I was wrong. The pilots scout around for the runway like an old couple looking for a parking spot at

the grocery store. They point out the window and scowl at each other. "No, that's the highway!"— "No, that's a parking lot!"— "There it is. Land there!"

SWEDEN IS A PECULIAR COUNTRY. The birthplace of both hardcore pornography and Volvo. The people have a certain bearing that is neither inviting nor repellent, and while they share with Iceland a common ancestry and love of fishy food, their character is distinctly Scandinavian: measured civility, beautiful precision, and above all, temperance and order in all things.

My presence at the airport sets the Swedes on edge as there are not customarily passengers on board cargo planes. With a frosty gaze, an older woman with tight, blond braids instructs me to stay away from the horses and sequesters me to a fenced-off area. From behind chicken wire looking for Lykill, I feel slightly felonious as I watch Siggí unload the horses. The first couple of animals prance out of the crates casting smug glances at the horde of ground crew gathered around to see their arrival. Other animals are trembling and drenched in sweat, the equine equivalent of white-knuckle fliers.

When I spot Lykill he is composed, if a bit curious—as any Icelander is when first setting foot on foreign ground. There are trees. Everywhere. The light is different, not as diffused. Before he can fully take in the new world, the phlegmatic

When I spot Lykill he is composed, if a bit curious—as any Icelandic is when first setting foot on foreign ground.





You can take the horse out of Iceland, but you can't take Iceland out of the horse.

woman with tight braids yanks his halter sharply and pulls him into the shed for veterinary inspection.

Hours pass and the sun begins to dip behind the hills before a beater Mercedes pulls up towing a horse trailer. Three older men step out, each one with fewer teeth than the one before. They have come to drive Lykill to his farm north of Stockholm, and for the first time I feel slightly apprehensive for the horse. Along the five-hour drive in the dark, we stop to fill up on gas and Swedish hotdogs several times, at which time the men smoke cigarettes and pee in the bushes, despite readily available toilets—even in the middle of Stockholm. It is at one of those stops that the youngest man (the one with all his teeth) brings me to the front of the trailer and opens a small door. There I see Lykill, looking weary but content. The man reaches up into the trough and pulls out a tuft of hay, crushing the straw between his fingers.

“Ah, smell sweet?” he tells me in broken English, pantomiming the hay’s aroma of clover and honeysuckle rising to his nostrils.

“This from my farm,” he says slapping his chest and striking a smile. I feel better about

Lykill’s escorts and go for a pee in the bushes.

We reach Bärby, the farm where Lykill will remain, and I am surprised by a booming greeting in Icelandic, “*Saell og blessadur!*”, from the farm’s owner, Hreggvidur Eyvindsson, who, like Lykill, left Iceland to live in Sweden. But as Icelanders do, Hreggvidur has taken the nation along with him, seen in more aspects than the Icelandic horse farm he runs; that night on Hreggvidur’s farm I sleep in a room called Katla, named after the Icelandic volcano, under a blanket spun from Álafoss wool. Outside, Katie Brumpton leads her tired horse in silence to his stall. She is a demure girl at 17 and full of promise, having already placed in the Nordic Championship. They will remain here for the next year to train and prepare for next year’s competitions before returning to Katie’s native Finland.

Lykill’s line has been bred in Iceland since the settlement of the island in the 9th century, with very little outside bloodstock brought into the pedigree. Through his veins courses a millennium of isolation; he is not only a horse of a different color, but a horse of an entirely different genetic makeup. Here in Sweden, neither of them is native, but the horse has found its rider. ◻

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