

SUPPORTING
YEAR OF
STORIES
— 2022 —



NorthLink
FERRIES

ONWARD, VOYAGER

A collection of short stories



We are all storytellers.....

ONWARD, VOYAGER

A collection of short stories

Entries from a short story competition
for Scotland's Year of Stories 2022 and run by



SUPPORTING
**YEAR OF
STORIES**
— 2022 —

Published by Serco NorthLink Ferries,
Stromness Ferry Terminal, Ferry Road, Stromness, Orkney, KW16 3BH, UK

Designed and edited by Magnus Dixon.

Cover by Victoria Dixon, featuring an image of MV Hamnavoe by Nick McCaffrey.

All stories © the authors 2022 and reproduced here with their permission.

Dedicated to those who love the Orkney and Shetland Islands

Shetland

Leona Mullay - Lowrie's Tale	13
Siân Bryant - The Gannet	19
Lydia Coventry - Singing to the Selkies	21
Annabel Strange - Less than Baleful	27
Emma Webb - Home Again	33
Adrian Williams - The Helicopter	39
Joan Pratt - Da Sten Spaeks	43
Nina Patterson - Homecoming	51
Hannah Nicholson - Dey Spaek	55
Heather Christie - The Ancestors	61
Louise Casson - On The Edge	67
James Scargill - The Broch of Burland	73
Hannah Boden - Heather's trip to Shetland	79
Iain Murray - Beside the Sea	83
Elizabeth Volz-Goller - Dream Island	87
Jackie Green - Home	93
Lauren McAvoy - Meeting Eva Davies	99
Amber Patterson - Charlotte Ocean	101

Orkney

David Freer - Sands of Rothiesholm	107
Sam Oakley - John Craigie's Second Half	111
Virginia Crow - Homecoming	117
Isabel Wilson - A Good Start	123
Hazel Grant - Breathe in Orkney	129
Emma Reed - Red Eyes	133
Gerald Hodgson - Two Truths and a Lie	139
Geoffrey Shand - The Box	143
Emma McGuire - Eyes from the Water	149
Craig Taylor - A harder life, loved	155
Sue Gerrard - Full Circle	163
Sue Gerrard - Queen Esa	169
Marie McColm - Going back to your roots	173
Judith Crow - Guidman Trowie	181
Vivian Ainsworth - Home Bound	187
Lucy Fraser-Gunn - North Links	193
Aiden Schinkel - Orkney, a special place	199
Moirá Weir - Odin	205
Steve Ewens - My Orcadian Lass	209
Mirran Hall - Orkney	215
Vincent Fox - Homecoming	217
Ceri John - Orkney Diaries	221
Jenny Beal - One Day in Orkney	225
Rebecca Hay - Bomby's Orkney Adventure	229
Catriona Stevenson - Exploring with the Elephants	233
Moa Patience - Orkney and Shetland poetry sequence	237

Introduction

Magnus Dixon

There's a general rule with online competitions that I've learned during my years of being the e-Marketing Manager at NorthLink Ferries. The rule is, the simpler a competition is to enter, the more entries you will receive. Competitions that ask for an answer to a question, even one which is not at all tricky, will receive far fewer entries than one which just asks for names and email addresses, or a prize draw that only requires a social media 'like' to enter.

For that reason, I was worried when my marketing team proposed, for Scotland's Year of Stories 2022, a competition asking entrants to submit a short story!

What if we only got a few entries, or worse, none at all? What might we do if none of the entries were up to snuff, and we had to choose a poor story as our winner? None the less, we advertised the competition, promising prizes for four winning authors in total, one adult winner and one child winner for a story set in the Shetland Islands, and one adult winner and one child winner for a story set in Orkney.

I shouldn't have been concerned. A slow trickle of entries slowly turned into a torrent of stories, and the quality of the tales we received were staggeringly high. These islands, which had inspired Christine De Luca, George Mackay Brown, Lise Sinclair, and Edwin Muir, had also provided fertile grounds for the imagination here. The range of stories included historic adventures, modern folk tales, homecoming experiences, snapshots of island life and compelling children's tales. The competition had turned into something special, and NorthLink's Managing Director, Stuart Garrett, came up with a marvellous way to acknowledge this.

He suggested that an author who was similarly inspired by the beautiful island landscape, Ann Cleeves OBE, should be asked to judge the competition. Ann of course is the prolific author of the Shetland crime books, as well as the Vera Stanhope and Matthew Venn series, and I assumed she might be too busy to help. Again, I needn't have worried,

because she kindly found time, and did a magnificent job of judging the competition. Ann picked ‘Lowrie’s Tale’ by Leona Mullay, and ‘Sands of Rothiesholm’ by David Freer as the adult winners. The children’s winning entries were ‘Charlotte Ocean’ by Amber Patterson and ‘Exploring with the Elephants’ by Catriona Stevenson.

It was a very hard choice though, and whilst reading the stories, as a team we kept saying to ourselves, “It really is a shame that there can be only four winners.”

With every new entry received, it became evident that we simply had to publish all of the stories in one collection, so that the wider public could enjoy these Orkney and Shetland tales as much as we did. I’d like to take a moment to thank all of the writers who took time to put pen to paper, who submitted their stories, and who agreed to let us publish their stories in this volume.

To the talented authors whose works are collected here, we say, Onward, Voyager - and keep writing!

Shetland

Lowrie's Tale

Leona Mulla

Lowrie's feet hit the rock as the sea spewed its foam from below smashing on the rocks like a torrent of anger arriving at his feet for avoiding his ill fate. His rough booted foot slipped on the wet seaweed clinging to the rock he had landed on. As his heartbeat in his chest he glanced upwards, to the cliff top he had scrambled down and the sky above, the dark clouds rolled in like boulders ready to knock down anything in their path. The ensuing darkness seemed to consume everything and was the only hope he had.

Swiping his hands across his brow, he noticed the blood streaming from the cuts and gashes on his hands, he hoped reverently the blood trail would not give away his location to those hunting him. He shrunk against the rocks trying to still his breath as he struggled to keep his heart rate in check. The shouts of the men above him caused him to shrink further into the rock face as he tried to get his bearings. Whilst being well used to these rocks and the coastal area, he had never had to find his orientations in such life-or-death circumstances.

Looking around and realising he had scaled the rocks slightly too far up the geo, he cursed himself as he now knew his path was more hazardous. However, escaping the onslaught of men had been the most imperative at the time. The steep over crop of rocks to seek safety, along with the storming sea below and the men above put his already perilous situation into more dire straits. Glancing around, he could find nowhere immediate to skulk into whilst the immediate danger from above passed, he had to press on and avoid detection at all costs. His thoughts passed to his little brother whom he had lost on the run, given the men above were still seeking he could only hope this was a good sign and Sinclair had given them the slip.

Through the oncoming storm, he knew moving to his left was the only option to reach safety. His two big cousins had already 'been taen' and never heard of again, Auntie Mary was frantic with worry about them, her only sons, let alone his own concern of leaving Johan. He had

met her at a wedding and was immediately enthralled with her natural grace, she was a beautiful dancer. He couldn't help but be enraptured by her sweet smile and made it his mission to dance with her that evening, the waltz allowed a moment to get to know her, after plucking up the courage to learn her name he was quickly enraptured by her caring nature and quick, almost brutal wit. Travelling home on the cart that evening had allowed some close conversation under the guise of keeping warm against the evening chill and had cemented the pair as a courting couple.

Being a Bigton boy fae da Runn, the walks to Channerwick to call on Johan was a pleasure, and never a hardship. Their courtship had been quick, but neither could deny their strong feelings, certainly neither could deny how much they loved each other. He could remember as if it was yesterday the feeling of slipping his croft beaten hand into hers on their walk down Channerwick burn whilst her peerie brothers Johnny and Geordie ran on ahead, completely unaware of the lovestruck couple behind them. Denying their feelings and lust beyond a kiss was becoming extremely difficult and, at times, all consuming. The need for an engagement had become paramount and was happily announced in both kirks the previous Sunday, their happy story following on from those, less fortunate women, who found themselves in a worse certain condition who were forced to plead to the congregation of their church to believe them that promises of marriage were meant to force the guilty men to be honourable. He could never do that to his Johan, and, in two short weeks Johan would be his bride and he could live happily, at least that had been the plan...until this.

His immediate plan did not extend beyond surviving, and avoiding those who hunt him, those faceless men who would take him and throw him into the worst example of living hell. Tearing his shirt to wind round his torn hands, he steadied himself as he began his move towards 'safety'. Steeling himself, and whilst clinging to the rocks he began to inch himself leftwards. Whilst his feet slipped on the seaweed, the shouts from the men above still rang through the rising storm, their incompetent shouts to scale the rocks and catch the men showed their lack of knowledge towards both the weather and their surroundings, the gold in their pocket all they cared about. As the storm heightened,

and the sea below foamed farther up the rocks, he grimaced against the hanging out crop of rock with a sheer drop to the spewing sea below. Movement to the right spurred him on as he reached around to find a foot hold.

Thoughts of his future with Johan spurred him on, whilst his desire to not be caught caused him to move with less regard for his safety than he was used to. A cascade of loose rocks and shingle caused him to still his movement and caused him to catch his breath. A rabbit burrowing too close to the bank had cast the loose shingle towards the sea, however it seemed to have also caused a still in the men from above as they regrouped and assessed their situation – was a catch worth risking your life over? Moving now would cause a raucous of shingle and stones and make his pursuers aware of his situation and location. However, he was in an increasingly dangerous situation given the overhang of rock he was desperately clinging to and needed to pass with the limited time he could hang on.

Selecting a reasonably sized stone and casting it heavily high to his right, he listened to his captures claiming to have found him from the ensuing rumbling of shingle towards the foaming sea. After taking a deep breath, and a prayer to the god he wasn't sure he believed in, he took the plunge and swung out wildly to overcome the rock overhang facing him. Once past the worst and after his heart had stilled a little, he paused to make sure none of the men from above had either seen or heard him and were still wildly searching in the wrong location. Moving on towards safety, the noise of his pursuers diminished the further he moved around the coastline.

Nearing the cave entrance, he was overjoyed to see movement from within and increased his pace across the rock face. As his searchers were still to be heard in the distance, he felt confident that he had given them the slip and moved to the entrance of the sea cave. His younger brother, with a grazed face and a look that betrayed false jubilation reached for him, he gladly brought Sinclair into an embrace filled with thanks and gratefulness. The supplies of salt beef and dry bannocks that had been stored in preparation for this event would keep them going for at least a few days. Fresh water was their only issue now. He was confident that the men chasing them would give up after a few hours, assuming

they wouldn't fall over the cliffs to their death first. He felt secure in the knowledge they would be able to collect drinkable water without risk of immediate capture once they had moved on. However, from stories that swirled around the area about these gangs, they would pursue the family for weeks, almost relentlessly and threatening them to give up locations, until ordered to move on. He knew he would be in this cave with limited rations for many weeks to come, until word came the gang had moved on, even so, a couple of days saving grace would be given in case family members were followed by any lingering gang members. Meanwhile, he hoped Johan remained true to him and his family were able to sneak extra supplies to them before him and his little brother succumbed to starvation.

Slumping down against the damp rock of the cave, he allowed himself to take a deep breath to calm his racing heartbeat. His brother looked worried and was pacing the entrance to the cave, realising Sinclair needed support and reassurance, he stood up slowly on his stiff legs, walked towards him and put his heavy hand on his shoulder.

His breath shuddering, Sinclair turned towards him and asked, "Why do dey shaste wis, why do dey tak wis, I'm heard spik o it round da table but never taen much notice."

Lowrie, knowing he had to step up to explain to his younger, innocent brother who was still too young to understand the way of the world asked him to sit, or perch, whichever he preferred.

"Da war dat we are apparently fighting is a lang wye fae here, too far for folk lik wis to tink about, against folk wi wid never hae a chance o ever meeting. A peerie guy called Napoleon wants to tak ower Europe, da Navy is fighting against him hitting wir shores. Da folk in England have decided we are good seafaering men, so gangs are allowed to come and get wis, and force wis to serve in da navy, basically dey are allowed to kidnap wis. Dey dinna care wha we are, or wha we hae relying on wis, dey are paid for every man they hand ower. Da chances o ony o wis coming back are slim, beyond peerie as we are pit to wark in the worst conditions wi no chance o promotion or bettering wirsels, we are basically cannon fodder to those folk, it is living hell. Dey are allowed to use whatever brute strength dey see fit to git wis in, its brutal. Mind

when wir cousins were gone and Auntie Mary was frantic wi worry till she realised dey had been taen and started grieving?”

“Dey were taen?” asked Sinclair, looking pale, unsure and worried. “I’m only 14, surely I’m too young?”

Lowrie faced him with a grim face, “Dey dinna seem to tak note of age, we are best here hiding, I hope dey think we are both geen ower da edge o da banks and will gie up on wis, but dey will hover round and watch wir family in case dey try and sneak wis food, we are on wir own for da next start. Thank god I hae someone to keep me sane!”

Epilogue

Lowrie and his brother stayed safe during this press gang visit, Lowrie was able to marry his sweetheart Johan and avoid any future gang visits. During the time of Press Gangs, Shetland gave a disproportionate number of men to the British navy through impressment. It’s thought that some 3,000 men were impressed. Most men who were impressed would never return home again.

The Gannet

Siân Bryant

Her pulse quickened and her breath became ragged as she ranged over uneven ground towards her goal. She knew she had to be quick but quiet otherwise she would lose her chance. As her feet squelched in the winter field, her quarry turned to look at her, piercing blue eyes staring into her soul, maw opened wide and dark and huge wings snapping with warning. Its size caught her breath, but that beak looked lethal. Sitting in this field away from the beach she knew something was wrong. She could see the problem, the left wing, massive and threatening but oddly twisted as something silver glinted in the sunlight with a long line trailing behind.

The element of surprise was over, she couldn't sit thinking for long, so she sprang into action. She threw her arms open wide with the corners of a frayed old pink towel in each hand and jumped on the bird, securing the head and that massive beak with one hand, and pinning its wings and body to the ground with her body, using the towel to keep the wings closed. She gently pulled out that left wing and working deftly she cut away the fishing line and untangled it from feathers, snipped the hooks barb and pulled it out in one firm movement. Not too deep and no joints affected, phew! Suddenly it was all over, and she could breathe. The gannet lay calmly under the towel, protected from the howling wind while she breathed in finding calmness in the chaos.

A once over to see the gannet was in otherwise good condition and the right wing was free from any uninvited passengers, a little bit skinny from being unable to fish with just a little bit of keel felt by probing thumbs under the soft feathers and there was no obvious infection in the wound and she leapt off the bird, taking the towel with her for protection. It clicked its beak menacingly, ruffled its snow-white feathers and stretched its black tipped wings before staring once more at its rescuer and realising it was free, then took off back to the sea. It didn't have far to waddle before it was back on the sand and headed straight for the water always keeping one eye on that figure on the beach. It went from clumsy and flat footed to instantly elegant and

looking at home on the waves, steering further and further away. Finally when it was deemed safe, the gannet bobbed its yellow head under the water like it was washing away the day. When it resurfaced it opened its wings wide with elegance and grace and took off into the sky finally free from the burning pain in its wing and dangerous downwards drag of the line.

The sheep looked on in mild indifference, being careful to move away from whatever direction she was moving. Walking back along the beach with the sea raging to her left and sodden fields all around she felt a sense of achievement wash over her. One more saved. The feeling was dampened as she thought about the man-made cause to the birds suffering and how the cliffs and shores around her beautifully wild islands was devastatingly littered with the broken bodies of the ones who didn't make it or were too isolated for help. She knew Shetland was dramatic and windy but filled with beauty and awe, so this all too frequent event along the coastline was heart-breaking.

Wind whipped her hair and tickled her face, it became unbearable, so she tried to sweep it away only to realise her skin was crawling with the lice of the sea bird. GAH! She yelled and started to dance around the field swiping at her clothes and face while the sheep panicked at these crazed movements and ran off ahead of her.

She made it back to the van, stripped off her jacket and batted herself down one more time before jumping in and starting the engine while waiting in anticipation for the warm air to kick in and bring her much needed warmth. Twitching at every stray tickle but convinced she'd knocked most of the lice off she put the van in gear, took one last look at the churning water and gently took off back to the main road and her next rescue mission.

Singing to the Selkies

Lydia Coventry

There is a certain beauty in bleakness. Today was truly bleak. The light able to break through the plumes of cloud only giving a sepia tone to the world, like an old photograph. My mood, being in keeping with the weather, a walk along the vivid coastline seemed fitting. If perhaps a little dangerous what with the pummelling knocks of wind. I could not help but marvel at the mountains, like giant fists rupturing out of a violent sea. Stood from my vantage point, teetering far too close to the edge of what would be a life ending fall, the waves looked to me vast wild stallions fighting. Rampaging back at each other, all chaos and drama. A mirror to my inner turmoil. I came to Lunna to sing to the Selkies. I am told Selkies hear the plight of the broken hearted, bringing solace and peace. I can only hope they hear my plaintive song through the incredible orchestra of the sea, for my heart is truly in pieces.

I came to Shetland with a broken heart on a youth work outreach program. 90 degrees north was far from home way down south. So far south that most the locals had never heard of it. Sooth moother that I was, I was surprised to be so welcomed into the community. Yes, there were jeers and chortles about my accent along with teaching me the local dialect words - peerie means small so a peerie orange is a satsuma. On top of specific dialect words there's the Shetland accent. Beautiful to listen to. Like music tripping off the tongue. But devilish to understand. My initial blank and apologetic expressions had everyone in stitches. Especially the children I was working with or bairns I should say. All jibes were in good humour and jest - a great way to break the ice, all be it at my own expense.

All told, for me Shetland was a most welcome change. Far away from the pain that had me fleeing to the furthest place I could find a post. I had been desperately seeking a bolt hole when I came across the ad for the outreach team. I frantically typed my application at midnight, the night my heart was trampled, and beyond thankful a week later I

had been accepted. My darling mother, ever and advocate for my well-being, mixed emotions about my plans. Heartbroken and furious as only a mother could be for me at the boy who caused me so much strife. She still was anxious as I set off.

The hostel where we were staying must be in one of the most picturesque places possible in the world. Sea views from practically every window, seals and otters regular sights. Coming from inland south, this thrilled me. I finally braved enough to swim in the marina surrounding it with the others. Baltic as the water was it brought with it a welcome numbing sensation.

The outreach team was made up of locals, which was infinitely helpful for navigation and translation, along with others like myself. We came from different backgrounds, various ages, here for a multitude of reasons. Staying in the hostel bonded us with dorm rooms and shared meals. There were amazing discoveries to make about Shetland - food, crafts and wildlife. The fantastic food was soon apparent along with the warmth of the people. We were regularly treated by locals coming down and cooking fantastic meals. All manner and variety of traditional food was cooked for us from bannocks to fancy pieces (yummy cakes). Having always found fish an absolute no go, I was dubious to try it once more. I should have known better. Frankie's fish and chip shop in brae had me converted at first mouthful. Caught, cooked and on your plate the same day. There is nothing like a Shetland fish supper!

We took our outreach programs to the agricultural fairs - Voe, Cunningsburgh and Walls. Mingling with the islanders and ever working on understanding the language. At these shows I was astonished by their crafts. The heritage of the island kept alive through knitting, sliver work and carpentry - truly celebrated and encouraged at the, with competitions and stalls for purchasing the hard work of others. I never failed to find something I had to have.

One team bonding occasion went to Sumbrugh light house. I was concerned the heavily loaded minibus would not make it to the car park at the top. The road to climb was tight and twisting. As were many of the roads in Shetland I found, with passing places a plenty. There is a certain driving etiquette in Shetland, pulling into the places

with the passer by saying thank you with a car horn toot or wave. No clamouring and squeezing to get by like us down south. Thankfully we made it to the car park. As we went to pile out the rain pattered. They say a day in Shetland has all the seasons Spring through to winter. It's a fair summary of Shetland weather. Changing in the blink of an eye. A friendly postie (mind you all the posties I have met here are friendly, nipping in the houses to leave post on the indoor step or kitchen table) explained to me how she lost the van door to a mighty clap of wind in the morning. But was thankfully driving along in the sun two hours later not overly wind swept. Having learnt from the locals not to let a drop of weather stop you, else you'd never get anything done, we explored Sumburgh head in light mizzle and breeze. This was where I first saw a puffin. Not a bird that could be mistaken for anything else. Not like a Chaffinch and a Bullfinch. A sea bird, that really didn't look like it should be even remotely seaworthy. And the noise they made. Not a chirp or a tweet but a moo is the best description. They were nesting along the cliffs. Zipping along narrow little paths they had made and launching themselves into the air with far more agility I would ever have thought had I not seen them with my own eyes. Shetland with its wonders and distractions a plenty kept me from dwelling so much on the boy from back home.

Women are intuitive and it must be said. The majority of us love a good story and the chance to venture our opinion. As such the girls soon caught on to my reason for being there. I am not a good actress and simply could not hide my melancholy. At night in the girl's dorm my heartache spilled out. Wronged by the boy I thought myself in love with for over 2 years. He wanted another girl, my friend, not me. There was a roar of womanly support. Coming together as we do when we feel one of ours has been wronged. Affirmations that time will heal, advise to look for a man not a boy. A local lass who had become a friend of mine told me to sing to the Selkies. At first, I thought she was joking with me. This was the friend who introduced me to the lady behind the counter in the Hamnavoe shop as her English acquaintance. Simple statement yes, but with a touch of friendly insult thrown in. So, I continued our conversation with mild weariness until the truth of her advice came clear... Selkies being shape shifting sea-folk, able to take of their dress

of seal skin and roam the shores. Tale is they were wronged by man hiding their seal skin dresses when they came to shore and coerced into loveless relationships. So, when they find their dress, they once again don their skin returning to the sea and true love. They understand the lament of a scorned heart that fears love will never be found again.

One day with weather so dreadful it stopped our plans; I took the melody of my broken heart to sing to the Selkies. What could it hurt I thought? Desperate for a lighter heart and a quieter mind. I headed out in our Bolts car hire for Lunna Ness.

I'm not sure if it was the Selkies; but with good food, wild activities - cliff diving, kayaking and boat trips and the busy outreach work I was consumed. My heart was soothed, and I rarely thought of the grief that sent me to Shetland.

* * * * *

Month 3 of my stay, I found Shetland had firmly seeped into my bones. Right into the marrow. Feeling as ever part of me as the open fields of the plain back home.

We were all piled in the minivan heading to our next outreach program -supporting the running of a summer youth activity week with one of the churches. The drive was beautiful. From the window I could see an Arctic turn dive bombing an unsuspecting couple as they gingerly walked amongst the rocks and heather. They must be too close to her nest. I was on a sort of auto pilot. Conversations were darting on around me as the team quipped each other and planned out activities. I found it all too easy to daydream here. To spot a bird, seal or edge of coastline I just had to focus on. The Drongs for example over by Braewick were captivating. Simply wondrous how they were formed. Sea stacks of magnificent rock shooting from the sea like jagged spears.

Before I knew it, we had arrived at the church hall. I often found these days my mind was not where my body was and ended up being surprised at my location when the two joined once again. It was here and now that my focus changed. Mind and body fastened together

with a jolt and snap both now in need of each other to deal with new emotions. One person came careering into focus blurring everything and everyone else in this world.

I heard him before I saw him. When we walked in the church the piano was jaunting out a jazz tune. Children were on the floor playing musical statues. Looking over to the piano, there he was. An ecstatic smile spread over his face as the children danced along to the tune his nimble fingers played. I have never been musical myself. Not enough patience to sit and learn. Music didn't come naturally to me. But I could certainly appreciate it. One of the many wealth's of Shetland was its music - a Shetland jig on the fiddle or accordion never failed to get your feet tapping and your mind washed away with the song. We had been to several music event both at the Mareel in Lerwick and various halls. But never had I seen him. This nameless man. For man is what he was. He almost looked too big for the piano he played with such speed and grace. They say your life flashes before your eyes as you die. Well, mine flashed before my eyes then - a life I wanted to live. I wasn't the average 22 year old I guess. I had been clubbing a total of twice and hated every second. No desire to travel to hot and sandy climes. I wanted a family. Simple. Well, not that families are simple. All have their joys and trials. Mine certainly did. But for me my family surrounded me in love and security. And that's what I wanted to give, to continue. To wrap myself around my own family, born from precious moments of love. Sappy as it sounds. That was what I most wanted in life. As I looked across the church to the man with dark hair and Viking beard, I saw my family. He smiled at me and thankfully I gathered my senses enough to smile back.

Less than Baleful

Annabel Strange

The wastwind woke me early that day.

Being still accustomed to Edinburgh's grand edifices breaking up waves of most gales, I had still to shake off the shackles of light sleeping.

So it was that I found myself over Hermaness, bonnet tied tight in case of westerly returns, picking heiðaberries from the swathe of peatbog for steeping in gin to warm through the winter.

The simmer-dim brought increasingly luscious light of dawn out to sea, and so it was, emboldened out across to almost the northernmost point of the *Old Rock* to investigate, distracted by lichens, that I first saw him out by the shoormal; wash breaking against his rock, the line stretching before him into the drink.

Stricken as I was by the unusual appearance, I made no sound - his cloak dyed a unique pattern by the same lichens that brought me out to this point, I almost missed sight of him; yet grey-white hue of fur and long flattened tip of snout were less familiar sights than the rock he sat upon. There was something distinctly wolvis to his countenance, though wearing man's clothing rather than adopting the attire of the proverbial sheep. There are a number of domesticated dogs around the islands, but since Viking times, nothing so much like a wolf to be found on the *Old Rock*.

Quiet as I was in initial barn of wild curiosity, I must have uttered a gasp - for in just the same moment as I watched him quietly spit limpit-grease as bait for the sillacks, he had caught sight of me, swept up his catch; and dove out of sight for the depths.

* * * * *

Intrigued by this apparition, however benign, I spent several days of restless sleep, waking early, trekking out to the same spot a number of

times when weather and more rational commitments permitted: much to no avail.

Little more than three weeks later as best I could recollect, I had decided to make a picnic of it and, having brought a basket of faerdie-maet and a Dewar-bottle of hot tea, I set out to pass the day writing; keeping calm and comfortable vigil looking out to sea. Upon arrival at my vigil post to gaze across at the jutting skerry, I saw signs of life out on the rock - limpit shells!

It is common enough to see shells by the shoormal, or even further inland; scattered by the shalder after dashing them against more sizeable plateaux to get at the sweetmeats within and feed the season's crop of nestlings; but such a narrow rock would make much less likely resting place for the shells owing to the risk of bouncing from the skerry when dropped.

Overcome with excitement, in a brief flurry of motion, I found my arms flung in the air one moment, then down, palms outstretched the next, and again to clutch my heart in eager anticipation; so that I was motivated to pause, take breath, and calm myself. A creature so surreptitious would, in the normal course of events, have removed such evidence as bait; to cover their tracks. Had I caught him off guard again?

I called out, "Ahoy, I mean you no harm!"; before sharply the realisation hit me - a wolf has its own language, surely neither Norn, Scots, or English could bait him.

Feeling foolish, and still with some trepidated excitement, an idea came to me. Perhaps a gift could convey my harmlessness and encourage engagement of sorts?

Knowing he must regularly fish this spot, and that there were caves below the point where I stood, albeit not so accessible to the sound of mind, I thought of the sodden creature shivering there; however well adapted he was to the chill, the image saddened my heart.

Being somebody that rarely leaves home without an abundance of string, I tied the Dewar-bottle of warming tea tightly and, laying down on the edge of the precipice, I lowered the prize down towards the mouth of the caves. Having to estimate the way down, I soon found the

need to lower the bottle cease; reaching, I hoped, a suitable knoll.

Taking up the slack, I fastened the end to a fork from the picnic basket and plunged it into the ground to hold it fast. With line baited and cast, I began patient vigil over a chicken sandwich, a scone, and a number of small cakes I had prepared, watching the line for signs of movement. Again, my wait was long, my vigil fruitless - save for lightly grazing on nearby heiðaberries - and I began to feel somewhat foolish in my aims to make acquaintance; perhaps there was danger involved in meeting such a potentially wild and baleful being? What was I thinking?

Setting off downhill for home, I witnessed the sun gradually dip over the horizon before me; and, whilst still bright from the *simmer-dim*, I could make out the fullness of the moon. Laughing aloud how my imagination had raced, as always it does, when the moon is bright and full over me, my spirits raised to know I wasn't going quite mad just yet, and the fruitless day could be chalked up to experience.

As the faerdie basket bumped against my hip, I thought it would be well to retrieve my only Dewar-bottle the next day; hoping no harm had come to it by my foolhardy games.

I was surprised, therefore, when I found the bottle on my doorstep as I reached home.

* * * * *

To say I was shocked would have been an understatement.

Taken aback in a double take, I took a step back, as I struggled to process the greater astonishment that comes with having just given up on a flight of fancy, only to have it realised before one's own eyes; I tripped on a rock and swooned. My last thought was the further surprise, as I lost consciousness, that my fall was broken by the gentle hands which caught me.

I was revived by the smell of fresh crushed mint and lavender at my nose. As my eyes slowly opened, I saw the concern in his eyes; and although his hood was drawn about him, the protrusion of his snout was

unmistakable. As he held me in his arms, I experienced a warmth of companionship I had not felt in almost two decades.

His concern transformed almost to a mischievous grin as he helped me to an upright position in one of the lawn chairs. "I suppose I gave you something of a fright," he quipped. That was never my intention."

He must have noticed my jaw drop as the grin became quizzical, his head cocked to one side. "You won't have been expecting conversation, either?"

I slowly shook my head, and much like a dog emerging from water, I gave another good shake, slapping some colour back to my cheeks. "My dear boy," I replied, "I had just given you up as a folly, yet here you are - none of this was expected!

What might your name be?"

"My parents never gave me a name, I just simply am. I'm fairly sure you are the first of your kind to hear me speak out loud; aside from my selkie friends back at the caves, but I'll wager you don't have the same enchantments as they?"

"Well, now," I replied, "between myself, yourself, and the gallows, I may be something of a witch; but I'm very much of the genus *Homo sapiens*, and not so enchanting. And you would be of the *Canidae* family; though certainly enchanted, yes?"

"There's nothing enchanting about me, either" replied the wolf-man, "again, I just simply am."

As intriguing as this encounter may have been, and perhaps as result of my fainting spell, I found the calm acceptance of his condition to be quite charming and felt a great closeness to him; the familiarity of this familiar making me almost forget how unusual all this was. Then it dawned on me - with the moon being full tonight, had it not also been around the same part of the lunar cycle when I first saw him?

"But surely," I retorted, "a wolf in the form of a man, and under a full moon, no less? Surely, this could only happen by enchantment! Perhaps I can talk to my friend the corbie and straighten this out?"

My new friend looked somewhat cross at the suggestion, closing his

eyes, and taking turn to shake his head in disbelief. “This is who I am, regardless of the moon’s influence. I thought I knew your family better than this”, he muttered dismally. “Long have I watched with fondness the kindness of your forebears, long have I waited to make my introduction; I thought you would understand and accept me for who I am!”

I could tell I had upset the poor creature, and whether the misunderstanding was with myself or with the wolf, the last thing I wanted was to scare my new friend away with prejudice; however well intentioned. I reached out to take his paw in my hand and squeezed gently.

“Of course I accept you! Why, if you were man or wolf, beast, or omen, or somewhere in between, that would not affect my thoughts or feeling. If anything,” I could see him begin to warm to my words, “animals are far better company than people!”

I gazed down at our held hands and blushed, this contact further stirring the warmth in my heart; and, involuntarily, I let go. His expression was inscrutable as we gazed into one another’s eyes a moment longer, and without realising, I held my breath; but suddenly, the spell was broken as he dusted off his cloak to take leave.

“Well,” he intoned formally, “I thank you for the hospitality of your tea, but you have your flask, and now I must be going.”

I was still agog, breath held, as he nodded curtly and made for the road. I could barely squeak as I leapt to my feet, reaching my hand out to halt him, but found myself frozen in anxiety as he walked away. I shook my head in disbelief at the encounter, and as I blinked once, he was gone.

* * * * *

For weeks, I was concerned that I had offended my new acquaintance and fretted intermittently as I went about my business. I had not meant to assume more than seemed obvious to me- I had only wished to assist in returning this polymorph to his original form. I made a number of

trips back out to the ness, but again to no avail, there was to be no sign.

As the weeks passed, summer turned quickly to Autumn, and the few trees my family planted shed their short fall.

One day in October, as I was returning from visiting a friend in Uyeasound, I noticed a fat piltack tied to the door handle and, tidying my hair, I searched for my companion. There he was, smiling sweetly among the wych elm.

We talked over piltack and potatoes, and I discovered there was no 'enchantment' to his character, he was happy as he was, the last of his aged kind; and happy to be alone.

* * * * *

As our friendship grew, I soon realised I was happy to be alone in tandem; the occasional visits enlightened my natural acceptance - some people don't need to change.

Home Again

Emma Webb

As she disembarked the Hjalmland, setting foot on Shetland soil for the first time in two years, she had the feeling that she had never left. Nothing had changed. The early morning smells of Lerwick were as they had always been, the roads still quiet before the work traffic began.

She crossed the road to the bus stop, dodging puddles as she ran. Thankfully, there was no one else waiting, she didn't want company. She only had twenty minutes to wait until the bus arrived.

She wished that she had made herself a coffee before leaving the boat, if nothing else, it would have given her something warm to hold onto on this chilly morning.

Feeling hungry, she only had enough money for the bus fare, she had found a three pack of custard creams on the boat and had slipped them into her coat pocket. She nibbled on the last one, hoping that it would keep her going until she got home.

Home.

She had tried to block this place out of her mind for so long. To forget everything about it. However, the guilt had eaten at her, and she had to face things and return.

She shivered as the bus pulled up. She paid the driver and found a seat at the back, by the window. The same one she had used to sit in when travelled to the high school, the same one she had sat in every Saturday on her way to her weekend job in town. When someone else had been in that seat, she had felt that her day was cursed. As she settled into the seat, she wrapped her coat, really not suitable for the unpredictable Shetland weather, around her as best as she could.

The bus pulled out of the stop, and she was off. Familiar sights passed as she leaned her forehead onto the cold glass, steamed with condensation. The power station was still there, the petrol stations on the hill, nothing had changed.

She wondered what was going to greet her when she arrived in Walls? She had called last night before the boat left Aberdeen to make sure there would be someone at home, but no one had answered. She checked her phone, no signal. Nothing had changed.

As she sat, swaying with the motion of the bus, she began to reminisce...

She had left in a whirlwind of emotion. He had taken her out for lunch that afternoon. She had felt it strange as he never did that kind of thing. Everything had to be so thoroughly planned with him, so when he called her that morning at ten to see if she could take her lunch at twelve and meet him on the street, alarm bells had rung.

It had been one of those rare sunny days in Lerwick when they had met. Windy of course, you can't hide from the wind, but sunny. They'd bought a takeaway lunch and sat on Victoria Pier to eat. There weren't any cruise boats in that day, so the pier, and the town centre had been relatively quiet.

As they'd sat on the bench watching the gulls, she waited for him to speak. It was like she had been waiting for a dentist appointment. She was anxious, her heart drumming, she could hear it. After about ten minutes of silent, awkward chewing, she eventually asked him to just come out with it.

He couldn't look at her. He dropped a few crumbs on the ground and took a deep breath.

He'd met someone else.

She couldn't say anything. She stood up and threw the remainder of her sandwich into the dark sea. She walked away. He tried to call her several times that afternoon, but she couldn't face it, not yet. Nothing was supposed to change.

She spoke to her boss when she arrived back at work and asked for a week's holiday at short notice. She boarded the boat that same day, not telling anyone where she was going. It didn't matter, he didn't need her anymore.

She found a flat and a job in Aberdeen, she didn't come back.

She wasn't sure exactly why she had come back now. Maybe it had something to do with her conscience? It had been eating at her for a while now. She had never been one to be told what to do, and for the best part of last year, she was not allowed to visit home. Now that she was allowed to do so again, she was going to use that to her advantage.

They were still together; she had spoken to an old friend who could tell her that. They were due to be married in a few weeks' time. Maybe this was the reason for her return? Maybe she had to see it for herself?

She had called him last night to say that she needed to talk to him, in person and she was on the boat coming to sort discuss things. He hadn't answered but she was sure he had got the message.

As the bus rolled over the hills heading west past Weisdale and down into the Tresta valley, her heart had that same feeling it had had all those many months ago when they had spoken on the pier. What would he say? What would she say?

There was a new speed limit here she noticed, ha! Something had changed!

Her thoughts went back to that day. He had met someone else. She didn't stick around to find out who. She had an idea. Too hurt to believe it, she had reacted too quickly. Had she over-reacted? She didn't want to hear his explanations, his excuses.

She hadn't even packed a bag before getting on the boat. She'd grabbed a toothbrush from the Co-op along with a bottle of cheap wine, which she intended to drink in the cabin, and boarded the boat. She felt nothing as she sat on the crisp white bed, nothing as the safety announcement had instructed her on the procedures she must follow in the event of an emergency, and nothing as the boat had docked in Aberdeen the next morning.

Everything she did for the next few weeks was done on autopilot. She went through the motions, just surviving. Getting a bar job which thankfully came with accommodation, so she didn't have to try too hard. She lived a minimal lifestyle. She had no ties to anyone, and no one had any ties to her.

As the bus stopped in Bixter, someone got off. There was only one other

passenger on it now as well as her. Her chest was tightening. Her palms becoming sweaty. She didn't know for sure that he had got her message. She didn't know if he would meet her at the bus stop. She didn't know... she didn't really know anything right now.

She had over-reacted. She knew that. She had cut all ties with her home. The beautiful place she had grown up in. The place she had always felt safe. She hadn't kept in touch with anyone, her friends, him.

The bus had made it through the Hulmalees and onto the single-track road now, they were not far, perhaps another ten minutes. As she jostled and bumped from side to side she remembered Saturday nights on the late bus, coming home from nights out in the town. Her and her friends laughing, pretending they hadn't been drinking. The road was still just as bad. Nothing had changed.

They crossed the Brig, the beautiful sky smiling down on her, she was almost home.

Climbing the hills, round the bend and soon the village was in sight. She could see her house. Nothing had changed.

Would he be there to meet her? What would he say? What would she say?

She wanted the bus to stop and let her off, but she had to do this, she had to right the wrong. She had to have that grown up discussion with him that she should have had two years ago. She had to face this and be strong. She had to go home again.

First the bus passed the church, then the hall. It turned the corner into the bus stop.

There he was.

He had come to meet her.

He looked exactly the same. Nothing changed.

She grabbed her bag and as the bus pulled into the stop, she walked to the front.

Their eyes locked immediately. She jumped the step, the way she always had when she was younger. Hesitantly at first, she approached

him, then she quickened her pace to match his.

She ran into his open arms, looked up and whispered, “hi Dad”.

The Helicopter

Adrian Williams

“Bigton Banger!”, my brother yelled from the kitchen. The colourful old bus had pulled up outside the school and its cargo of knitwear-clad, big, collared children spilled forth, ready to start a new school day.

Unlike most of the school children, who were bussed in from the various surrounding settlements, our family lived directly opposite the school. Looking back, I guess most days this was a blessing, no waiting for the bus at the start of the day or jolting journeys down single-track roads when the school day had finished.

Each school day the various buses pulled up outside the school and each bus we had given a nickname. Always a mishmash of where it had come from and the state of the vehicle, ideally some alliteration, although at the time only because it sounded good rather than through some superior grasp of the English language. The Bigton Banger was our favourite, older and shaped differently to the other buses, with a curved rather than flat front. The arrival of this flotilla of buses in the mornings was our cue to depart the house. Their reappearance, mid-afternoon, was a warning to our parents that soon we would be home. “Time to go” I called, and we said our goodbyes and headed across the road to school.

On this day, however, nearing the end of autumn term, the buses didn’t come back.

“Oh, it won’t snow much in Shetland” we were told, shortly before arriving in 1978; “it’s the Gulf Stream”. We might have received warnings of strong winds and the fabled wind-driven horizontal rain, but not snow! On this day, however, snow did arrive. All day it snowed, and as the afternoon light dimmed, still it snowed. “No chance the buses will get through now” I overheard my parents say. Earlier we had been led home through the snow and wind, leaving our classmates behind, trapped at school without a route home. We ate and then wandered aimlessly around the house, sensing the drama.

Then in the distance, the regular hum of a helicopter, getting louder as

it flew closer and closer. We peered against the windows, watching as one of the rig helicopters came into view. Strobing lights cut through the flurries of snow and illuminated the striped, red, white and blue chopper body. We had seen these helicopters at the airport, but here, outside the school, this was really something. Down, down the helicopter came amongst the banked-up drifts of snow until it settled into the school playground.

A human chain formed as the blizzard worsened, passing sleeping bags down the line from the helicopter and into our school. The prisoners would sleep the storm out at school and the sleeping bag delivery would allow this to happen. The line of figures, in their orange survival suits, had their heads bowed to the swirling snow around them. All the while, the helicopter's lights pulsed on and off, mesmerising us with their hypnotic beat.

Looking back, I would like to imagine there was no risk assessment, just a problem and a solution. It was the late 70s on a distant northerly island. Finally, unloaded, the helicopter rose again as we strained our necks, looking up out the windows as it disappeared from view in the failing winter light.

Then it was just quiet and dark out across the school playground. We could only imagine the scene inside the school hall as sleeping bags were handed out and our friends were allocated a patch of sleeping space. How much anybody slept that night, I really don't know. I can't remember hearing anything about it when we all returned to school, children live in the now, not the past.

All we understood was that we had been witness to, yet also missed out on, some great adventure. Our proximity to the school had given us a grandstand view of the drama yet had also stolen our chance to be part of the adventure.

How long the snow lasted, I really don't know, but I don't think it was around for long. Everything seemed to quickly slip back into the old routine. The buses pulled up in the morning, the children streamed off, and we followed them into school. Then, as the school day drew to a close, the buses returned. This happened like clockwork for the rest of our time on Shetland, but the time the helicopter arrived, stuck in my

mind long after we left.

Da Sten Spaeks

Joan Pratt

“Do you *really* believe it’s possible?” Shona’s words were like ice dropping into a glass.

Despite the feeling of impending doom, I managed to squeak, “Yes. We could still find evidence!”

“*Really* sweetie? You don’t consider it unjustified to pour money into a barren site?”

Not again. I wasn’t even through the office door and my boss was calling me “sweetie.” I hated it. So patronising.

Shona continued without waiting for an answer. “So, what about this stunning lack of progress?” She seemed to linger a long time over the word “stunning.”

“Point taken, it is disappointing,” I admitted, warily.

I sidled onto the hard wooden chair she indicated, conscious of my fringe flopping into my eyes. I’m forty-five and always felt the frizzy copper curls squirrelling down my back fitted with the image of a bohemian archaeologist. However, Shona’s rich, glossy blonde locks smugly contained by a smart clip, engulfed me in rich glossy blonde hair envy.

“Lottie, don’t let her get to you.” My partner Neil’s voice swam into my head. “Insufferable bitch. Just because she wrote a book about Shetland’s Viking past when she was eighteen.”

“Did she?” I was intrigued.

Shona was hard to ignore. Younger than me, she had this intimidating attitude. Oh, I admired her work, but even before we met, colleagues had warned me about her put downs. “She’s as tough as nails that one.” And “she’d make a grown man cry.” And “she did make a grown man cry.”

“Unfortunately, geofizz provided false readings,” I continued, trying to

stand my ground. “But, I do not believe this excavation was a mistake. Even an artefact-bare site can give rich opportunities for learning.” I gazed at my lap. “Shona, we will find evidence of Norse occupation. Call it woman’s intuition.”

Shona did not appear to be in agreement. She reached over, poured herself a coffee without offering me one, and half turned in her padded chair towards her laptop. She tapped the keys as if she was more interested in the words on the screen than on my words.

“Hah, that famous intuition,” she said eventually, with a twisted half smile.

I gasped, unsure.

But that dubious drop of praise was quickly drowned in the cloudburst of criticism that followed. “No matter how strong your intuition,” she needled away, “nothing can be permitted to disrupt the meticulous use of scientific methods. We have no money to investigate based on your clever clogs instinct. We need evidence. Naturally.”

“I believe,” I burst out, “we will find it.”

Shona sipped her coffee disapprovingly. “Nonsense. You are just being obstinate.”

I hurtled on, ignoring the cutting tone, telling myself obstinate can be a good trait in a hold-your-ground kind of way. “Viking treasures are out there, just waiting to be found.” I may lack confidence, but archaeology is my passion, and I couldn’t help leaping up, before crumpling under Shona’s withering glare.

Silence.

She seemed relieved that at least I had stopped jumping about. She reclined in her comfy chair and rested her head. She began to swing around. I felt the wooden chair dig further into my bones. It was rumoured Shona kept an especially hard chair for unwanted visitors. I was definitely feeling I was one very unwanted visitor, about to be dismissed. But not apparently before she jabbed scarlet talons at my ultra-short shorts.

“Now sweetie, are *those* suitable for a professional archaeologist?”

I frowned, wishing I could prove to Shona that beneath my seemingly frivolous attire lurked a highly focussed expert. I opened my mouth to answer, but Shona had apparently forgotten her last question already.

“So, describe how you will improve performance before I close down the Yell site?”

“Well,” I said, trying to appear unflustered. I wanted to say, *stop poking around asking irrelevant questions*. I stopped in time, but to my horror, I heard myself saying, “We should be fundraising to keep the site open. “And,” I hurtled on, “Shona, you could be more hands on with new team members.”

Big mistake. I had queried my boss’s actions.

Shona inspected those immaculate scarlet talons. “*Really* sweetie?” she snapped. “Two things. First, I’m through with digging. Thank goodness. It ruined my nails. I’m into research. Think of me as a surgeon who has dropped the doctor bit.” She was watching me, the way a cat watches a mouse. “Secondly, do you think you are sufficiently qualified to tell me how to manage my team?”

“No.” I hid my short, earth encrusted nails. My hands were damp, and I felt nauseous. This happened when Shona stressed me. I knew it could hamper my career if I couldn’t express myself succinctly.

“Correct answer sweetie.”

Now Shona was studying some paperwork intensely, as if it were an expensive artefact. More likely it was my contract, and she was about to rip it up. She smiled a very bored smile. In fact, it was clear she was bored with the whole procedure.

More silence.

My time was over. I bolted for the door. I knew exactly where to find Neil - in a nearby café, demolishing a tasty looking sassarmaet brunnie.

At fifty, Neil was five years older. We had worked together on several digs, and I trusted him implicitly. His face brightened when I entered, reminding me so much of the darling dad I had recently lost. Saying goodbye was the hardest thing I have ever done. On impulse, I threw my arms round him. He blinked in surprise, his leathery cheeks turning

a polished red. He started to speak, but I held onto him. Gently, he disentangled himself, grabbed his backpack and spoke, brisk as ever.

“Let’s go.”

I didn’t have to ask where.

Almost blinded by slashes of rain, we dived through the dark car park. Despite huge hands, Neil’s touch was light on the wheel, as he coaxed his battered jeep through Lerwick’s early morning traffic.

“Neil, it was awful.”

His voice was steady, reassuring. “Take your time.”

I made a rueful face, and blurted out the whole horrible encounter before finishing, “She wouldn’t listen.”

“No surprise there.” He voiced my thoughts. “Thank God she’s leaving.”

“We need a new team leader – a good leader.”

He grinned wryly. “And what would you say makes a good leader?”

“Someone who will respect fellow diggers, not humiliate them. Someone strong, competent and caring. Someone who can communicate, not just bark e-mails. Someone to build an atmosphere of trust and understanding amongst the team - and know how to put their own experience into good use.”

“So why don’t you apply for Shona’s position then?”

“Me?”

“That’s yourself you’re describing. You’ve got the skills. You’d be perfect.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

But I was warmed by his support.

Any more conversation was drowned out by the buffeting wind and rain, but soon the jeep was rolling onto the Yell ferry. Strong tides carried us across the sound, and once on Yell, we headed north on the good road. A quick prayer to St Olaf calmed my birling thoughts.

When we reached the headland, a bright blue canvas of sky opened up, and a huge fat sun welcomed us. We left the jeep. I flung my arms wide. I couldn't help myself. It was as if I'd designed the view myself. The sheer beauty of dramatic cliffs careering down to the sea was breath taking.

Neil loped onto the spot where I believed a Viking settlement had once dominated the landscape. He made an imposing figure, tall, square jawed and sinewy. King of his domain, almost sculpted from the rock itself, his grey hair bristling like a forest of spears. I collapsed against a large boulder. It was Friday. We had the place to ourselves. The diggers had finished up for the weekend. I stared and stared across to Unst bathed in glorious sunshine, until the smell of coffee rescued my vision.

"Here." Neil had poured a drink from his flask.

I wrapped my fingers round the mug. "You know my dad brought me here when I was young. He loved history, loved exploring, loved the excitement of discovery. It's an obsession. It's like touching your ancestors, Dad used to say."

"True. And the answer's out there somewhere."

"I'd like to share something with you," I said, slowly.

"Anything special?"

"Very."

I clambered over the edge down a steep, well-kent path. Obediently, Neil fell in behind me, until I stopped and pointed to a huge fallen slab.

"Found this when I was ten." Memories spilled from me. "My secret hidey hole. No one knows about it even now."

He stared thoughtfully at the slab of sandstone. I scrambled down until level with it- and vanished. Beneath the rock was a small chamber.

"Come in. Lie on your back."

He obeyed my muffled voice. The chamber was lined with packed earth and there was barely room for two.

"I used to hide here from Dad," I told Neil. "My secret. Brilliant."

Neil flicked a torch around, then focused on the slab above us. He was silent for a moment. Then he tapped my shoulder. "It's even more brilliant than you think." His voice sounded strange, passionate. "Lottie, look. Look up."

My eyes adjusted to absorb the scene on the roof above, and like warm honey, understanding seeped over me.

Living history.

The outside world ceased to exist. Carved into the sandstone, in stunning detail, was a long-haired girl wearing a helmet, and carrying a sword and shield. Around her was a runic inscription. My fingertips quivered as I traced her contours. I could sense her beating heart. I could sense it flowing into me. A powerful shiver ran through me. With certainty, I realised I had reached out over a thousand years and connected with a living soul.

She felt it too. We were entwined. Forever.

I could feel Neil's body tremble. "Lottie, do you realise it's a runestone?"

"The story of a shieldmaiden," I whispered.

"You never knew it was here?"

Without dragging my gaze away, I shook my head.

"I think you've found your answer, don't you?"

"Yes," I rasped eventually.

This time when I entered Shona's office, I no longer wobbled like a nervous giraffe who had blundered onto the motorway. I strode with certainty. Shona must have noticed the difference right away. Puzzled, she leaned forward from her comfy chair.

"It's late sweetie. I was just packing up. Would you like a seat?"

I glanced at the uncomfortable chair, but didn't allow her to bait me. As I held out my phone, I felt that same shiver. The shieldmaiden was willing me on. "Shona. Look..." I breathed deeply, then, simply and directly, explained our discovery. When I had finished I knew with certainty, I had presented a perfectly reasoned case to accompany the

sensational pictures.

Shona was sullen and silent, but her cup clattered on its saucer. “Stunning,” she mumbled. “Er, help yourself to coffee sweetie.”

The scathing tone was gone.

I poured myself a coffee, and carefully sipped it. “Two things. Let me be perfectly clear. Never call me sweetie. And...”

“What?” she asked, watching me warily.

“I’m not a clever clogs,” I snapped.

By now, Shona’s expression had become fossilised. “Er, point taken.”

“So, you’ll keep the dig open.” I gave her a poised smile. “Naturally.”

“Naturally,” she protested feebly.

After the last ghastly encounter, the sweetest relief stirred in me.

“Correct answer Shona.”

I shut the door decisively behind me.

Neil was waiting in the jeep. He took one look at my beaming face and reciprocated with the wall to wall smile I loved. “Just one more thing to do then,” he said.

“What?”

“Apply for her position.”

Overwhelmed, tears sprang to my eyes. Gently caressing the stubble of his jaw and cheek, I fixed his gaze. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“That’s brilliant news.” His chuckles blended with the revving engine.

Homecoming

Nina Patterson

She glides slowly under the water, laughing as the seal pups spin their playful circles around her. Her body is fluid, and she feels the heady mixture of joy and relief that accompanies a long-awaited homecoming. The warmth of the North Atlantic drift heats the seas around the Shetland Islands and in this moment, she can hear all the voices of the sea. However, even in this languished state she can feel the beginnings of that familiar tug that she knows will take her far from home and all that is familiar. Suddenly she is pulled to the water's surface thrashing and screaming as she has been every night for as long as she can remember.

Slowly Hilda becomes aware of the gentle ticking of a clock and the sound of the rain on a window. At the same time, she feels the stiffness and pain enter her joints and the weariness that comes from living in an 87-year-old human body. She is lying in a single bed in the bedroom of a small crofting house in Burra, one of the Shetland Islands. She has lived here as a child with her parents, then later with her own husband and children and now finally alone as an old woman. Every part of this house contains a thousand memories which are a source of both immense comfort and at times overwhelming loss. Hilda's day follows the same rhythm, a cup of tea followed by a short walk (which takes much longer than it used to) to the Sands of Minn. Here she will swim as she does every day of the year. Entering the water brings with it a sense of peace that has helped her to survive the losses of those she has most loved. These last few years the weightlessness of the sea has also provided a welcome balm from the constant aching in Hilda's bones.

Although Hilda's life now may seem quite unremarkable, it has not always been so. When I said she had lived in this house forever that is not strictly true. She was found on 21st June 1900 as a baby on a beach in the uninhabited Shetland Island of Hildasay (hence her namesake). A young couple, who had sneaked ashore for a romantic day trip, were the ones who found her and later went on to raise her as their own. The couple had followed the eerie sound of seals barking until they came

across a nearly hidden geo where they were met with the sight of a new-born baby lying naked on a bed of seaweed. The beach was otherwise abandoned, apart from close to one hundred seals in the bay who gave the appearance of standing guarding over the baby. With nobody else on the island and no boats moored in the jetty how and when the baby had arrived there was a source of much speculation in the Islands. It is still not unusual to hear the conversations stop and the whispering begin when Hilda goes into a shop or the post office even now after 87 years.

People are unsettled by things they can't explain and readily chose to believe that the baby had been abandoned by a young unmarried mother desperate to avoid the shame and the subsequent chains of her mistake. Hilda, however, always knew she had not been abandoned but rather given to the Islands as a gift from the sea herself.

There is an agreement between the land and the sea that has been in existence since the dawn of time. This agreement has long been forgotten by those on land (who prefer that which can be understood and controlled) but remains honoured by the sea. The agreement decrees that on the first Summer Solstice of each new millennium the sea will offer up one of their own in exchange for the lives that have been taken by the sea. A precious life in exchange for those lives lost, a peace offering between realms if you like. This life given by the sea will take a human form and Hilda was a beautiful child with long dark hair and eyes that reflected the colour of the sea on any given day. She spent most of her days alone at the beach collecting shells and playing with the crabs and seals. The locals considered the child to be 'old for her years', 'sullen' and 'strange'. Of course, Hilda was as old as creation itself and carried with her the souls of all those the sea had taken from them.

While Hilda struggled to understand human words the voices of the sea were as clear as her own. She heard the Orcas on their migration paths, the seals tangled in fisherman nets and the porpoises dancing on the waves. The waxing and waning of the tides ran through her blood, and she could not bear to be far from shore. Luckily on Shetland no point on land is ever far from the shore, making it easier for the sea to keep watch over one of their own. However, very few creatures can live in both the sea and the land. As Hilda grew more familiar in the human

ways she heard less and less of the sea voices.

In time, the local people had come to accept her and sought out her advice and blessing before crossing the treacherous seas around the island. Hilda did what she could to protect them, but the ancient rules of the agreement cannot easily be unwritten. She had lived a good life here and at times could almost believe Shetland was her home. Having experienced the great joys of love and motherhood herself, she now felt more keenly the sorrow for those souls who were lost to the sea in this cruel exchange. It was clear to Hilda that no offering, not even another life, can ever replace those taken and the sea's millennial peace offerings were futile.

With her husband now passed and her children long since flown the islands her pull to the sea grows stronger. Hilda spends more and more time in the sea, listening for the voices that remain just out of her reach. Increasingly a part of her never leaves the sea even as her body returns to the land and her croft. Her other respite is in her dreams where she longs to remain under the water unshackled by her human body. Each day the seals are there to greet her as she enters the sea and Hilda knows they are waiting, as she is, for her return. She wonders how she can explain this to her children and grandchildren who have only ever known the ways of the land.

Hilda wakes on 21st June 1987 with the whisperings of the sea carried on the wind. Once again, she can hear the orcas, seals, porpoises, and a myriad of other sea creatures. In the simmer dim tonight, she will take her boat over to her 'birth island' - Hildasay - as she has done each solstice since getting her first boat aged nineteen. She will return to that same geo where she was found 87 years ago today where she will find the seals once again offering their protection. As she enters the sea this time, she will shed her human body as she knows there will be no return to the surface. As she experiences the joy and relief that accompanies a homecoming, she will mourn the loss of a life for those that knew her as Hilda.

The islanders will find Hilda's boat on Hildasay but not her body which will have once again merged with the seas. People, unable to accept the unexplainable, will no doubt draw their predictable conclusions. She

just hopes that her children will understand that the fairy tales were always true and so much of what matters most cannot be put into human words.

Dey Spaek

Hannah Nicholson

You canna mind your ain bloody business in dis plaess. You sood raelly, but you dinna.

Dis is whit happens in sican a peerie plaess as dis. If fokk think ill o you, dey'll no stop short o' takkin you doon twartree pegs. Dir naethin laek gossip ta keep things goin aboot here, an dey really dinna care whit herm it caases.

We get some brawly uncan fokk comin here. Dey come up wi da oil, oswally. Some o dem juist turns up on da boat fae sooth, tinkin ta sort demsels oot wi a new life. Usually dey get shoved tae een o yun cooncil hooses till dey kin get somethin goin, an even den, dir still nae guarantee at hit'll wirk oot da wye at dey wid laek. A lot o dem, though, ir respectable anoff. Da kind o fokk you're prood ta hae in among you.

We haed dis wan faimly move up nort intae da hoose doon da rod fae wirs – English, dey wir. Fine bunch o fokk, keens. I keen sometimes, fokk tinkit wir judgemental o fokk uncan tae wis, but I keen I'm certainly no. Onyweye, dis eens... dey wir a weel-behaved bunch. Nae trouble avaa. Da bairns – fower o dem – wis quiet, weel-behaved peerie bodies, at ae spak wi you when dey wir oot an aboot an could mind dir manners. Dey made a lot o freends as weel. An on dis day, da een am spikkin aboot, I wis gone tae da shop fir me errands when een o dem wis come up da road wi a tirn faess, as if he kent at he wis in a braw lok o buddir.

“Kwitellsdee?” I axed him.

Da peerie fellow jumped whan he heard me an he turned tae look at me. “Pardon?” He said back. I gae him a bit o a gluff an he clearly wisna needin een.

“I said,” I answered ageen, spaekin so at he could understand, “what’s wrong?”

He looked doon at his shön. Dey wir smairt, polished black eens, Sunday shoes you wid wear tae da kirk. Den I noticed whit looked lik

gutter on dem.

“I’ve stepped in dog poo,” he telt me. He looked lik he micht greet. “If my dad sees dog poo on these shoes he’ll be really mad at me – they’re supposed to be for special occasions.”

“So why were you wearing them to school?” I said, tryin no ta gaff, keenin fine weel at I wid nivver o lat wir bairns wear shön lik yun tae da skule.

“It was school photo day,” he telt me. “My mum wanted me to wear them. She bought them specially and now I’ve got dog poo on them.” An wi yun he startit greetin, peerie-wyse.

“It’s okay,” I answered, tryin tae keep him calm. “If you come back tae mine, I’ll clean them fir you. Your dad need never know.” Becis eftir aa, it raelly wisna his faat at dey wir someen among wis at sood be takkin mair responsibility fir dir dug. I ay tinkit if you’re no prepared tae pick up eftir your dug, you raelly soodna hae een, an yun applies tae ower mony fokka here.

Onywye, da peerie fellow in his sheenin, sharn-clertit shön cheuchered up a peerie bit, so I took his hand an’ led him back tae da hoose. I helped him tak his shoes aff at da door, den I let him in. He wandered in tae da kitchen an sat at da table, lookin aboot him an sayin nithin. I took his shön tae da sink – da smell made me ill – an tried ta clean da dug sharn fae dem as best I could usin keetchin roll an haet watter. Finally, I wis successful. I drenched da sink wi bleach an chucked awa da keetchin roll. Den I got some shoe polish, shone dem up an guid ta gie dem tae him.

“There we go,” I said tae him. “Good as new.”

He smiled, den quietly said at he didna keen how tae tie shoelaces. So I wis knelt me doon afore him, an wis tellin him da rabbit story I telt wir bairns tae shaw them how ta tie laesses whan I noteeced some serious-lookin blue bruises on his shins. I managed tae hide how shocked I wis, but couldna help but worry. He suddenly spied ta time an said sorry, he’d hae ta go noo, but thanks very much, an he guid oot da door. I watched him go an worried.

I sat da hale nicht waatchin da telly an winderin how he got da bruises,

an feelin bad at I didna ax. Den I minded him sayin aboot how mad his faedir wid be if he cam hom wi dug sharn on his shön. An I dunna keen why, even tae dis day, but I panicked. Wis his faedir gien him yun bruises? Dey certainly wirna been fae faain ower some wye, dey widna be dat blue, dat severe. Yun wis definitely been anidder human being, een stranger as him, at gae him bruises lik yun. But du doesna hae proof, I said tae mesel. Du canna be sure at yun peerie boy wis gettin belted by his faedir. Du didna ax him. But den how else could he hae bruises lik yun on his shins?

But den, could it no aesy o been een o da boys at he guid tae da skule wi? Certainly when my two were growin up, an fokk wis first comin tae da isles fir oil jobs, da incomers did mak freends but dey wir a guid bit o abuse at guid on.

Den it occurred tae me – nah, couldna be someen at da skule, no way. Yun boy wis in primary three, an I kent dey kept aabody in P1-3 tagidder and aabody in P4-7 tagidder. So he wis een o da owldest eens in his group – he widna be gettin thumped be owlder bairns. Dir widna be da shance fir it.

An da nixt thing at I did wis tae lift da phone an get on tae social work.

Da followin eftir nune, when I cam hom fae da shop, I spied da child protection services vehicle ootside da hoose. Hiv ta say I wisna been expectin dem tae wirk dat quickly, but it wis nithin tae how quick da rumours started whan aabody else saa it as weel. Dey didna tak da bairns aff dir midder an faedir, but dey wir still plenty o fokk at were disgusted at onythin wis been don tae warrant sican a veesit, an it didna stop idle gossip. Nithin ivver does here.

Fae den on, things got hairder fur dem. Naebody wid spaek tae dem – an ony een at did only did so tae hurl abuse at dem. Da list o insults wis near endless – dey wid range fae fokk decryin dem as an affront tae dir bairns an da community as a whole, tae swearin an neems, references tae dir sooth moother status, an even dem bein spat at. You hae ta mind, we micht be plaessed fairder nort as da rest o da country, but wir still Scots. Dir a lok o things we're abön – but yun's definitely no wan o dem. Mair rumours flew aboot as weel – whit he wis hittin dem wi, whit dey'd telt idder bairns at skule, yun kinda thing. But I tried no tae get

involved. I kent at dis wis my faat. I coulda said nithin an mindit me ain business, but laekwise I coulda left yun bairns in genuine deengir an yun widda been a far waar feelin.

Den, a couple o weeks laetir, da midder an faedir cam tae wir door.

“It was you,” he thundered.

“Whit?!” I said. “Whit wis me?”

“You told them,” he fumed. “You told the social. You told them you thought my boy had bruises on his legs – I know you did. We couldn’t work out what the problem was, but now he’s finally told us he’d been to you because he’d gotten dog mess on his best shoes and you’d agreed to clean them for him.”

I nodded.

“Why did you do that? We’d done nothing to him.”

“Well, it couldna be een o da bairns he wis at da skule wi,” I answered him. “An he didna faa. Wid du lik ta tell me how he got dem?”

“I can tell you exactly how he got them,” his midder raged, an shö held up a pair o raed rubber buits. “See,” she said, pointin inside each o dem, “look at those.”

I looked in – an on da inner sides o each een wis black an blue stains. Dey lookit exactly lik...lik...

“...pen ink?!” I didna lik whar dis wis goin.

“Yes,” raged da midder. She wis greetin noo. “I wrote ‘L’ and ‘R’ on the inside of each boot so he could tell them apart. He’d been jumping in puddles and the ink smudged on his legs. I put him in the bath that night – I thought it had all come off. I tried to tell the social this but I wasn’t able to find the boots and show them. But now I can prove to them, and you, that we have never laid a finger on our son.”

I felt nae bigger as een o yun buits by dis time. Den da faedir spak.

“You are going to phone the social and retract your statement to them,” he ordered me. “And you are not going to speak to any one of my children ever again. You haven’t any idea what you’ve put us through.”

As shune as dey wir gone, yun's exactly whit I did.

Dey moved awa no long eftir yun happened – I canna blame dem. An as fir me, weel – I'll no even go intae whit fokka think o me noo. I kin see dem lookin at me doon dir noses, glowerin. I'm no made welcome ony wye at I geng noo, an it's aa me ain faat, stickin me neb in some wye whar hit didna belang.

You canna mind your ain bloody business in dis plaess. You sood raelly, but you dinna.

The Ancestors

Heather Christie

Walking uphill from the beach, I look ahead and take the settlement in. It doesn't seem like there's any life there now - just a few frugal, dilapidated buildings jutting up from the crest of the low hill, the bedrock scratching through the grass. Timeworn, our slab-stoned family crofthouse addresses the sea, flanked by a few other mostly empty dwellings and other lichen shrouded buildings close to collapse. There are scatterings of rusting farming equipment, rotting piles of beachcombed timber bleed into the ground.

The house now serves as a barn, with windows boarded up and tarred black, the stone porch roofless and doorless. Where there was once cultivation, everything is now overgrown. A small, barely identifiable patch of garden is smothered by long grasses that shimmer in the winds of short blustery summers, and lie dry, matted and yellow against the low grey skies of winter. Bare wind-sculpted branches of fuchsia persist, the tips of the branches still bearing tiny clusters of leaves and deep red flowers under a high summer sun - today framed against a slate velvet sea under a blue sky laced with scudding clouds. The fuchsias are the only sign the garden was once cared for. In winter, even they look dead.

Most of the few adjacent crofthouses are also empty, the settlement a ghost of its former self. But the shadows of those who once lived here hide in the corners, behind roofless dwelling-houses and barn walls, their spirits whispering in the unrelenting breeze that whistles through the rotting doors and the wire fences. I can feel their presence as I carefully negotiate a stile and walk into the settlement. They know I'm less agile, less confident in middle age than I was as a child. They have watched me grow.

The ancestors have always made their presence felt in the crofthouse. I knew they were there when I used to visit as a child, clinging on to the place they fought so hard to survive in. Generation after generation have populated this collection of near ruins, both in life and in spirit. I am certain that when it was a place of life and work, ancestors from decades

or centuries past silently kept company with their living descendants - sometimes judging, sometimes smiling on their lives and their work. When my son is in the croft house with my brother-in-law, he swears there's another man there. He stands near the wall, stares at my son and smiles. The man wears a cap, and a woollen jacket - the boarded-up windows mean it's too dark to see what his trousers are like. I ask around, but I can't find out who this might be, no-one living remembers him.

Four decades ago, before my family left the croft house, I would visit every year towards the end of the summer dim, one of three children of divorced parents living south with their mother but spending summer with my father's second family as they reclaimed our ancestral home. I would lie in the straw mattress box-bed in the butt-end, my cheeks sore with smiling, filled with expectation as I listened to fiddle and banjo meander to me from next door, waves of chatter and laughter signifying late night visitors. My brothers slept in the ben-end box bunkbeds, by default part of the action. I silently pleaded with the spirits of my forebears to arrange for me to get up, to join the fun for tales and tabnabs, but it never happened. Only once can I remember being called on to play my recorder and demonstrate my ballet lessons; nervous and excited in my brushed nylon nightdress, small among exuberant alcohol-fumed men. I squeaked out "Row, Row, Row Your Boat", would not dance and scuttled back to bed, with crisps and a biscuit, mission accomplished.

The small box-bed was a place I shared with my kind, portly grandmother, who escorted myself and my brothers to Shetland from south and whose resonant and often abrupt snoring kept me awake for hours in the ever-present daylight. In the mornings, she would get up early and join the others in the ben-end, taking the ancestors with her. On windless days I would revel in being left alone in deep silence, broken only by a splatter of rain on the window, alone at last.

Outside, crofting in the settlement followed the seasons and the weather - the cycle of sheep care and lamb production, of planting and harvesting in the kale yard, of peat cutting, stacking, and drying before it was brought to the large stack by the house. We children, visitors not residents, were scolded to keep out of the way. Inside there were ways

of doing things too. The large fireplace cleaned the peat fire lit. Meals important and ceremonial. Teatimes were proper spreads with plates of bread, butter, jam, biscuits, and cake on the table and all the condiments laid out, no matter what the meal. Saturday lunchtime was a ritual where even the children had sweet, watery coffee and a biscuit after a three-course meal, soup, meat and two veg, all salty. I would chatter and eat my dessert slowly to make my frugal portion last longer. The ancestors sat silent by the peat fire, scowling. No talking at the table.

Shopping took a whole day, ferry trip included. It started with us crushed in an island taxi and the children were not allowed to talk as we sat inside the boat. Sundays were often for church. Sunday evenings saw bath time at a neighbouring uncle's house, one child after the other in one tub of lukewarm water. The crofthouse bathroom was just a wooden shed, the toilet an old oil drum with a plastic toilet seat, a bucket of peat crumbs at its side for sprinkling in lieu of a flush. The contents of the oil drum were periodically emptied into the midden, which in turn supported a flourish of nettles.

When very young, before the divorce when even my mother came to the settlement, I am told I would drag a single peat almost as big as I was into the house. Pre-adolescence and post-divorce I would enter bearing handfuls of forget-me-not and buttercups - a present for my grandmother, who always, always smiled and was grateful for such a meagre posy. The soft smoke-scent of burning peat was a comforting blanket through all of my growing years, it was the smell of eons of nature, of history, of the ancestors.

In this crofthouse, I learned to sew, to knit, to crochet, to draw, to be kind to the feral cat who spent those peat-smoke evenings with us. I learned about my more recent ancestors and my current family situation. I learned to sign to my deaf and dumb uncle. I understood that children were to be seen and not heard, unless my father decided otherwise. My stepmother was kinder, but still held old-fashioned beliefs and boundaries, giving her an aura of wisdom I had never come across before. Although heartsore from our family split, all of this I loved.

Outside, with my brothers, when my dad had time out from work, I learned to skim stones, to collect buckies, to stack peat, to wheelbarrow

it uphill from the Ness, to chase yowes away from the dilapidated fence. Treats came our way when we behaved - rhubarb and a poke of sugar, homemade tablet, or sometimes money to walk the 4 miles to the shop and back to buy hard cinnamon-infused sweets.

The only real modern item in the crofthouse was a portable television, in fuzzy black and white. We watched summer sport, the news, and especially the weather. But the electricity was unstable and intermittent and power cuts happened too, one during a Christmas holiday visit necessitating an evening in a neighbour's house. I was allowed back to the crofthouse to retrieve a toy. The ancestors escorted me, emboldened in the claustrophobic blackness, prickling at my neck, the short journey from door to door stretching for miles. I had my new baby sister clutched to my chest along with a torch, talismans to protect me should the whispering spirits of my forebears decide to make fun of my fear.

This Yuletide visit to the crofthouse saw evening after evening of late celebration, our household only wakening after it had been light and was starting to get dark. These were some of my last times in this house. My last winter.

Yes, eventually the crofthouse was abandoned. The ancestors were abandoned. It was deemed unfit for my new younger siblings to grow up in, to have the experience I had. Of course my teenage attention turned to my paternal family's shiny new council house. The old crofthouse was too far from this new level of comfort to think about visiting much. Our forebears were left to themselves. As I grew older, I began to bring the boy from south who I met at art college and who would become my husband. I was thrilled to find he too fell in love with the the island, the settlement, my ancestors. But like everyone with a pull to Shetland, I had to spend time with him south, seeing the world, experiencing other things, other kinds of summers, urban life. The ancestors sighed, but knowing they would prevail, they let me go.

Children created a new family for me, and it was time to connect them to the Shetland kin, to the crofthouse, to the spirits of the settlement. The children felt the ancestors too, heard them whispering in the breezes, revelled in the prickles in the back of their neck which signified something they didn't understand. But they too preferred the council

house, not so new now, but with a level of comfort they were used to. And treats, tales and tabnabs were much more available for their generation than they had been for mine.

We still lived south, but the ancestors kept pulling at me, tugging at the invisible ropes they had bound me with in childhood. I looped them around my husband and children so that we all felt it. The children briefly fought against their bonds, attracted by city lights, but soon gave in. My son, tied to his guardian from the crofthouse, marked the days off on a calendar. My daughter made plans for her new bedroom, her new start. An overnight on the North Boat with a lorry containing all of our possessions transported our lives to this island - a day and a half's journey taking us to join our family, our ancestors.

I stop and look one last time at the crofthouse and the dilapidated garden and then head down the road that will take me to our new home. The crofthouse will not collapse, its new role as a barn safeguarding its future, at least for a while. My family and I are here now, not living in the crofthouse or the settlement, but relatively close by. I am comforted by the glimpse of part of it from our kitchen window. We make our new lives here, and the spirits quieten, let us get on with our lives. And so it is settled that one day I will become an ancestor too. I will sit in the corner of whatever is left of the house, or I will whisper in the breeze with the rest of my forebears, so that our descendants and anyone else who cares to listen will know we lived and live on.

On The Edge

Louise Casson

Wild winds whistle and wail as the drizzle falls more heavily on the soft purple heather of the Hermaness Nature Reserve. Undulating and gentle, the landscape here lays untouched by humans. Rolling lilac hills perch above Burra Firth, looking down into the foggy abyss. The sea below crashes into the rocks in a melancholic orchestral discord. This bleak yet beautiful place is deserted.

Almost deserted.

On the high path running up the side of the firth, a young woman strides purposefully towards the plateau at the top of the reserve. It's a path she has walked hundreds of times before. It's her escape. It's her sanctuary. But not today. Today is different. Her last hope of finding sanctuary up on the cliffs has disappeared, along with her job and the last of her cash.

Despite the season, she isn't dressed for the weather, but she doesn't need to be. Her pale, bare arms are tinged with blue and are covered in goosebumps; her burgundy vest and blue trousers are doing nothing to keep-out the chill; her open-toed walking shoes are wholly inadequate but she doesn't care. Her feet pound the gravel below her, rhythmically, as she allows nothing but the music in her ears to flood her mind. She's done with thinking. She has done so much thinking for the past two days that the thought of more thoughts makes her feel physically sick. Thoughts are just one more thing she can no longer bear.

They join a long list...

Work, or the lack of, was right at the top of the list. She loved her little job in the café, close to Eshaness; it paid the bills and allowed her to stay in this homely wilderness. Then the pandemic hit, the cruise ships stopped visiting, and that was that. She was no longer needed.

Then there was Ash...

Silence strikes her as her track finishes, and she suddenly becomes aware of her surroundings once more.

As she approaches the crest of the hill, she stares into the bleakness ahead. Fog swirls aimlessly, obscuring the long path to the cliff edge, and sheep and bonxies, whose muffled cries can only be faintly heard, become phantoms as their shapes shift behind the gloom. Straining to see, she stops as she realises, she's still in nature's silence. Her album has finished, and the only sounds are those which she once loved, yet hearing them now, at this moment, opens her mind's floodgates and allows those memories – they are now only memories – to come racing back.

In her head appears Ash, who made her life here so wonderful. For a place with so few people, Ash made sure she never felt alone. While she was happy however, Ash grew restless and dreamed of grandeur and the big wide world beyond these small islands off the north tip of the UK. She could have joined him of course: left with him, but no. She didn't want to do that. She wasn't searching for anything. She had everything right here.

How naïve of her to think he'd stay! She bites her bottom lip hard at this thought. It wasn't long before the blood permeates her senses. She tastes it. Feels it. Smells it.

Fumbling awkwardly with her phone, she tries to start another album. Maybe Coldplay – their music matches her mood. She doesn't think about it too hard. Coldplay it is.

Staring ahead again, the fog is thicker now. She shivers uncontrollably. How long has she been still? In her head, it was only a moment or two, but she suddenly feels exposed and anxious. If she didn't pick-up the pace, she wouldn't reach the cliffs, and that would be a poor way to go out.

Back in the rhythm, she pounds the ground again, except now she can't feel her feet. She looks down to make sure they're still there – what a foolish thing to do. She bites her lip again and focuses on her walking, but the phantoms in the fog unnerve her. They don't look like sheep. Or bonxies. They look like real phantoms – ghosts – hiding in plain sight behind that thick veil that separates the tangible from the intangible. She has never felt like this, up here, on the top of the world. She has only ever felt calmness and serenity. Now she feels nothing but dread and a

sense of foreboding.

What did she expect?

Focusing again, she walks quicker across the invisible openness towards the most magnificent view she has ever seen.

By now, she is soaking wet. Her long black hair is plastered to her face in a tangled mess and her numb feet squelch in the dampness. Her music is interspersed with white noise, which she assumes is down to the rain, and her energy is fading.

As she pushes this to the back of her mind and summons all her resolve, the short grass becomes boggy and she finds herself moving more slowly, picking her way carefully through the mire to avoid falling. Her feet sink into the ground and every arduous step drains more of her energy. A couple of times she loses her balance and has to steady herself with her hands. She can't feel those either, but she does feel pain. She just can't decide where it's coming from.

Her lucidity is beginning to fade. It seems like hours before she's back on firmer ground.

Then without warning, her foot plants itself on a solid piece of earth and she knows now that the cliffs aren't far. If it wasn't for the fog, she'd be looking at the ocean now.

Her pace quickens, spurred on by a renewed vigour, and at last, the edge comes into view. Her plan, formulated so meticulously the day before, changes in that instant. Instead of the cliff edge directly ahead, she decides that she'd like to see the gannet colony one last time. The cliffs there are still cliffs, and the thought of soaring with those majestic, winged, kings of the islands, appeals to her.

Turning left at the edge, she prolongs her journey.

The smell hits her first: stale and salty, and it is quickly followed by the noise. Thirty thousand pairs of gannets make quite a squall.

She pauses. She breathes deeply. She shuffles her feet toward the birds, towards the noise and towards the edge. The grass is slippery and feels less firm than it did moments before.

She breathes again then sits. She removes her shoes, her headphones and her headband, and places them in a neat pile beside her.

Right in front of her face, maybe two or three feet away, glides not one gannet, but three. Their wings move the air, and she feels a rush of cool wind on her cheeks. The gannets are free, and she is about to join them.

Her hands grip the cold, wet edge. She swings her legs around so that they dangle over. She breathes deeply again. Now, clarity of thought has returned, and she feels overwhelmed by a sense of peace. But she shivers. Not a cold shiver, but the sort of shiver you feel when someone walks over your grave.

She breathes deeply again as the noise of the gannets, the rush of the wind and the overwhelming power of nature consume her.

“Hey! Hey you! What are you doing?”

Her head wheels round. Standing in front of her is a young man. She has never seen him before. Now her head is filled with thinking again. Who is he? What is he doing up here? Why now? At this moment?

“Don’t move! I’m coming!”

Within seconds, a firm arm embraces her. She feels herself being pulled backwards and she feels her heels on solid ground again.

“You’re going to die out here dressed like that.”

She doesn’t really have the strength to speak, but she smiles wryly and mutters, “That’s the idea.”

“I’m Raymond. What’s your name?”

“I’m nobody.”

“I’m Raymond. You must be somebody. Now you know my name, who are you? A long silence ensues. “Are you Mary by any chance?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Never mind that now. We have to go.”

She falls back onto the saturated ground and her eyes close. The world is coming and going, and she wonders whether the fog in front of her eyes is real. Darkness washes over her like perpetual waves on the

shore. Raymond hauls her to her feet and with his right arm, grips her tightly around the waist. He flings her left arm over his shoulder and holds her hand with his. He holds it so tight it feels like he's never going to let her go.

She attempts to move, but she can barely manage a shuffle and her exposed toes drag on the earth. She opens her eyes and sees her feet in her shoes but doesn't remember putting them back on. She can feel his thick woollen jumper rubbing against her bare skin, and it prickles but is surprisingly warm. She picks-up her feet and manages to keep step for what seems like hours before the darkness falls again. The last thing she sees is the iridescent purple heather that always brings her peace.

* * * * *

The next time she opens her eyes, she sees the water on her left. The long, sloping gravel path, which leads down to the car park, is in front of her. She is alone but she is walking unaided, and she feels surprisingly warm and peaceful. She starts to remember, but she's done with thinking, so she continues down towards where she left her car, hours ago.

Below her, In the car park, she can see flashing lights, lots of movement and a real commotion. She's still done with thinking, and she knows she can't go back to the cliffs, so she stops briefly, surveys the scene, embraces herself with both arms and rubs her bare arms...except they are no longer bare.

She's clothed in a thick woollen jumper. It's cream with large brown diamonds across the chest and smaller ones around the cuffs and the hem. Again, memories come flooding back, but this time, they are more vivid: more real. Questions start again in her head, but they'll have to wait. The furore below has captured her interest.

"Mary! Mary! Mary Parkinson! Is that you?"

Suddenly, four men, dressed in red suits, are running towards her, armed with a bright orange stretcher. She contemplates her next move, then

falls to the floor, feeling the warmth of a blanket being placed around her and a lightness overtake her, as she's helped onto the stretcher.

Once again, the perpetual darkness washes over her, but this time, it's accompanied by peace.

When she awakes, she is in a hospital bed. The nearest hospital is Lerwick and she has no memory of the journey. Machines beep loudly around her, and a nurse stands at the foot of the bed, writing on a chart.

Beside her is a warm drink, some flowers and a copy of The Lerwick Times. "Have yourself a peerie drink and sit yourself up if you can." spoke the nurse, softly. She props herself up against her pillow and reaches for the mug, which is still warm. It looks like hot chocolate.

As she does so, she sees a small photo at the top of a small column, on the open page of The Lerwick Times. It's a grainy photo – clearly old – of a young, athletic-looking man. She thinks she recognises him, and it is at that moment that she sees his jumper: plain, with large diamonds across the chest and smaller ones on the cuffs and hem. The very same jumper is folded neatly on the chair beside her.

The headline reads, 'Remembering Raymond: 100 years Since Cliff Tragedy at Toolie'

The Broch of Burland

James Scargill

Loric knew this day would come yet holding the fear as he had for all this time did nothing to temper its icy chill, which he now felt sitting in shards in his stomach as he watched the stream of warriors bear down in the distance. The warning they had received gave just enough time to ensconce the young and old within the thick stone walls that guarded their promontory, and the able-bodied to line up behind their defensive ditches. The enemy would soon be upon Loric, and his fellow defenders and he tried not to acknowledge the sickening sensation as he braced himself.

I looked ahead, my goal now visible in the distance. It was an undulating walk to get here, hugging the coast and its crenelations, kittiwakes swooping from their rocky perches as they sensed my approach. The birds glided out to sea once I passed and drew my view across the waves. Descending to a beach at one point I poked among the rocks and scoured the nautical paraphernalia that had washed up, the strands of rope parted from their companions, the scoops of a polystyrene buoy—they would make a good artwork, and in fact they do, as I recalled an exhibition I had seen a few months prior. Cresting the next hill I saw it in the distance, grey stone visible against the green tufts perched on an outcrop, but before reaching it I must navigate the burn that owns a cleft in the landscape—the stream seems too small to have eroded this valley itself, but eons can produce strange results. The sheep eyed me strangely as I crossed the small bridge and clambered up their hill, but they were accommodating, and soon my targeted wanderings achieved their goal as I looked out and over the Broch of Burland.

This circular, iron-age fort crouches near the edge of its promontory, almost covered by grass on the landward side, towards the sea it peers out. Though crumbled by time, its diameter of twenty or so feet speaks to the effort that its construction entailed almost two thousand years ago, especially when one considers the towering height it would have once enjoyed. Similar structures pepper the islands of

this archipelago and Orkney too, and the ancient people who built them even reached down to Caithness and Sutherland, and further too, or did they reach up to the isles? Mystery shrouds them and these structures they left too, like a distinctive logo that one keeps seeing around a foreign city, its artistry evident and compelling, yet is meaning obscure and enticing. Walking around a broch I am drawn into its past, and its many ages and roles rise up before my mind's eye, peopled by my imagination.

Though not as large as the multiple rings of Clickimin, or as tall as proud Mousa, Burland stimulates. The cliffs here fall away sheer, maybe a hundred feet down to the crashing waves, where the white surf coats their base like lather. Did the broch serve a defensive function?

Loric knew that the snarls of aggression and the clash of weapons around him should have inspired the thrill of battle, but instead each swipe compacted the sloppy confusion until it formed a dead substrate. When one of the opposing warriors broke through their rough line, Loric's fear expanded to encompass those sheltering within the broch. Personal combat to protect his tribe, perhaps glory lay therein? Giving chase, he swung his axe trying to nick his opponent's back, distract him, let him know he could not barrel forward with impunity. Loric succeeded just as they reached the narrow ledge separating the squat doorway from the perilous drop. They had the barest moment to size one another up, and against this titan Loric sensed he was on the losing side of the bargain. Or he would have been, yet as he felt fear and adrenaline congeal in his throat, the ferocity of the enemy's subsequent swing was enough to unbalance the giant and cause an unceremonious tumble. After a moment's trepidation, Loric peered over the edge to see the broken body on the rocks below, about to be claimed by the sea. He wanted to laugh and scream, but instead vomited.

No, this didn't feel right to me. Though the broch had the perfect defensive aspect, it cannot only have witnessed violence—life is richer than that. And in any case, just as the burn eroded the valley, the cliffs may not have encroached quite so close when the broch was built.

I turned around to take in the sweep of the slope I had climbed to reach here, dotted with sheep still wearing their thick winter coats. Some have

suggested brochs were the stately homes of their day, and certainly this one does have a million dollar view to equal any latter day mansion. My walk had already shown me in what a prominent position it lay, visible from a wide arc of the surroundings, even more so when it would have borne its full height - a nexus of great prestige.

The hum of the A970 in the background was transmuted into the murmuring of shepherds as they chatted whilst their small flocks intermingled. Loric strode up the hill, attempting to make himself more confident in the act, with his free hand playfully tussling the woolly back of a sheep whom he passed, whilst in the other he held a neat cloth package. He bade the shepherds wish him luck as he continued upwards towards the bored looking guard who leaned next to the broch's door. Loric held up his package in explanation and was ushered inside and up the stairway set between the thick, circular walls.

Some time ago the lord of this broch had won some booty, which, however, had been damaged in its acquisition. Loric, meanwhile, was an artist of minor repute who had just been banished from a neighbouring community. Therefore, it was natural he should offer his services to create something new from the broken brooch, which reimagined treasure he hoped might win him patronage.

The room on the broch's second level was filled with the sound of cavorting and through the flickering of torches, whose sooty smell mingled with that of spilt ale, he could see his would-be patron, attended by his retinue and laughing uproariously at some tale that had just been told. The air hung like thick cloth and Loric hesitated, unseen, part of him turning to descend the stairs and escape, seek freedom he wasn't sure existed, instead of the solicitude he wasn't sure he would reap. When he did pierce through, however, the chief noticed him without recognition, so with bruised pride Loric explained that he had finished reworking the golden jewellery and elicited an equivocal laugh. He handed the package to the chief, who handed it to one of his retainers to unwrap and pass the brooch back to be examined. Loric stared at the chief's face and tried to gauge the reaction his work inspired. His first audience had given him a strong impression of the kind of man this was, one whose tastes were soft yet predictable, but still, as an outsider to this community and with the ejection from his previous one still stinging,

he felt unsure. The chief turned it this way and that, and with each movement Loric became more certain that he had made a mistake, that his design was even insulting, and could see himself being led up to the roof of the broch and tossed off. This clashed with confusion, however, when the chief held it up to his ear as if it would explain itself that way, and it was only when that man bit it and saw the mark of his teeth that he roared once more in laughter.

Perhaps a thousand years later Loric would not be bringing a treasure but taking a stone, I mused, as the broch was quarried to the advantage of surrounding structures. Looking at its crumbled walls and ruined interior, I could see it now in a superposition of erection and disassembly, the ethereal stones faded in and out, preaching longevity and transition. Much like the sea itself, these isles' constant companion, yet ever in flux, roaring and squalling, placid and still.

How many waves had this broch heard crash against its supporting cliffs? Did its role lie out there? Scanning north I followed the various nesses that anticipate Lerwick and the sound of Bressay, which island stretches out to protect that supposedly muddy bay. The cliffs of Bressay's far side granted it an angular silhouette from my vantage and though no broch has been found at their limit I could imagine them having harboured their own itinerant lookout in ages past, just as they possessed their own artillery piece a century ago. Turning south, the coast passes in a more or less gentle curve until Helli Ness pokes out. Stood here I commanded an expansive view and I wondered how it had drawn others, a sketch in the water echoing the observer.

The undulation of the waves carried things in two directions, like a well-worn trading path sharing goods, news, and ideas, Loric realised, as he watched the rhythmic irruption and withdrawal of the water. He extracted hope from this understanding as he sat on the edge of the promontory, perched high above the water, the broch to his rear to which he would retreat in the face of only the fiercest weather. Right now, however, it was calm, as if the gods were doing what they could to soothe him. Gazing out at the horizon, Loric tried to send a message that would be carried by the waves whilst straining for a glimpse of something. It was important that his resolve not falter, that he not lose hope. She was out there.

There. At the vanishing point. Was that a sail, or a whale? And if the latter, would it bear a message from her? She had powers he did not understand but by which he was enthralled, from the time he had first encountered her, in the cave at the head of the geo. There had been a fearsome storm that day, which he thought would claim him when he fell in the water. Icy froth paralysed him before he could promise not to steal another seabird's egg, yet when he awoke in the cool, dark sanctuary, he was sure this was a pledge he must uphold. Until, that is, he saw her, eyeing him from a corner, and recognised his saviour clad in silver sealskin. The roar of the sea outside made speech impossible, but none was necessary as he made a new vow. She dissolved into a thousand sparkling droplets and the following day he commenced his vigil.

It wasn't a whale, but was a ship, a large one, and back in the present day it was my turn to become cognisant: there was the ferry carrying my friends. I smiled and followed its passage for a few moments before turning to make my way back to my car and thence to Lerwick to meet them.

Heather's trip to Shetland

Hannah Boden

It was August 1999, and Heather and her family were taking a trip to Shetland for the very first time. Heather was just 12 years old at the time and was so excited to be visiting her mum's best friend Sally in the old ancient capital, Scalloway. When they landed in Sumburgh Airport, Sally was there on the tarmac waiting for them eagerly, for it had been a number of years. Heather's younger sister, Sophie aged 10, and who hadn't uttered a word to Sally all the years while growing up ran up to her, gave her a big bear hug and shouted, "Oh Sally, I have missed you!" Sally was so shocked to hear Sophie finally speak, she almost fainted. The air was cooler in Shetland than it was in England, but the breeze kept any midges away. Heather also had a friend with her, Krystal also aged 12.

Heather, her mum, sister, Heather's best friend and Sally made their way to Scalloway passing the most beautiful scenery on the way. Heather was in awe of the wide-open skies and the appearance of a treeless landscape.

They all stayed in Sally's big house. Also at the house was Sally's daughters Katrina and Tulula, Tulula's boyfriend, his younger 13-year-old brother, and another teenage girl aged 14 Sally was also fostering at the time. So it was a busy household! Not to mention 2 dogs and a few cats!

Heather thought it was wonderful, she enjoyed playing on Scalloway recreational ground with her best friend and the young teenage boy that was staying at the house. Of course the two brothers were rivals, one supported Celtic and the other a Rangers fan. Having come from England Heather didn't understand what the fuss was about! It was clearly a thing though!

The next day the mums had decided a trip for a few nights in Unst was in order. This was to prove interesting, very interesting indeed. Heather's mum borrowed a large estate car off a local man. He had agreed to it, but he saw us later that day after he'd had one too many red

tins and exclaimed “They’ve taken my car!”

They all laughed and carried on, Heather thought it was hilarious.

They couldn’t all fit in the car so Heather, her best friend Krystal and the teenage lad where squeezed into the boot! Sophie was on Katrinas Knee! The only cassette they had was a FIVE single, *if ya getting down baby* on repeat. Welcome to the 90s! Which they sang, badly, all the way to Unst.

To get to Unst they had to cross Yell. They stopped off in Yell for the day. Sally recognised her old male gentleman friend leaning over a wall, he worked on the Tugboats but had a croft on the island. Sally wound the car window down, tapped him on the bottom and exclaimed “I’d recognise that ass anywhere!” He leaped up from his compromised position and greeted her fondly. Heather and her friends all giggling from within the car.

They all got out and took a deep breath, an arctic turn flew overhead. Sally stretched out her arms, circled a few times and said this is why I love Shetland. Peat green hills, sea and sky surrounded them.

Eventually they got to Unst. There was a small caravan parked at the leisure centre and a tent pitched.

They all want on a midnight walk, Heather’s younger sister was all scared and clung to mum while Heather, her best friend Krystal walked on together. The teenage boy ran ahead to an abandoned old croft house. There were rumours it was haunted! The teenage boy lept out suddenly and scared Heather and Krystal, “Aghhhh, oh my goodness don’t scare us like that!” The teenage boy laughed at them hysterically.

It was still quite daylight even though it was late, and this big orange ball appeared in the sky. It was the moon, a full moon, but it looked so much bigger than usual and so orange.

The next day it was actually quite warm. So they went to a local beach. Sally and Heather’s mum had brought puffin t-shirts. The beach was quiet. They decided to take their trousers off and paddle in the sea in just t-shirts and knickers! Much to Heather’s utter embarrassment! Suddenly out of nowhere came dozens of American tourists! Not just any old American tourists, but evangelists who had come to spread the

word of God at the local church and they saw Sally in just her t-shirt and knickers with her friend. Heather thought it was the funniest thing ever.

That night everyone was so excited and would not sleep. After Krystal and told the longest joke ever it was time for bed. But everyone kept giggling. One would shout “I need a fag” another “I need a wee,” “Stop tickling my bottom.” The teenage boy shouted, “Get ta bed!” which made everyone giggle even more. I don’t think any of them got sleep that night.

Sally decided to show everyone another beach in Unst, golden and sandy. Heather’s mum struggled over the styles saying these “These are no good if you’ve got short legs and bladder problems,” which caused further giggling in the party.

Heather was so impressed by the Shetland scenery she told her mum and Sally she’d move here one day.

That she did. 13 years later. She did.

Beside the Sea

Iain Murray

I locked my car in Britain's most northerly carpark and headed towards the grassy headland that would take me to the edge of the Atlantic Ocean.

Solitude had been my friend of late, along with an increased appreciation of the simple pleasures of life and this beautiful place hugged my troubled thoughts.

A path of wooden boards appeared to float on the boggy ground and each step I took forced water through the slats with a squelching sound contrasting with the birdsong from the meadow, resplendent with the colours of crowberry and bilberry plants.

Reaching the end of the uphill boardwalk, the moor widened and lochans appeared. A sudden closing shadow above my head and a loud shriek told me that I had reached the nesting area of the cannibalistic Great Skuas that flourished here. My guidebook had warned of the threat these large birds posed for walkers and the next 100 metres gave ample opportunity to photograph the marauders as they swooped towards my head.

Clifftops reached - looking west the open expanse of the Atlantic stretched in front of me, peering over the edge I could see waves crash at the foot of the cliffs, white foam contrasting vividly with the turquoise open water.

On the grassy clifftop I saw a flash of red and yellow scurry past – and moving towards a dip in the grass a circus of puffins appeared in view. I sat down and watched the performance as the birds returned from sea, beaks crammed with sand eels for their young, secreted in old rabbit burrows below the cushion of grass. In the simmer dim twilight of Shetland, thousands of seabirds soared in the still clear skies. I felt as if I shared their freedom, stripped of the troubles that had threatened my very existence months before when a starlit snowdrift seemed a welcoming place to sleep.

Countless photographs of puffins, the clowns of the sea, secured I headed northwards along the cliffs, negotiating the undulating paths created by sheep grazing on the land above the sea, occasionally slipping downhill in areas damp from settling dew. A granite sea stack, fifty metres from a lower part of the coastline was festooned with thousands of gannets, their cries less noticeable than the pungent smell of fish-tinged guano blown in by the offshore breeze.

I tried to take photographs of these birds and their spectacular headlong perpendicular dives under the surface of the waves followed by their eventual return to the stack and their mates with piscine prizes. Skuas patrolled the air around the stack, intent on banditry and self-preservation.

* * * * *

Eventually I reached the end of land, the north end of the island of Unst. The only thing in view were the small islands of Out Stack and Muckle Flugga, the latter topped by a 20-metre-high Stevenson lighthouse. Here I planned to await the sunset, due around 11 p.m. and use the white paint of the lighthouse to contrast with the reds of the setting sun and the shifting colours of the sea. I sat, cushioned by the spongy grass and looked out towards the islands and the North Atlantic. The setting was therapeutic, my troubles distant and outlook clear, as clear as the sky.

The sun set, wonderful hues of red and orange sinking behind the lighthouse and was replaced by a cloak of white light that still illuminated the land, awaiting the return of the sun 4 hours later.

I started back to the car, cooler air and little wind made for pleasant walking. Few birds were in the air, most having sought out their own nesting site amongst the colonies. Rabbits and sheep abundant, foraged in the grasses untroubled by predators. Streams ran down towards the cliffs, deep but narrow, cutting through peaty ground. I cleared one easily and sank feet first, water and mud reaching as high as my chest, into an unseen boggy hole.

Sean Heaney once wrote; “The ground itself is kind, black butter –

melting and opening underfoot” but that was far from my first thought. Months earlier I would have been content to succumb to my black dog thoughts, but now was not that time. I had no desire to be entombed, preserved for future generations to find, or not.

I managed to remove my backpack and throw it to the side of the swallow hole. I tried to push up with my feet, but there was no purchase below. I reached over to retrieve my phone from my bag, my fears confirmed - no signal found. Leaning forward I tried to use my arms to pull my body up to no avail. I looked out to sea, did perdition or the will of providence beckon?

Dream Island

Elizabeth Volz-Goller

Finally her dream had become true. After a long journey, comprising trains, long distance buses, bicycles and exhausting walks she was aboard the ferry to Shetland. Dream destination since her childhood. Mysterious islands. People had warned her: It's just rocks, wind, rain and coldness. She didn't mind. A light breeze caught her curly, grey hair. The sea was smooth, the waves gently rocked the boat. She was watching the sunset. As always, she was astonished how long it took so far up in the north. She stayed on deck until the sun finally sank into the sea and the last streak of red-golden light vanished. She passed the lifeboats on the way to her cabin.

That night, for the first time in years she slept really well. She awakened from a loud clong. Another one! Clong... clong... clong. In a hurry she put on her clothes. She slowly opened the cabin-door and peeped outside. Everything was as usual. Clong... clong. There was nobody in the long corridor. She took the elevator up to the restaurant. Nobody was there, either. She hurried on deck. There was still the soft breeze and the light rocking of the boat. With every wave moving the boat a heavy chain hit the rump. Clong... Clong... Once there must have been one of the lifeboats fastened to it. There were no lifeboats on the deck. She only saw the empty spaces where they had left their marks. Horror crept up inside her.

What had happened while she had been sleeping? Clong... clong... Now she realized something else: The monotonous sound of the machines which had made her fall asleep so easily, had stopped. The boat was bobbing lightly on the sea, not moving in any specified direction. She glanced at her watch: 7 o'clock. Right now they should be arriving at Lerwick. Clong... clong... She looked around. Sea as far as she could see. She ran to the other side of the deck. Sea. At the front: Sea. At the back: sea. No boats, nothing, not even an oil rig, which all ablaze lighting the dark North Sea, had surprised her with their strange technical beauty last night. Clong... clong... What could she do? Try to start the engines? Send SOS?

Where was the radio? She started panicking. What had become of her dream journey to Shetland? Cosy cottages, lonely beaches, nature, Vikings, “adventure” the homepage had said. ADVENTURE !!!!

Being stuck on a ghost ship? Is that what adventure on Shetland meant? She could have coped with murder – at least she had watched all the episodes of “Shetland” as soon as they were available on German TV. But now she seemed to be closer to the Flying Dutchman than to Jimmy Pérez. Clong... clong... She frowned. Thinking of the Flying Dutchman must have triggered the weather. The wind suddenly became stronger and the waves rougher. Dark clouds covered the sun. Clongclongclongclong... The boat shivered. She nearly fell over the dangling ropes of the lifeboats when she hurried inside, just in time before the storm broke loose. Where should, where could she go? The movements of the boat became more forceful, she was driven from one side of the corridor to the other.

Rescue came in form of a toilet whose door swung open just when she staggered along. The booth was so small that she could not really fall over, and, best of all, there were two handles she could clutch. She didn't know for how long she had been crouching in her little hideaway, shivering, crying, finally quietly submitting herself to her fate. Then all of a sudden descent into hell stopped. One last clong – silence took over. She slowly and carefully steadied herself and went on deck again. She gasped. Right in front of her there was an island. The island she had always dreamed of. A green jewel in the still greyish black sea. Blue sky – was it real or was she hallucinating? White cliffs – she could hear seagulls scream in the distance and she would bet that there were thousands of other birds she didn't even know existed. Where was she? Was the island inhabited?

She tried her cell phone. No, naturally there was no net. There must be binoculars on the bridge. As the elevators didn't work she climbed all the stairs up only to realize, that somehow, she had ended up at the rear of the boat. So, back again, down, up, lost again, up, down, finally. “No passengers allowed” – but who would sue her on this Flying Dutchman? The binoculars were fastened to the dashboard - would you call it a dashboard on a boat- she pondered for a moment but then concentrated on unfastening the object of her desire.

Yes, she could see the island clearly now: It was dotted with small white cottages – there was a beach and next to it what looked like a small harbour. Far too small for a big ferry like the one she was on. So it definitely couldn't be Mainland. She made out some sheep, but is there a Scottish island without sheep? At least there were no palm trees, so she hadn't been transferred to the other side of the globe. She tried to start the screen in the middle of the bridge, but no electricity, no map, no radio, no navigation, no nothing.

Brave new world, she thought and rummaged through the drawers and shelves of the bridge hoping to find a real, analogue, paper map. She once had heard that naval officers even had to learn how to use a sextant in case all navigation devices broke down – so there had to be a map somewhere. Finally – as always: the last drawer she opened. There were maps of all the areas between Aberdeen and the Faroes Islands neatly stacked next to some biscuits and a small bottle of gin. “Western Approaches to the Orkney and Shetland Islands. UKHO219” seemed the most appropriate one. She looked through the binoculars again: Houses. Sheep. Small harbour. On the right there seemed to be a lighthouse. She searched the map for an island with these features. No chance. Most of the islands seemed to have houses, harbours and a lighthouse (some of them even two). And anyhow, what help would it be to know where she was if she couldn't attract attention.

The more she considered her situation the more she got puzzled. There should be boats and helicopters around looking, if not for her, for the ferry. Even if she had managed to sleep through an evacuation and so be left behind, they definitely would search for the boat. So why was there no one around? She decided to look for some flares she could launch. Every boat should have some – even the Titanic had them, didn't help the people on her either. She was looking for some kind of pistol, but didn't find anything. She was close to giving up. Alas, what a fool she had been. Right next to her she saw an orange container labelled “DISTRESS SIGNAL FLARES”. She carefully opened the container and found something looking like new year's rockets, marked: “for night-time”, and two tins, marked “for day time” but she wouldn't bother.

She launched the parachute rockets – off they went, opened the floating

smoke tins after placing them on the front deck and even lit the hand flares. What a sight! But nothing happened. Her high spirits turned into deep frustration. She took the binoculars again and searched the area for some activity. Nothing on the water, even more astonishing: nothing on the island. Imagine. There was this big ferry, stranded within sight of the harbour pier, launching fireworks as if it was New Year's Eve or the Queen's birthday, and – no one on the pier, watching the spectacle. Strange. So close to her dream, yet no way to get there.

Could she swim to the island? Distance – less than a kilometre – manageable. Temperature – about 10 degrees – no way. At least not at her age. New plan: Find a dinghy - or make a raft. She couldn't help imagining herself on a raft, like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*, but then she realized that there was no volleyball around, so she dismissed this idea. Thinking about her situation she suddenly heard her stomach grumble. She hadn't even had breakfast. So she decided to head for the restaurant again, where she, surprisingly enough found some sandwiches and soft drinks. Egg and cucumber, tuna, ham, and cheese. She devoured all of them. Thus full of new energy went on deck again.

She didn't trust her eyes: the sea had gone. Just some puddles. The island within walking distance. A wonder? Oh, don't be stupid. It must be low tide. She found a rope ladder and climbed down. She had to jump the last meter and half, but she managed. The rocks made her stumble, but within half an hour she reached the harbour. No sign of any human life. Neat houses, a white chapel, the big wooden door locked. A red telephone booth, the post office. Closed. Through the windows she could see that the post office was also the village's grocery shop. But nowhere a single human soul. Not only the Flying Dutchman but also a ghost village? But not like the derelict western towns, with their screechy saloon doors she had seen on TV, more like German villages during an important world cup game, when life outside seemed to have stopped. But even then, you would hear cheers from the houses or the reporter's voice. No, that here was different from everything she had experienced before.

Outside the village – you couldn't really speak of a village – scattered houses, big distances between them, only sheep, birds, some stray dogs, cats. No cars, no trucks not even pickups or bulldogs, usually common

sights in rural areas.

She strolled through the landscape, enjoying its beauty. Yes, this was her dream island – if only there were any people around. Creepy. What had happened? Was this a crime scene? A filming location? She listened attentively. Again only birds, sheep, now and again a barking dog. Suddenly there was something else. A low hum. It grew louder. She knew this sound. A plane! No plane could fly without a pilot. She looked into the sky and started running. She reached the airstrip at about the same time the blue and white Cessna touched the gravel runway. The plane came to a halt and the cabin door was opened. The pilot in his neat uniform slowly climbed out. “Hör doch auf zu schreiben, Abendessen ist fertig.”(1) Karin closed her laptop. “Danke, ich bin auch so gut wie fertig. Ich glaube, das ist eine gute Geschichte für den Wettbewerb.” (2)

(1) “Stop writing, dinner is ready.”

(2) “Thank you, I’m almost finished. I think this is a good story to take part in the competition.”

Home

Jackie Green

The girl gripped the handrail, felt the spray on her face and watched as the Scottish coastline faded into the eventide. Behind her she could hear her parents chiding her younger sisters, excited by the prospect at a night aboard ship and ecstatic to finally be allowed out of the car. The drive had been exhausting for all of them. The little girls begging to stop at every service station, her father, forever patient, trying to distract them by playing age old word games and her mother, with little humour left, concentrating on the road ahead and worrying that they might not make Aberdeen in time. But they had and here they were, finally aboard and leaving behind everything the girl had ever known.

An adventure they called it, an experience. A chance for them all to explore a different lifestyle and embrace new cultures and experiences. The girl had laughed at this, mocking her father's words. "Dad it's only a group of islands in the North Sea, not somewhere exotic like India or Polynesia." But sarcasm did not disguise the contempt she had felt when the subject had first been raised. Words of encouragement passed over her head in the same way as her objections drifted over his. "Two years, that's all." said her mother. "We will give it two years and if it doesn't work out, we will come back." The lack of permanency was the only crumb of comfort to the girl. Her reluctance ebbed slightly but she made up her mind that nothing would persuade her to stay longer. If necessary, she would beg her parents to send her back to live with her grandparents or even boarding school. This thought reassured her now as she stood, rocking involuntary as the darkness quickly formed a shroud around the swaying ship.

The girl gripped the handrail but this time the coastline was not receding, and the weak April sun was rising so that she could make out hills and cliffs, even distant grey buildings. They had travelled here before of course but not this way, not sailing by a lighthouse veiled by dawn but beaming a hopeful glow onto the inky sea. The trip they had made last summer had been taken in a small plane which shakily landed on a cliff top runway at a place called Sumburgh. They'd laughed and

clutched each other as they went down the steps, the wind catching them unexpectedly, ripping through their lightweight clothing. “What is this place?” she had shouted above the airport noises. “An adventure.” Her father had called back, and so it was.

A week exploring golden beaches, looking for wildlife, scouring quaint shops, eating delicious food and her parents enduring a flurry of job interviews. Then, looking at pretty coloured houses and picturesque wooden cottages, all with wild astonishing views. The girl thought it was fun, but the reality was yet to sink in. It was only during the following months she realised the seriousness of it all. They were moving to a group of subarctic islands, an archipelago halfway between Scotland and Norway, where, in winter they would barely see daylight and the wind was practically constant, where there were none of her favourite shops and no guarantee that her precious internet would be constant. She missed her friends already. And she wasn’t sure that the wetness on her face was caused by the wind or her tears.

“How do you like your rooms?” asked her mother, “The view from your bedroom window is amazing!” She had been given the whole top floor, the attic and felt that she should be grateful to have a bedroom to herself and her own bathroom even, when her sisters were sharing but the loneliness and unfamiliarity of everything engulfed her. She felt ungracious and moody, irritable, and sad, knowing that her parents were doing their best to please her and her siblings were delighted with the prospect of their new lives. She tried to include herself in their enthusiasm, but she felt like an outsider, someone who was not even in the family. There was just a week before she started at her new school. She didn’t know how she was going to bear it as the new girl, the one who spoke differently, the one who knew nobody. The walls of the house were closing in on her, she could barely breath. “I’m going out.” She called. “Going out where?” “You don’t know your way around.” Her mother appeared; concern etched across her face. “Wait now, we’ll all go out later. We can explore. I need to finish unpacking kitchen stuff and then we will go out” The girl smirked. She hadn’t meant to. She did not even realise she could smirk. “Explore? I’m 13 not 3!” She crashed out of the house.

Their house stood alone. By a lake. No, a voe, her father had called it.

Apparently a voe was tidal. It didn't make any difference to her though. Mostly she refused to listen when her parents read out loud from information books. Shetland wasn't ever going to be her home so why should she be interested. Two years! She doubted if she would survive 2 weeks in this wilderness. It was a wasteland! She looked around her. Fields, hills, sheep, and water. In the distance a group of cottages and in the other direction a large stone house stood alone. A washing line with clothes miraculously still attached, blowing horizontally and she could see a child on a slide or climbing frame and a brown dog on its hind legs trying to reach him. Obscure sounds confused her. She was used to traffic, to the sirens of emergency vehicles and people's voices. Here there were deafening noises of wind gushing, waves hitting rocks, sheep bleating and birds chattering on the shoreline.

She shivered, wishing she had thought to put a coat on but reluctant to return for one and encounter her mother's concerned face, so she started to walk towards the water. There was no visible path leading to the beach, so her walk involved clambering over two fences and ploughing through wild grasses which were wet and dampened her jeans. The sand, once she reached it, was almost white but imperfect because it was splattered with seaweed and broken shells, washed up by tide. There were huge prehistoric looking rocks and boulders, separating the sand from the grass casting grey shadows on the sand. She reached down for a pebble, worn smooth by the water and embroidered with silver and pink. It was still wet as was the sand and she guessed that the waves, at times, reached the very top by the large rocks or even beyond, flooding the grasses with salt. She wondered if she could be stranded or even drowned. The idea temporarily intrigued her.

She sat on one of the boulders and looked first at her phone and then to her far left where the birds were clustered. There seemed to be hundreds of them, squawking and arguing with each other and then pecking furiously at the sand but were too far for her to see at what. Some appeared to be floating in the water. She had no idea what sort of birds they were. She remembered puffins from their visit last summer, and gannets. She recalled watching them from the clifftop by a lighthouse somewhere at the north of the island, but these birds were unknown to her. The girl lost interest and returned to her phone. She clicked on

Instagram, surprised to have internet or even a signal. Her mother had messaged her, but the girl wouldn't even look.

The sun was weak but its effect on the sea was to deepen its turquoise hues and the girl tried not to be impressed by this or the clearness of the water, as she walked by the breaking foamy waves. There were rocks in the sea too, similar grey boulders pushing themselves above the foam as the sea bounced over them. She shivered again and thought about returning to the house. As she walked, head bent, she suddenly spotted something on the sand, not seaweed or stones this time but she dropped to her knees and discovered, to her surprise, that it was a cluster of tiny shells. They looked like the baby teeth, her mother saved in a little jar. She placed a few on the palm of her hand, softly running a finger along the curves and ridges, feeling their pureness. Mostly they were creamy coloured, some more grey, others tinged with the same pink she had seen on the pebble. The girl looked around. She was alone but felt as if she was being watched that she shouldn't, for some unknown reason, be handling and admiring the miniature sea baubles. Another glance and she quickly removed her phone from her pocket and replaced it with the shells that she had held. She felt it was right to leave the rest nestling in their sand bed. She was pleased with her find, wanted to show her small sisters who, she knew would claim them to be mermaids' teeth.

She stood and laughed quietly to herself. Mermaids' teeth, how funny but her sisters were all about magic. Mermaids, unicorns, fairies, other mythical creatures they read of or watched in films. The girl remembered their trip to Disneyland a few years back but now it meant nothing to her. Make believe. But still, hand in pocket, she felt the shells. The phone vibrated in her other hand. Her mother again. Still the girl chose to ignore the messages, picturing her mother's worried face and determining, cruelly, to make her suffer a little more. Knowing her father too would fret, probably come looking for her. The wind had calmed a little and the birds' furore became more distinct, and the girl could hear sheep calling to one another and reprimanding their lambs for wandering. Then... all at once, something else, a different sound.

The girl trembled, not understanding the deep haunting noise, a cry for help maybe? A creature in distress? She recalled the dog she had seen in the garden of the big house, but this noise came from the sea not from

where she imagined the house to be. There it was again and quickly the girl looked out to the waves and what she saw made her gasp in surprise and relief as a large seal hurled itself out of the water, heaving its cumbersome body onto the rocks. Laughter bubbled up in the girl, a delight that she couldn't control, to see the magnificent animal twist its ungainly body like a massive wet slug. She was mesmerized. They had seen seals when they visited last year. Firstly, off the coast, when they took a boat trip to a little island solely inhabited by birds, and another time from a distance, sunbathing on a yellow beach but this enormous creature was so close she felt she could almost touch it.

The girl felt unable to move. Her fingers remained on the shells in her pocket. For some reason, she felt reluctant to move her hand away. Then, as she watched, the seal again contorted its huge body and the girl wondered how this creature, with its limited and cumbersome movements, could even survive on land for a few hours. The seal wailed and shuffled to the rock's edge, and she watched in awe as it dived back into the water, causing the waves to crash as it metamorphosed into an exquisite vision of brilliance, its beautiful body gliding through cascades of blue until it disappeared from sight. Selkie. The girl felt the wetness from her eyes on her face, but she knew that this time they were tears of happiness, she turned from the sea, her hand still resting on the tiny shells and headed back across the sand, going home.

Meeting Eva Davies

Lauren McAvoy

It was a sunny summer day in the Shetland Islands. These were the days Lily wished lasted forever as the sun was shining on her as she read her book in the gardens of her parents' hotel. Of course this was to be shortly interrupted by her mum, "Put that book away and help me make dinner for our guests."

It was 1:00 pm but her mum insisted that she made the dinner early. Lily's parents owned a hotel called 'The Seacoast Inn' which was never busy apart from the odd number of people here and there. Although, her mum did win an award for 'Shetland's best breakfast' that she would use to her advantage. "What's wrong with Shetland's best breakfast?" She asked while Lily was stabbing her tomato with her fork.

At 3 o'clock, Lily started to put plates and cutlery out at a table for a woman who looked so familiar. As Lily was walking to the next table, she was trying to work out who the lady was. After she was finished setting the five tables, she went back into the kitchen where her mum was plating up a portion of spaghetti. "Who is the woman sitting at table 2?" she asked, hoping her mum would know. "Don't know but she looks hungry, so go and give her the spaghetti she ordered."

The clock at reception read nine o'clock and now all the guests had left and went up to their rooms. Lily walked up to her father, who was still working away at reception. She thought that her dad might know who it was Lily thought was familiar. "Sorry darling, but I've just shut down the computer that gives me access to all the bookings but remind me in the morning and I can tell you." Lily sighed but knew at least she can get answers tomorrow.

The next morning Lily got up nice and early as usual. All the guests were helping themselves to breakfast, all but one. The woman who Lily thought she knew wasn't there and was nowhere to be seen. Lily ran to the reception to find her dad. When she found him cleaning the fireplace, she started talking so fast and so quickly. After she had explained everything, her dad checked the bookings and said a woman

called Eva Davies had left early before breakfast. Lily felt heartbroken as she knew now who the woman was, her favourite author.

She couldn't believe she had missed her chance to meet her favourite author. Lily darted up the stairs to her room while being in floods of tears. Her dad felt so bad but didn't know what to do to make her feel better. The bell at reception had rung so her dad walked over to see who was there.

"Hi, I was staying in this hotel last night and it seems I left my phone in the room. My name is Eva Davies". Lily's dad's face lit up with excitement, he said to the woman to stay there, and he will go and find her phone.

There was a knock on Lily's door and she opened it to find her father, who said "There's someone to see you at reception."

Lily walked slowly and quietly down the stairs trying to get a sneak peek to who it was. She caught a glimpse of the red hair, pink bow and denim jacket and knew it was Eva Davies. She ran back up the stairs, grabbed the books she knew Eva Davies wrote and got a pen to get them signed. She ran up to Eva and told her how big of a fan she was and asked her to sign her books. Eva gladly signed them and had a conversation with Lily.

"Here is your phone" interrupted Lily's dad.

"Ah, thanks. Well it was lovely to meet you Lily, and I hope you continue to read my books!" replied Eva Davies.

"I will! Bye!" said an ecstatic Lily.

That night as Lily went to bed she thought about the great and bad day she had today, but she couldn't stop thinking about the fact she met Eva Davies.

Charlotte Ocean

Amber Patterson

“HELP,” I screamed. The waves felt heavier, and I was getting weaker. My heart was pounding in what felt like my throat, I was trembling. My clouded head was racing with thoughts, “how am I going to get out of here?” “Will I get out of here?” My seawater filled eyelids opened for the first time. That’s when I saw it. It was coming straight for me.

Let me take you back...

It was that time of year again, time for our annual Shetland family holiday. You know what that means, sunset walks along Bannamin, barbeques on Hildasay and best of all the sea. Each year me and my cousin Lily set out on a ‘swim-athon’. Well, I guess you could call it that. For me (who can’t brave the Shetland chill) it’s more of a 20-minute meander on a paddleboard. I know, pathetic. Lily on the other hand is the complete contrast. She’s your typical swims-in-any-weather Shetlander. More often than not, she’s not even in a wetsuit! Anyways, despite our differences, we love our yearly swim and plan it months in advance. This time, we were particularly excited as we were both 13 and finally old enough to go unaccompanied! To a 13-year-old, this can seem like a monumental milestone, and it certainly was to us.

We were minutes before landing. It felt surreal. I gazed out the airplane window, mesmerised by the rolling hills, the tranquil waves, and the elegant birds. My bubble was soon popped by the flight attendant announcing our arrival. I stepped outside. My lungs were instantly filled with crisp, Northern air as the smell of sea salt crept up my nose. ‘This is going to be a trip to remember’ I thought to myself as I walked across the runway to the arrivals lounge. We were greeted with our Granda’s caring face pressed against the airport window, eager to give us a hug. It finally felt like summer!

Pulling up at our grandparents, the first thing I saw was my granny smartly dressed in her apron along with a cup of cocoa in each hand, one for me, one for my brother. She quickly ushered us out of the cold and practically sat us down. Forcing a cup of cocoa into our hands to

warm us up, she asked how our journey was. However, the conversation seemed to divert to her being concerned if we'd brought enough layers and asking if she needs to put the heating on since she doesn't want us to catch a cold. Reassuring her, I put on my wellies and jacket and dashed out to see my ponies.

Forgetting how steep the pony hill was, my legs ran uncontrollably towards the towering stone cairn located right in the centre of the field. Crash. Unsurprisingly, I'd tumbled into the pile. Oh, and much to my dismay it just so happened someone was staring right at me. I gave my eyes a couple seconds to focus and wait, I thought. I rubbed my eyes again and it became clear. It was Lily! She leapt over the fence and came over for a hug (knocking me down in the process).

"I can't believe it's really you!" said Lily while jokingly pinching my cheeks.

"I know, I missed you so much" I said as tears started to fill my eyes.

We both looked up to my parents in the window who waved back at us and giggled.

"Tomorrow at 6 for the big swim Lils?" I said.

"You bet, I'll see you and your wetsuit then", said Lily mockingly. I gave her a playful nudge as she left the field. I lay there for a while, watching the serene sky as the twinkling stars began to emerge, like an owl after hibernation.

It was now 6pm the next day and I was more than ready to dive in the water. As ready as I was, I couldn't shake the feeling of cold. Lily looked at me and laughed as I attempted to squeeze in my wetsuit along with my thermal swim gloves. After all, she was only in a swimsuit and warm! I don't know how she does it, I thought quietly to myself, still trying to squeeze into the last arm of my wetsuit, giving every effort not to rip it. We were finally ready. Clutching my paddleboard, we jumped in sequence into the sea. As soon as we did, I knew something wasn't right...

It was an unexplainable feeling, a feeling like something was off, a feeling of danger. I suggested to Lily that maybe we ought to get out. Lily, who was already halfway across the bay, said I was overreacting,

and everything was fine. As appreciative of her reassurance that I was it really didn't help me, not even in the slightest. As concerned as I was, I didn't want to ruin our long-awaited trip with my worry. Lily playfully jumped onto my paddleboard and accidentally knocked me off in the process.

I was struggling to catch my breath. The current was forcing my head underwater and pushing it against the rocks. The blood from my nose slowly swam around me, making me feel like a victim in Jaws. Gulping in seawater, I tried to scream for Lily- who was unaware of my danger- but my voice was drowned out by the everlasting crash of the waves against the cliff edge. The waves felt heavier, and I was getting weaker. My heart was pounding in what felt like my throat, I was trembling. My clouded head was racing with thoughts; how am I going to get out of here? Will I get out of here?

As the current increased, I felt myself drifting further and further from land. I instantly went into panic. My arms frantically pounded down on the water surface, attempting to inch myself closer to the bay. The closer I got to the vast ocean, the further I was from safety. I screamed for help. But, by this point I felt like it was only the seagulls that could only hear me and there's not much they could do to help me. A tear crept down my cheek as my arms started to give way. I slowly felt myself losing hope of escape. Another wave came crashing down on me again, forcing me under. Just as it did, my seawater filled eyelids opened for the first time. That's when I saw it. It was coming straight for me.

I was trapped, enclosed, and surrounded with no way to escape. With my stinging eyes, all I could see were black pixels gradually increasing in size. It was in that moment I knew what I was facing, it was a killer whale. Not one, but an entire pod. They must've sensed my blood. One looked at me right in the eye, like it almost understood me, what it felt like to be trapped. Its distinctive harpoon scar along its right side instantly caught my attention. It made me feel more sorry for the whale than scared.

Spouting unthinkable amounts of water, the magnificent creature elegantly dived into the deep blues of the sea. Everything felt still again. It was in that moment that the surrounding water started to ripple, then

foam started to form a circle around me. It felt as if the entire sea started to vibrate.

Before I even comprehended what was happening, I was flown out of the water. The whale had come back! Clinging onto its fin as tightly as possible as the whale submerged again, it's streamlined head darted through the water at unimaginable speed. It felt surreal. Like something out of a movie. I didn't know where it was taking me, but I trusted it. To the bay? A boat? Even a person? As sudden as it appeared, it started to slow. I wondered what was happening if something was wrong. I felt a bump as the whales' head hit something, something hard. It slid me off it's back as it gave me an empathetic look. It knew exactly where it was taking me and had reached its destination.

I swam to surface, a rush of relief instantly flooded through me as I saw Lily's face reflecting in the water while lounging on a paddleboard with my initials 'CO'. With an exasperated gasp, I hurled myself onto the paddleboard.

"There you are! I was going to ask you if you wanted to go for ice cream. Where were you anyway?" said Lily clueless of what had just happened. I couldn't help it, I just looked at her and laughed.

"What's so funny?" said Lily, confused. I attempted to explain everything from the current, to the screaming, to the whale.

"Okay, I think you definitely need some ice cream, and a drink!", said Lily in disbelief, chuckling to herself. I didn't try and argue with her, to be honest I was struggling to believe what had just happened myself.

We walked out of the sea with our arms round each other towards the ice cream van. After all, I'll always know what happened on this day. My name is Charlotte Ocean, and this is my story.

Orkney

Sands of Rothiesholm

David Freer

Sands of Rothiesholm, Stronsay, 5:17am.

The sun had long since risen by the time consciousness returned to him. Was it the warmth of the early morning or the sound of the gentle waves lapping on the shoreline mere feet away from where he lay that woke him up? All he could be certain was that the pain in his head was enough to make him wish he had not awoken.

In spite of the throbbing in his head, he was becoming more aware of his surroundings. Where was he? The mile-long stretch of white sand curving round to form a bay to encapsulate the calm turquoise water. It seemed familiar to him, and yet... As he tried to stand, he became increasingly aware of an unwelcome sensation in his stomach. His legs collapsed from underneath him, and he fell, vomiting, to the sand where he lay panting for several moments.

Slowly, the soft sound of the waves breaking on the shore and the warmth of the light breeze worked their magic and his nausea eased. A trio of oystercatchers skimmed over the surface of the water, peeping noisily, breaking the spell of the otherwise peaceful morning. Why was he here and indeed, where was “here”? He was alone, he knew that much, and his earlier feeling of sickness had been replaced by one of growing hunger. He knew that he would have to leave the shore in order to search for food. He gingerly got to his feet again. He felt a lot more confident than before and started to survey his surroundings.

To his right, the beach curved round slowly until it met the sea at the corner as if of a crescent moon. There were buildings there, a farm perhaps? It seemed a long way away. To his left, a hundred yards or so of beach until it met the edge of fields, raised up from sea level on small sandy cliffs. Whilst they were nearer, he wasn't sure if he could clamber up them in his weakened condition and so he ruled them out. In front of him stretched the water, calm, still and peaceful. The low tide meant that the water was a long way out from the wet sand he found himself on, and he had no way to judge its depth at any rate. Its tranquillity washed

over him however and for a moment at least he found himself calmed. He may not know who he was or where he was, but he could imagine that there were far worse places to be than here.

Behind him, between him and the sand dunes leading inland, lay a line of shells and pebbles. The high-water line, he surmised. He wandered over and casually picked up a small cyprina shell. He toyed with it idly for a moment and then tossed it down amongst the rest. There were so many of them, razor shells, cowries, bubble shells, all just lying in a line following the curve of the beach. Should he hoard them? They seemed so beautiful, so abundant. He looked down at them again, pelican foot shells, canoe shells, all lying there in a line a couple of feet wide. He sighed. What would he do with such pretty things anyway?

From the southwest corner of the bay came the sound of a dog barking, shattering the illusion that he was completely alone. He froze. Instinct told him that he did not want to be found, but he could not fully explain why. Dogs bought their owners with them, and he did not relish an encounter with either. How could he escape though?

He was unsure what lay beyond the edge of the sand dunes at the top of the beach. Should he try heading into the water instead? Somehow, he knew to trust his abilities as a swimmer but knew that he would still be visible in the water, an open target. No, the sand dunes it had to be.

Swiftly, he negotiated his way to the top of the beach. Crouching low behind clumps of sea rocket, oraches and marram grass, he held his breath and waited. He could hear the dog approaching, its running footsteps audible on the sand in spite of the distance. What would he do if he was discovered? The dog was getting much closer now and had slowed right down to sniff around as it neared. He risked a glance from his hiding place. Should he change position and move further inland, deeper into the undergrowth? He would surely be found within moments if he remained where he was, but that would be reduced to mere heartbeats if the dog sensed his movement. Just as it seemed that he would have to move, and hope that he would be aided by the element of surprise, he heard a far-off shout and a whistle. The dog abruptly stopped searching and raised its head. A further whistle and the dog reluctantly trotted back the way it had come. He was safe, for now.

He waited. He was not going to risk moving from this spot until he felt comfortable that he was not in danger, no matter how much time passed. He reached out and grabbed a sea rocket stem that was growing at this low-level, so close to the floor of the sand dune. There were lots of different types of flora here and some of them had to be edible. He cautiously bit off a section of leaf and started chewing. It didn't seem too bad to him, but it would not sustain him for very long he mused. He carefully let go of the plant and continued to lie still.

Only when he was certain that the coast was clear did he risk moving from his hiding place and carefully re-treading his footsteps back to the beach. His head did not pain him now, but the feeling of hunger continued to gnaw at him. He would need to find food soon. He wandered along the line of shells and pebbles that he had found earlier until he became acutely aware that he was being watched.

He turned towards the sea and saw the head of a common seal poking out of the water, staring straight at him. He supposed it was a common seal because of its dog-like head but at this distance it could easily be a grey seal, as both were active in these waters. The thought stopped him dead in his tracks. How did he know that? He pondered for a moment, and he started to recall... not quite a memory, but stronger than just a feeling... playing on a beach when he was younger. The sensation of walking on the hot dry sand, of digging in the cooler wet sand. Was it on this beach? He couldn't be certain, but it felt right. He could now clearly remember playing on the shoreline, running in and out of the water, and swimming in the sea for the first time.

Birds! There had been a flock of birds guarding one end of the beach that day. Not as big as the greater black backed gulls he had seen, but gulls nevertheless. He remembered running down the sand towards them, determined to try and capture one. But even with the speed of youth he stood no chance. There was an air of nonchalance in the way they waited until he got nearer to him and then simply flew into the air before settling down on the gentle sea, once again out of his reach.

Another, more recent memory formed in his mind, had there been some sort of fight? Had that been here? Is that why he had woken up on the beach with his head injured? He remembered a figure backing away

from him slowly, dejectedly, defeated. If only he could remember...

A pang of hunger jolted him back to the present. Whatever these memories were, they would sort themselves out over time and he had more pressing concerns at the moment. The common seal, the concave angled head more apparent in profile, was now gazing at another seal further along the bay. He left them to their staring contest and continued walking along the line of natural debris washed up along the beach in search of something to eat.

The sun was rising higher in the cloudless sky and really starting to warm the sands he trod barefoot on. Was he really still alone in this paradise? A paradise without food though, he reflected bitterly. He stopped for a moment and took in his surroundings once more. Here on the dry sand it was hard to determine if anyone else had walked these sands in a long time, and the wet sand closer to the water's edge was devoid of footprints or tracks of any kind that he could see. Even the birds from his memory did not seem to have set foot here recently. He raised his eyes to sky just in time to see a large black and brown shape swooping low overhead. A bonxie! The powerful great skua came over him so fast that he had no time to scurry for cover, he just watched in amazement as the pirate of the skies flew so close to him. The bird, appearing to be spying the shoreline for food from the air, ignored him and flew on. He was neither a threat nor a meal he supposed. Still, he thought, he had better get used to the fact that he was not the only living thing on this beach, and not the only one in search of food. With a little more wariness, he continued on his way.

About two hundred yards along, the pebbles and shells were joined with the discarded carcasses of brown crabs. He inspected one. Not enough left on it to ease his hunger, but the scent triggered a thought that grew into a memory, and slowly recollection dawned. This was his beach, his hunting ground, and his holt was close by. He must have been knocked unconscious when he defended his territory against the invader last night. More sure of himself now, there was a perceptible arrogance in the way he held his tail, as he padded off to this favourite pool to look for crabs.

John Craigie's Second Half

Sam Oakley

John Craigie staggered into the moonlight, stumbling into a tumble down the grassy slope as his knees gave way. Stars winked and trembled in a vast sky as he scrambled back up, only to find the mound no longer offered a return. He sank back down, feeling the chill wind on his face, hearing a faint pulse of music, muffled, and fading now. Panic assailed him - the music had nourished every corner of his soul, now it was receding like the tide, revealing the expanse of his unwanted life - night chills from a mud bath war, the long ache of injury, the return to a cold hearth. He rubbed his aching eyes, then brushed damp hair from his forehead with a grubby shirtsleeve. His left hand still gripped his fiddle and bow; his throat was dry as sawdust. He lurched to his feet.

The familiar curves of the land lay low and brooding. That was the loch alright, and the church, ancient stones standing watch, but other dark outlines seemed unfamiliar. Trampling down the grass, he made his way slowly to the road to find an unfamiliar sleek, grey surface with crisp white lines. He fell to his knees and touched them in wonder. Slumped at the roadside, he tried to make sense of it all: light in the west, ragged robin, a shabby primrose... late spring? A wedding... he'd been playing at a wedding. He glanced at his fiddle as if it had the answers. He'd been with Willie, where the hell was he? He wiped soft rain from his face, watched the wind ripple the loch and shook his head. Standing up, he winced at the ache in his knees. There'd been dancing too, aye, there had. He knew the way, at least. Turning towards Stromness, he heard the unfamiliar ring of his boots on this new road. As he paced, he found a beat still in his head, that stomp, stomp, stomp of wild joy.

In his reverie he didn't hear the car until it was almost upon him. He lurched into the ditch as the dazzling lights bore down on him, the engine a roar. It screeched to a halt, and he was open-mouthed at its shiny red paint as the door swung open. Music filled the air and a tumble of red hair leaned out.

"There y'are! Ha - said I'd find yers! They're on in ten minutes..."

come on!” She was grinning, gesturing, and he stumbled towards her. The interior was sleek, metal, fabric... loud music was coming from somewhere, a radio? He looked for the box, confused. “Will you hurry up! For the love of God...” He recognised the accent - Irish, like Paddy O’Dell on the docks. He clambered inside, shifting awkwardly on a seat softer than he’d imagined, wedging his fiddle at his feet. She tipped her head impatiently and he pulled the door to, noting that she had a scent about her, sweet and soft as honeysuckle. He slammed backwards into the seat as she accelerated sharply away, window open to the night, music blaring. “Seat belt!”

She was driving faster than he’d ever been in his life. Small, pale hands gripped the wheel as she flung them round the corner by the stones. As he fumbled with the unfamiliar strap, he glanced at her clothes. She wore the magic of a gipsy: boots, shorts, a flowing green shirt revealing some black lace... as they flew along, he thought the dream wasn’t over yet, he was still tumbling, falling down another rabbit hole. She kept up a steady chatter and he tried to concentrate.

“You missed Talisk - they were AMAZING! Such a honey too, but you’re not too bad yourself!” She glanced at him and smiled. “I like the cap and waistcoat, very boho. I’m Aoife by the way. See, I knew you’d gone further - my uncle Oisean can stagger miles in his cups... sure got yourself lost, didn’t ya?” He was starting to feel sick and reached for the silver handle beside him for steadiness. To his horror, the door swung open. “Eedjit!” She slammed on the breaks and reached across him to pull it shut. “Jeez, will ya just sit there and mind yerself.”

Her frown faded as she accelerated off again and she began to sing along to the music, her voice a low thrill of harmony. He glanced at her again and was rewarded with a smile. Her hand grazed his knee as she changed gear. All too soon they were braking outside the Stromness Hotel. There wasn’t time to understand the cars, the new buildings, she was out and running. There was a crush of drinkers in the entrance under a banner - ‘Orkney Folk Festival’ - but she dragged him through, clutching his free hand and striding to the back.

“Found him! Oi! Over here!”

“But that’s not Stefan!” A tall dark-haired man was clutching a guitar

and frowning at him. “Who the hell’s this?”

“What?” Aoife turned to frown at him too.

“Got a fiddle... he’ll do!” A blond giant of a man was beaming, beer clutched in each hand. “We can wing it! Can you play, yeah? Fast?”

John nodded. He didn’t know much, but he did know he could play. “Get him a beer, let’s go...” The blond man slapped him on the back so hard he nearly staggered. “I’m Piotr, that’s Simeon. Crazy, where is that Stefan, huh? Maybe he met some girl?”

With Piotr’s arm round his shoulders, John was led into the bar where a stage was lit. The noise was deafening, the crowd was packed and drinking. Everything and nothing was familiar. He accepted a bottle and took a long drink.

“Take that mic, yeah?” Simeon pointed him to the left side of the stage. John tapped it suspiciously and the loud thud brought a few curses. “Jesus, he’s a rookie!” Simeon frowned at Piotr.

“He’s gonna be great, man... what’s your name?” Piotr was strapping on an accordion.

“John.” His voice was a rasp, like he hadn’t used it for years.

“OK - don’t sing, but here we go...” Piotr bared his teeth with a roar as he launched into Sailor’s Joy like a Viking to battle. After a few bars, Simeon joined in on guitar. John watched intently, listened for the key, felt his confidence flow back like the tide. His bow dipped and swayed; his fingers danced across the strings: this he knew how to do. Watching for the signals, pausing long enough to catch each tune, before long they were giving him solos, matching him beat for beat. He played a few Shetland reels, some Irish jigs. The crowd roared - they always did - and he saw Aoife raise a glass to him from the bar. She was leaning back, whispering with a friend and they looked his way. He knew that look too.

“Hey we’re gonna let John play one now, what’ll it be?” Simeon gestured to him and stepped back, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

John let his mind wander, absentmindedly checking his tuning, then realised he already knew what to play. His fingers ached for it. As the

strange melodies began to flow and weave their way from the stage, the crowd began to sway, then to dance. Simeon picked up a rhythm, soft at first, then more confident, as Piotr added his own shuffle to the mix and the room began to tilt and swirl. He could have played it forever but the performer's instinct overrode with a nod to the others he played a final round and ended with a flourish. The roar deafened him, and he took an embarrassed swig of beer.

"We're gonna take a break! We got CDs at the back... big round of applause for this fella... thanks John for stepping in!" Piotr flung out an arm towards him. "You done good, man!"

As the applause finally died away, John blinked in the glare of the lights and wiped the sheen of sweat from his brow. Adrenalin ebbed and he sensed shadows at the edge of the crowd, wondering if he was trapped in a night that would never end. His eyes swept across the room and, with a jolt of recognition, met a face he knew. Tam Thomson's face was haggard and worn but his eyes were blazing. John stumbled from the stage and made his way to him, ignoring the slaps on the back and compliments as he passed.

"John Craigie." Tam's voice was a whisper. His hand was shaking as he took a sip from his pint. "Wha' the devil. So they got you too, aye?"

"Who? Who got me?" John hissed at him.

"You know who." Tam wouldn't meet his eye.

"Where is everyone?" John glanced round. On a Saturday night in Stromness he'd know almost every face in a bar.

"Dead." Tam spat the word out. "You've lost a century, lad. There's nobody left. Just me... and now you." Tam's cackle had no mirth in it. John remembered him as an argumentative old drunk. A demon with a fiddle who'd beached on Rousay from Lerwick, then vanished again some ten years back. Some said he'd wandered off Marwick Head in his drink, others that he'd fled the draft to go whaling. No-one had cried.

"I need air." John pushed his way outside and leaned against the stones, breathing deep, hearing the slap of the waves against the seawall. The little fishing boats were gone, the docks cleaner and emptier than he'd ever seen them. One giant white ghost ship waited there, a blue Viking

on its side pointing him onwards. A century, Tam had said. All of them gone. He thought he might be sick and turned his face to the wall.

The door banged and he saw Aoife watching him, her head tilted.

“What have you taken? You look proper gone, man.”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, didn’t understand her question.

She walked across and smiled at him, clutching herself to keep warm as she shivered in the wind.

“My nan would say you’re away wit the fairies.”

“Maybe I was.”

She was gazing up at the stars and he could study her neat profile. Her ears were full of silver hoops; a diamond sparkled in her slender nose. He wished he had a cigarette.

“You just need to hold on tight to what matters.” Her voice was soft. “A night sky, the light on the water, music, the craic, a handsome man...” She was grinning at him. “Come on, let’s get you another beer. Will you teach me that tune, the one you played? I’ll fetch my squeezebox. Unless you fancy a drink in my room after?”

Her smile made him smile, perhaps his first in a hundred years if Tam was right. The door banged again, and Piotr was waving at him from the doorway.

“Hey fiddler John!” His voice boomed out across the harbour. “Time for your second half!” Piotr swung the door wide and, with a swift kiss on the cheek from a delighted Aoife, John strode inside.

Homecoming

Virginia Crow

Statistically speaking, in a group of six friends, at least one of them is going to die prematurely. I think I always knew that. Still, it didn't make it any easier when the message arrived telling me that one of our number had died in her mid-twenties. Not that we'd shared anything more than a few letters since we hit that age of 'grown-up', but it was strange to think of the world without her in it.

That was so many years ago now. In that time, I'd never returned to the idyllic landscape where we'd been children. At first, it had been intentional; then an issue of time and cost; but now it was just that I'd shelved the nostalgic part of me.

Then, Davy announced he'd booked us a weekend in Orkney.

"What for?" I knew I was meant to be thanking him, but this revelation was more disconcerting than exciting.

"Because I'm always listening to you saying: 'when I was little, I did this', or 'it was different where I grew up'."

This was absolutely true. Stories of his Birmingham childhood seemed so alien he could have come from Mars.

"Don't you want to go back?" His voice was suddenly unsure.

"No, it'll be great."

And, despite my initial reception, I began to look forward to it. It would be an opportunity to see my previous home through the eyes of a tourist. I remembered seeing them, cameras hanging around their necks. It would be nice to see it like that. Besides, it was Friday evening to Monday lunchtime. Not enough time for an emotional overload.

"It's bad luck to sail on a Friday," I pointed out as we boarded the ferry at Scrabster.

"You never told me that."

"You never asked. Don't worry. I shelved superstition years ago."

But Davy seemed concerned. He missed most of the boat journey, subconsciously running his thumb over the tiny Saint Christopher which usually hung in the car. He did, however, join the other tourists as they flocked to the starboard side as we passed The Old Man of Hoy. I ventured to the port side instead, recalling being told that this was the best place to spot dolphins chasing the boat. It hadn't been this boat then, nor the one before. Funny how time passes.

I had mixed feelings as I drove off the boat. Stromness had changed. I remembered lines of creels, shrieking gulls, and a tangy sharpness on my lips. It took me a few minutes to realise how far along the harbourside road I was coming out. I was still a child when I left, and I'd never driven here. Davy's eyes were on me as we moved out, but he was silent until I subconsciously flicked the indicator to turn right at the tiny roundabout.

"It said Kirkwall was straight on."

"Yeah," I breathed. "But we always went this way."

He didn't question me again, but pretended to watch out the window. But I could feel his gaze still on me. Was he looking for a response? Looking to catch me out?

"That was my school." The words leaving my mouth before I'd checked them. He leaned to look across.

"The tall one?"

I nodded.

Twisting in his seat as we left the small village of Stenness, he looked back at the building. "There can't have been many of you."

"Seemed a lot at the time."

That was all the nostalgia he was getting out of me, and I became a tour guide as we travelled onward. I pointed out the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar, as well as Maeshowe. There were memories attached: climbing on top of the ancient burial mound or scrambling up and down the ditch around the henge. But they remained with me, unspoken and unnerving, but cherished.

Kirkwall was a shock. There were still Aberdeen Angus in the fields outside, the cathedral's spire still visible on the approach, but the city was now enormous. The changes made me more settled, though. I finally felt like a tourist here.

On Saturday, Davy had control of the itinerary. I was confident he'd never find the location whose memory had caused me a sleepless night as I felt, for the first time in years, how unbearably sad it was that we six would never gather there again. We'd parted with no idea it would be the last time we were together.

Davy wanted to be a tourist. We started at the cathedral, although he was surprised to find I'd never been inside.

"We set off for a carol service once," I replied with a laugh. "We got as far as Finstown, but the headlight blew, so we had to turn back."

It was peculiar to step inside. This building had defined so much of my time here. After moving to Deerness, I used to go past it every day on the way to school, and it had been a meeting point if ever we split up to go shopping. I told Davy.

"Let's go to Deerness," Davy said eagerly.

So that was what we ended up doing. After a lunch in Kirkwall, we went to visit The Gloup, and I pointed out the wreckers' cottage on the hillside where I used to live. There was a footpath so, after sharing stories about my intrepid brother's cliff-edge adventures which made Davy's cheeks turn green, we wandered up to the house.

"Why did you go to school in Stenness if you lived all the way out here?" Davy asked.

"I used to live in Stenness. Then moved here. Just stayed at the same school."

The omission of a pronoun was my indication to Davy that this was not a conversation I wanted to continue. Thankfully, he took the hint. I pointed out the island of Copinsay, telling him the sorry story of the two families who had once lived there, and showed him the place where we saw the ghost ship like a ball of fire on the horizon on our first night in the house. He was a perfect audience.

We visited the Churchill Barriers on our detour back to the hotel and called in at the beautiful Italian Chapel. This was his period of history. My interest was generally further back, but here it was more recent.

On Sunday, we visited Skara Brae then Earl's Palace at Birsay. I could remember a school trip here, playing in the ruins, before gathering on the grass beside the enormous well for a picnic lunch. After that, we'd gone to the beach with little nets to forage in the rockpools the diagonal rock formations formed at low tide. I'd forgotten that until now.

But today the tide was against us, so Davy took a turn at driving and we headed through Harray to the Heart of Neolithic Orkney. Going around with him helped me bury my memories further, seeing it as though for the first time, although I couldn't help but share how disappointed I was to find half the Ring of Brodgar blocked off.

"It keeps it safe for future generations," Davy pointed out.

I reluctantly agreed. But it seemed sad, like a part of my childhood was barricaded and out of reach. Perhaps because of this, eager to catch hold of my memories, I pointed out the kirk as we travelled towards the main road.

"I can still remember my Primary One carol service." There must have been more sentimentality in my voice than I had meant to give, because Davy smiled across at me with an expression of confusion. I gave a dismissive cough. "I wore white tights."

"Didn't you have school uniform?"

"No. Weird, isn't it?" I turned back to the kirk. "I can remember what I wore, but I can't remember what we sang."

Davy made the most of having the wheel. He took me on a tour of the west mainland, pointing to things and asking about them. He even pointed out a house sign which carried my name.

"They named it after me," I joked.

By the time we arrived back at the hotel, I was exhausted. But I had managed to keep a cap on the turmoil of emotions today had thrown up at me. Mostly, at least.

And then he hit me with it.

“I thought we could look round a house tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Well...” He fumbled for words. “We don’t have to be at the terminal for a while, and our house is on the market, so I booked us in to have a look at a house in Stenness.”

I didn’t speak to him. I couldn’t find words. Returning for a weekend was difficult enough, confronting ghosts of memories which lay in every contour of the landscape. I couldn’t live like this.

I dreamed that night. I dreamed all six of us were back there, but as adults. It wasn’t possible, but somehow it seemed natural.

Sunrise comes early in the Orcadian summer, and it easily woke me. Davy was still asleep, but I knew I wasn’t going to be able to get back to sleep. Instead, I pulled on my clothes, collected the car keys and, without even brushing my hair, I left.

Orkney isn’t big. It didn’t take me long to arrive on that road I felt certain Davy had been trying to find yesterday: the dead-end road on the hillside where my earliest memories had been formed. I left the car at the junction, unsure where I could safely park, and I walked on. Past the farm where we used to run to escape the dog; past where the caravan had blown away in hurricane-force winds; past her house; then to that house which had been my home.

How strange to see it there! Familiar yet profoundly different. No one was about so early in the morning, but I thought I heard laughter. I looked around, trying to find whoever was watching me, but I was alone.

I don’t know what came over me while I walked across the road. As a child, I’d been terrified of the metal barbs on the wire, but now I climbed the peculiarly shaped stone, which was used as a fencepost, and leapt safely down on the other side. I found myself smiling at the memory of rushing down the centre of the field to find all the cows hidden by the incline of the hill. We had passed through countless times, over the fence at the opposite side, and to the burn beyond.

Decades had passed since I stood here, but this place hadn't changed a bit. The laughter was louder here, and I thought I saw a movement further up the stream, reminding me of the time we'd tried to find the river's source. Six figures, armed with sticks and lunchboxes passed me, unaware I stood there. And I wondered whether, as my five friends and I adventured along the stream, I had seen my adult self as a child.

And then the strangest thing happened. She turned and looked directly at me, my friend whose face I had never thought to see again except on aging photographs. And she smiled. I don't know how long I stood there before I awoke and climbed back up the hill, returning to the car. It was strange, when I had undergone such a rite of passage, to slip into the hotel room and find Davy still asleep. Sitting down in front of the mirror, I lifted my hairbrush.

"Did you go out?" Davy asked sleepily. "I thought I heard the door."

I watched him in the mirror, willing myself to have the courage her smile had given me. Courage to face the past and live the future.

"I'm sorry about last night," he continued. "I'll cancel the appointment. What would you like to do instead?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm sorry. And don't cancel it. I'm ready to come home."

A Good Start

Isabel Wilson

The island was being allocated a youth worker, and the council identified the old Sea Scout hut at the pier as a likely hub where a community event could be arranged that would bring folks together after the Covid lockdowns. Particular emphasis was placed on the need for a project that would provide a creative focus for the island's youngsters. The sole teacher on the island had voiced concern that the reopening of the school was unlikely to meet all of the young people's needs as far as their mental health was concerned.

The first lockdown had kept people separate, but islanders had remained largely optimistic. They had cooperated with the restrictions. Consciously, they had exercised more and eaten better. They had taken up new interests and made the most of the downtime they confidently assumed would be both a temporary and a singular event.

But the second lockdown had taken its toll. Confidence that normal life would one day be resumed, faltered. Separation and social distancing tripped over at times into something more like division. It was easy to misinterpret a word or a phrase online, especially as people had so much more time to think over and to overthink. The determined solidarity of a community in the face of an exterior threat waned a little and old grievances reasserted themselves. The second time round, lockdown was fraught and freighted.

Cally took the contract for the young people's project with enthusiasm. For a period of six weeks, she would be housed free of charge at an unused holiday let and groceries would be delivered by the community shop. The pay was modest, but she would have few expenses. There would be no direct supervision, but her line manager would catch up with her on a weekly basis by phone and was contactable at all times by e-mail.

The Sea Scout hut turned out to be a former Nissan hut, concreted over on the outside to anchor it down in the path of the wind. It was painted a uniform grey inside and smelled like an old church. Cally borrowed

a dehumidifier from the island's heritage centre to dispel the dampness and cleaned the single toilet. Someone had already swept the floor and arranged a circle of grey plastic chairs in the central arc of the hut. There were folding tables and a row of empty cupboards, and the space was well lit by windows arching down the curve of the roof on both sides. All things considered, Cally thought, it was a good start.

The first teenagers arrived not in dribs and drabs, but in a carefully choreographed group. Although they must have come from different points all over the little island, there had clearly been a plan made. They had chosen to make an entrance. These youngsters may have been separated in lockdown, but there was a deliberate measure of unity being presented now. It did not occur to Cally to view this warily. Her training disposed her to see it as useful. The kids were already thinking like a team. That seemed like a good start too.

Cally made it known that the teenagers' first task would be to redecorate the Sea Scout hut, to make the space their own. Having established a base, the young people would then be invited to put forward ideas as to how they wanted to use their new premises. Cally had plenty of suggestions, but naturally it would be client driven. As a trained youth worker, Cally saw herself strictly as a facilitator.

Donations of paint turned up. They were handed over in person by islanders curious to see a new face. They were left just inside the door of the hut overnight by folks Cally never set eyes on. They came on the backs of bikes and in the footwells of cars and off trailers. Half full or half empty, the tins piled up. And it was, inevitably, a strange mix.

Cally separated the tins into rough collections of colours and tried not to speculate where on the island there could be actual rooms painted in these shades. There was an intensely pink shade in particular which defied her imagination. She simply couldn't visualise it in any normal domestic application, not even a child's bedroom. There were a great many greens and blues and even a small amount of metallic gold in a spray can. There were larger and more useful quantities of white household emulsion and of course, magnolia.

Cally set out the paint trays and rollers she had brought from the mainland. There were brushes too and dust sheets and metres of

masking tape. It didn't matter really what the hall ended up looking like or if there was a bit of a mess. The process itself was precisely the creative outlet these youngsters needed. Cally was determined that they should be allowed free reign. Everything was working just as she had seen it in her own mind.

Except the youngsters made no move towards actual painting. They turned up every day and gave every impression of being content to be there. They drank the diluting juice and ate the biscuits Cally provided and sat about on the plastic chairs. They rode their bikes and scooters on the hard standing around the pierhead. They brought sweets from the shop and shared them and sat around in the weak sunshine on a grassy area outside the hut talking. They neither accepted Cally's painting proposal, nor rejected it. There didn't seem to be any hint of a collective decision about the matter, but the project did not begin.

Cally phoned her supervisor and was reassured. She had made a good start and should just sit tight and wait. As long as the youngsters were gathering and socialising, this was enough.

Cally closed up the Nissan hut each evening at five. She didn't think to lock it. There were keys but it seemed unlikely that anything would be stolen in such a remote location. In any case there was just the paint to steal and there wasn't any colour in sufficient quantities to make theft purposeful. She took to walking up Cairn Hill after closing up. Locals had it that from this mild elevation, you could see every one of the other islands in the archipelago. In the quiet of the evenings, with the last ferry gone, and only the sound of the birds on the wind, it felt like the roof of the world. Cally was soothed and reassured.

When several weeks had gone by, Cally decided to nudge things along. She printed out photos from her laptop on the school printer. She chose pictures of street art, murals, graffiti, chalk pavement drawings. She displayed these examples of community artwork on the walls of the Nissan hut. The teenagers examined them with polite interest but did not engage.

Cally set up blank flipcharts and laid out pens and markers to encourage the teenagers to brainstorm ideas for the painting of the Nissan hut, but their drawings never quite made it anywhere near the walls. Cally's

supervisor remained reassuring but could make no practical suggestions. Perhaps this was one of those projects that wasn't ever really going to get off the ground. Cally wasn't to take it personally.

With two weeks left on her contract, Cally tried to maintain a philosophical frame of mind whilst occasionally spiralling into thoughts of failure. It was true that she may have done some good. The teacher was on record, in a midpoint feedback form, saying that the young people were better socialised than during lockdown. But Cally wasn't convinced that this would not be the case without her intervention. It was likely to be the normal effect of the simple increase in freedom of association permitted by the easing of lockdown restrictions.

One night, after the youngsters had gone home, Cally took matters into her own hands and opened up a single tin of paint. Not bothering with a tray or roller, she dabbed at a section of wall on the hut with the largest paint brush she could find, but realistically she knew it was nothing short of an admission of defeat. She began to number the days she had left on her contract, to count down to the day when she could board the ferry home. She would turn in her notes, sign off and not look back.

On her last evening on the island, Cally went up the Cairn. She wanted to be by herself. She told the children she wanted one last chance to see the elusive Northern Lights before she went home, and they laughed. They were not deceived. It wasn't the time. It was true that their island was the best of all places to see the Mirrie Dancers, but everyone knew they were months away if they came at all. It was the right place but the wrong time, and it wasn't even dark. Cally took her usual route up round the great standing stone and past the ruins of the stalled burial chambers to the mound at the summit. It was all as usual. There would be no Northern Lights.

She got up early the next day. Everything was already packed and, in her haste, to be gone, she had even laid out the clothes she would wear. She had stripped the bed and emptied the little fridge. She had signed a thank you card for the teacher and one for the folks in the shop and delivered them the previous day. All that remained for her to do was to take the keys to the Sea Scout hut and leave them in the door; she had no idea for whom.

Cally could see the ferry rounding the south cliffs as she arrived at the hut, and she felt nothing but relief that none of the children had turned up to bid her farewell. The hut door stood open, and Cally stepped inside for the last time.

For a second, she could not make sense of what she could see, like walking from daylight into darkness. Every inch of the arched interior of the space was painted. It began with the deepest of blues and faded almost imperceptibly to lighter blue and then dramatically to a vivid, electric green. A wave of palest pink bloomed above this and was bounded by a faint tracery of shimmering metallic gold. If it was meant to be a rainbow, then it was surely a rainbow of the night. It was the arc of the sky in the north. And it danced over Cally's head in waves and sheets of darkness and of colour.

There was evidence of a certain amount of tidying up but handprints on discarded paint tins told of the painters' identities. The children had finally taken up brushes and rollers and painted. Cally had given them her time and her patience and impatience. She had stuck with the task when there was no progress. She had been there, even when there had seemed to be no point.

And they had given her, in the end, the one thing she had asked for. They had given her the Mirrie Dancers.

Breathe in Orkney

Hazel Grant

Stepping off the ferry in Stromness after a beautiful crossing means stepping on to the loveliest of places to visit. Don't confuse a beautiful crossing with a calm sailing! A fresh wind in your face on the deck simply adds to the excitement of the trip across the Pentland Firth accompanied by sea-faring birds and white horses.

The drive to Granny's house didn't take long. The first thing to greet you was smell of the peat fire, like being hugged by a favourite warm blanket. Then of course came a real hug from Granny.

A pot-roast simmering on the black-leaded stove - another aroma to send my sense of smell into a frenzy. Remembering the combination of aromas from smoky peat and home-cooked food, I am transported to an incredibly happy place. The fragrances were long-lived as they became infused my hair and clothes. They lingered on and acted as a comforter until either the wind blew the perfume away or it was lost after I washed my hair.

Not all smells were so pleasant, but they might not be as bad as you might imagine either. The dry toilet. There it was: sat in the wee wooden shed in the garden. A metal bucket with a smooth wooden seat over it. The bucket (lined with old newspapers and topped up with more after every use), was not what I was used to, but I had to use it on my holidays! Then, where did the contents go? They went wheech, into the sea at high tide! Can you imagine having to attend to such a chore?! And so, the crashing waves had their role to play in a very different way to our sailing. It never entered my mind as a bairn playing in the rock pools at the same shoreline, that the water may have had contaminants. The adults of course would have known but were accustomed to the habit and were either unconcerned, or just accepting. How glad I am for today's running water and flushing toilets. Not that the experience taints my holiday memories at all.

The grocery vans would visit Granny's house regularly and each of those had a distinct smell depending on their produce. Creamy Orkney

cheese that crumbles as you cut it, and fresh Orkney butter - I am salivating as I write. Oh yum!

Down in the local shop the smell was not so pleasant as they stocked dried fish. It didn't look tasty, and the smell suited its appearance. I can't claim to have ever knowingly have eaten the fish but the contrast to the afore mentioned dairy products - my face is contorted at the thought of it.

Thank goodness that the positives heavily outweigh the negatives. Rhubarb jam flavoured with cloves. No, not ginger. Cloves. I can't begin to tell you how delicious it is! Delightful! Devine! Oh, so good - I want some now!!

Smells! The air in Orkney has all those perfumes and they move me back in time and I love re-living the experiences.

Out and about there is an abundance of cattle – and they have their own sweet odours of leathery hides and fresh manure.

I remember the smell of deep-sea fisherman landing their catch at the pier. But fresh fish is not stinky - it has a distinctive scent of the salty ocean and is nothing like rotten fish.

Distilleries and breweries release their ingredients into the Orcadian air adding to the cornucopia that fills my olfactory senses.

Sitting in a hand-crafted Orkney chair has its own beautiful perfume. A new chair has a light fragrance of dry grass, and when you shift your weight, the tightly woven fibres of the chair release a little more of their gentle aroma. When a chair has been worn-in and lived in, it absorbs particles of peat smoke from the fireside and smells of the history of its inhabitants. Who sat here? Who imparted oils from their palms onto the arms of the chair as they sat down at the end of the working day? Whose head has brushed against it, leaving a scent of freshly washed hair? Who sat there and enjoyed their home brew, a dark malty droplet running down the outside of glass and staining the woodwork?

And then the holiday is over, and my ferry sets sail. Away I go to mainland Scotland - my dear old Granny waving from her doorstep with her tea towel. I head for home with tears in my eyes and a whole lot of new memories to add to the treasured earlier ones.

Your turn now to breathe in Orkney - it's bliss.

Red Eyes

Emma Reed

Elodie rubbed her blood-shot eyes. For the past month she had been struggling to see - her blurry vision was caused by something her mum called 'uveitis'. Elodie was almost 6 years old, so only understood two things about it 1) She'd had enough, as the doctor said it should have gone by now and 2) Her cousin said her red eyes made her look like a demon. But today came with additional uncertainty since she was moving with her parents to the middle of nowhere.

They had already been traveling (for what seemed like days) to their new family home, a place called Papa Westray in the Orkney islands of Scotland. Her French-born mother Celine had long complained about their hometown of Tadworth in Surrey as (according to her) it was "a concrete jungle, too close to London" and "craved the excitement of open spaces and challenging landscapes." Her Surrey-born father Tim worked remotely in I.T, so it didn't matter where they lived "as long as we have internet." Without even viewing it, her parents blindly purchased "an amazing deal" at an online auction. Today was the start of their new life.

With their household possessions currently on the last leg of the journey by boat, the Nubury family boarded an eight-seater plane on the shortest scheduled flight in the world, which (to Elodie's delight) lasted all of 90 seconds. The cold, misty atmosphere at Papa Westray airport was a soothing relief to Elodie's red eyes. They were greeted by a hardy looking local man in a heavy brown coat and waterproof boots who introduced himself as Mawnus Linklater. He was the man arranging the property and looked as solid as an ox, with wiry grey hair blowing in the wind.

"Welcome to Papay as the locals call it. The population is 90, well 93 now including yous three." He bent down to give Elodie a firm handshake. "This must be wee Elodie. Whit like the day? She's got very red eyes! Is she peelie-wallie or just puggled?" Elodie looked down whilst her mother explained her eye condition. "I've got 20/20 vision

me,” he boasted in response.

From the window of Mawnus’s car, through her cloudy vision, Elodie noted a landscape more like the Stone Age of early man. Even with the expanse of open fields with far-stretching views, there were no trees, hardly any buildings and very few people. It was a flat wind-swept farmland of rugged sheep, below a foggy October sky, filled with tousled seabirds. Even the primitive sea looked like it was hiding an ancient secret.

“Ignore the weather,” Mawnus boomed from the driving seat.

“Summertime’s a sunny paradise with white sandy beaches and turquoise waters. We get the Northern Lights here too and have puffins and short-eared owls if ye like birdwatching.”

Mawnus stopped the car along a single lane road which ran between two tufty fields of wind-blown grass. The only building was a lonely dwelling, which must be their new family home. It was a squashed, single-story, stone building with a door in the middle and 2 narrow slits for windows on either side. There were two forlorn chimneys on both ends of the tiled roof which were covered in yellow lichen. It looked more like a livestock shelter than a residential home.

“Welcome to ye new home!” announced Mawnus as he opened the car doors to his cautious new residents. Even Celine and Tim, Elodie’s parents looked deflated at their blind purchase.

“Don’t worry, we’ll make it work,” mumbled Celine under her breath to a dazed looking Tim. Mawnus unlocked the front door and handed the keys to Tim.

“Congratulations Nubury family, here’s the keys to ye new home.”

The door creaked open, but the house was steeped in darkness inside. Mawnus quickly put the lights on and explained the thick baked bread that was left for them was “Bere Bannocks, made from Barony Mills, great with the Orkney cheese I left too. Ye certainly bought this house at the right time, these long-abandoned houses have nearly all been restored and brought back to life.”

Celine muttered “I wonder what else has been brought back to life in this house,” to Tim who smirked.

Mawnus continued, “Now I best be off, to leave yous to it. You’ve got 2 B&B’s and a shop in Papa Westray but everything is within walking distance as the whole island is only 1 mile by 4 miles. Pub night is only on a Saturday. There’s a folk museum which you might find interesting. Knap of Howar is older than the pyramids. Your new property is very close to the remains of the medieval chapel at St Tredwell’s Loch. So ah’ll go now and no humbug thee. See ye in the morn.” With that, Mawnus finally left.

“A medieval chapel... not creepy at all,” remarked Tim.

Celine rolled her eyes. “It’s late now, let’s find Elodie’s room and get some kind of bed put together and I MUST put her eyedrops in.”

Her room was at the back of the house on the closest side to the loch, in what was basically an empty shell. The old wooden floorboards were rickety and uneven in places, but there was a small side table, a lamp and her basic bedding. Elodie couldn’t wait for her familiar bedroom furniture to arrive, but she was so tired, she could sleep on anything.

In the middle of the night, Elodie was awoken by something uninvited. At first, she thought it was the feral wind, but the sound was much closer. She listened, laying completely still and eventually she heard water moving. It sounded like someone had swished a bowl of water on the floor (or maybe under the floor). Elodie didn’t dare look nor move until the sound came again, this time she heard wood dislodging, almost like the floorboards themselves had moved, then a breathy female voice softly called “ELODIEEEE!”

Elodie screamed and her parents came racing into her dark room to put on her light. Celine immediately consoled her young daughter, whilst Tim wondered why some of the more badly laid floorboards were wet. Her parents explained that “first nights in new homes are often scary.” Celine put eyedrops in Elodie’s eyes and said “goodnight” once she had calmed. Elodie tried to listen again and just as the intoxicating heaviness of sleep began, she was convinced of the sound of swirling water.

The following morning was a bright day with much less wind. Elodie

heard her dad talking about the lack of broadband, which made her feel safer. The family's possessions were due to arrive today, so they could look forward to making this barren house more of a home. But Elodie hadn't forgotten what she had heard in the night. She sat up in bed and reached for her glasses which were on her bedside table. It was then that she noticed the tiny square of something on the floor that wasn't there before.

Her mother came into her room. "Bon matin mon amour. What is this?" she asked, after noticing the strange thing on the floor and picking it up. "Orkney fudge, made in Stromness at Argo's Bakery," she said, reading the packaging. "Where did you get this fudge?" she asked. Elodie shrugged her shoulders just as her father popped his head around the door.

"We need to fix that floor today don't we Elodie? We should check out that St Tredwell's Loch outside our house too," he explained. "Best not tell her about our medieval ruined chapel neighbours," he whispered to his wife rather loudly.

The furniture arrived, Mawnus and his wife Alesoun came over to help (she'd brought Grimbister Farm Cheese and Stockan's Oatcakes) and the day was filled with a lot of carrying and organising.

On the second night, Elodie had her own bed setup, her eyes were still red, and her father still hadn't fixed the floor.

Elodie listened once again to the sounds at night. As soon as her bedroom light went out, plunging her room into darkness, the swishing water started. It sounded like someone was swimming in a bath under the floor. She heard one of the floorboards being lifted up and moved aside. There was no eerie voice this time, but she heard something being placed on the floor. This time Elodie put her lamp and glasses on to see. In her blurry vision, Elodie thought she saw a woman's hand coming up through a hole in the floor and was placing things around. In the glimmer of the lamp, a woman's face was seen, gently smiling, before replacing the floorboards and swimming away, deep under the house. All that remained, were 5 more pieces of fudge on the floor.

“There’s damp under this house I tell you Celine,” argued Tim the following day. “That’s why we got it so cheaply. We’ll get subsidence or black mould. The place is going to be a money-pit, you realise this? No wonder it was cash only. It’s completely un-mortgageable and unsellable too. You and your wild ideas!”

“Oh stop Tim,” she calmly replied. “It’s Saturday, let’s go to pub night and meet the locals.”

“But what about Elodie?” challenged Tim. “We can’t leave her on her own!”

“We won’t be back late, she’ll be fine until about 8pm, as long as we’ve done her eyedrops.”

That night, Celine and Tim came home to a horrifying find. When looking-in on their daughter, they saw, not only were the wooden floorboards completely wet, but their daughter’s hair, nightgown and bedsheets were drenched in water.

“What happened?” screamed her mother. “Elodie are you ok?!”

“I’m fine,” replied Elodie.

“What’s all of this water, what have you done?” demanded her father.

“The lady, Triduana, she came to fix my eyes.”

“What do you mean, fix your eyes? What lady? What are you talking about?!” demanded her mother frantically.

“The lady in the water, she comes to help me. My eyes aren’t red anymore. She came up through the floor and held me on her lap until I could see again, without my glasses! She told me her name is Triduana and then she swam away, back down under the house.”

Her mother was crying in disbelief and her father had started attacking the floorboards with a hammer. “That loch had better NOT be running under this goddamn house!” he seethed.

The unexplained is quite often never made any clearer after explanation. Elodie’s parents continued as normal, in utter denial of the story from a little girl who wasn’t yet 6 years old. The house was now fully

renovated and picturesque. Spring was finally here and the island was looking beautiful after a very bleak winter. Mawnus and his wife Alesoun had popped by to see if they'd all like to visit the folk museum.

It was whilst at the museum that Tim spotted something which made his blood run cold.

An exhibit at the museum read; "In 710, St Tredwell or 'Triduana' was associated as a 'holy virgin'. Legend has it, King Nechtan fell in love with Triduana and praised her beautiful eyes. She responded by plucking them out and sending them to him skewered on a twig. Since then, miraculous cures were associated with St Tredwell's chapel, particularly with those suffering from eye afflictions. Pilgrims travelled to Papay from all of Orkney seeking a cure. By 1925, the chapel was in ruin but still had a door. Superstitious people seeking a medical cure for their eyes would visit to place a stone as an offering, with some leaving money. In the modern era, St Tredwell's chapel is a ruined heap of small stones. Saint Triduana was once the way of cure of bodily disease, whose fame has now passed away and name almost forgotten."

Mawnus, having noticed Tim was trembling whilst reading the exhibit said "Oh we ALL know Triduana," and gestured with a wink.

Two Truths and a Lie

Gerald Hodgson

With the gentle rocking of the vessel under Ryan's feet as he strode across the shiny wooden floor, he searched the place for the man whose very presence he'd been awaiting. At last, he spotted him, sitting at a nicely furnished table, leaning his head on the rain-soaked window, and sipping black coffee that nicely contrasted with his white mug.

"Mr. Nunez?" Ryan asked tentatively. The man looked up, his blonde mop of hair shifting slightly with the movement.

"Ah, you must be Ryan! Come, take a seat." They shook hands and before he sat down.

"I must thank you immensely for taking this interview Mr. Nunez. I'm sure you have a lot of offers."

"Well, I have to say, your history in journalism was quite the deciding factor. Your pieces on the Oscar nominees for best picture last year were very entertaining."

"Thank you," replied Ryan with a hint of pride in his voice.

Praise like that coming from John Nunez, one of the most critically acclaimed artistic directors of their time was quite something, so Ryan's satisfaction was certainly justified.

"So- "Ryan started until he was suddenly cut off by Nunez.

"Actually, I was wondering if we could do something a little different."

Ryan raised one eyebrow at his interruption.

"As you said, I receive a lot of interview requests, and I go experience interviews even more. I appreciate you coming to meet me here on this ferry rather than interfering with our shooting schedule. I thought we could do something a little different, a little special. Something interesting to do with an interesting journalist such as yourself," he continued.

"What did you have in mind?" asked Ryan, a little skeptical.

Nunez leaned back a little. “You ask me three questions. I shall answer two truthfully. You will have to guess which one is fabricated.” Before Ryan had the chance to respond, Nunez continued. “Good, let’s get started. You might want to take some notes. “

Ryan, seeing really no other option, took out his notepad and pencil, then started pondering what to ask first. Finally, he came to a decision.

“What would you say inspires you and your films?”

Mr. Nunez smiled slowly, and then he began.

“In Budapest, there is small, lovely brick house next to a coffee shop with a lovely woman living there named Anika Benowitz. She had converted the bottom floor of her house into a cozy and charismatic art gallery. The art, however, was not quite everyone’s cup of tea. Yet for some reason I quite admired it. One morning, I found her standing and staring at one of her own paintings. I stood next to her, examining the piece. It seemed to be a plain white swan, struggling in harsh red waters created by violent strokes of the brush. “Amazing,” she said, still staring at the piece. “Five people have commented on what they thought was the meaning behind this painting, and they have all been wrong.” I thought to myself for a while what could possibly be interpreted by this painting? Then suddenly, it hit me. It wasn’t about deep meaning. It was supposed to evoke emotion. It was supposed to inspire you to keep going, to keep struggling.”

As Nunez stopped, so did Ryan as his pencil was still once more.

“Next question?” asked the director.

Ryan readied himself a new page in his notebook. “Ok...well, going with the theme of emotion, which of your films do you think carries the most emotional impact?”

Nunez took a second to ponder this one. Then, he had his answer.

“For the filming of *The Loving Memory of Charlie* we travelled to this beautiful town in the deep south of the US,” began Nunez.

The Loving Memory of Charlie was a film that had been Oscar nominated for best picture a few years back and was one of Ryan’s all-time favorite films.

“In this little town, I was approached by this quaint old woman during our coffee break. She asked us a little about our film, and we told her the premise, a father coming back to his childhood town while still grieving over the loss of his son. She then told us a little about her life, and how she had lost her young daughter to an outbreak of Polio in the 1970s. Most of the actors and crew were listening, and it really added to the emotional impact carried by the film. That, and the beautiful landscape that surrounded us of course.”

Ryan finished writing his last note, still hanging onto the words coming from Nunez, eager as a starving dog watching its food bowl being filled by its owner.

Sensing that John was ready for another question, Ryan asked “So, you talk of all these different exotic and beautiful places, what has made you decide to film in Orkney for your upcoming work?”

Nunez once again smiled. “I was hoping you would ask that. You see, I’ve visited these islands on multiple occasions, and Orkney is beautiful at a surface level. You look at the gorgeous and peaceful hills meeting with the intense skies, the spectrums of color that water radiates, and the cute little towns with picturesque streets and you objectively say to yourself “This is lovely, but is it as beautiful as Paris or Amsterdam?” The objective answer is in most cases, no, but that is not what is important. Somehow, these little islands are so wonderful in ways that words cannot contain them. And that is exactly what I wish to create with my new film. I wish to capture the pure gold that Orkney has emitting from its very soils, the spectacle that it is for the human mind, and share it with the world.”

Once Nunez had clearly stopped, Ryan put down his pencil.

“Now it is your time to guess,” said John.

Ryan was so lost in the man’s words that he had completely forgotten about their strange ‘game’. He tried to think, which one could it have possibly been? They had all seemed so sincere...

Nunez, seeing the lost look upon the poor journalist’s face, decided to speak.

“All of them are true. And none of them are true. Each answer is partly

true with some fabrications thrown into the mix. Such is the way I make my films.” With that, he glanced at his watch and stood up. He bid Ryan farewell and offered his hand out again.

Ryan shook his hand, his head filled with questions, but none of them seeming relevant enough to be the first to come pouring from his mouth and open the floodgates.

Before Ryan had even the slightest chance of arranging the chaotic mess that his thoughts were in, Nunez was walking away leaving no trace but his dirty, empty coffee cup.

Once the ferry finally arrived in Stromness and Ryan took his first steps back onto solid ground, he admired the island around him with new eyes and new feelings, all thanks to a brief encounter with a strange man.

The Box

Geoffrey Shand

Andy Johnston had never had much luck with the ladies.

Despite being a brawny fisherman and reasonably good-looking, he had an inherent shyness that made it difficult for him to converse with the fair sex. Invariably, he would get tongue-tied, and things he meant to say, didn't emerge in a way he would have liked.

There was one girl he fancied, Ingrid Drever, who was "the most beautiful woman in the world". Ingrid was medium height, slim, with auburn hair, worn up. She had brown eyes and a stunning figure. Andy dismissed her as being "out of my league" as Ingrid could have her pick of any man.

Predictably, she had no shortage of admirers. When her dad's boat, the *Girl Isla*, tied up at Kirkwall after a trip, crew members would attempt to engage with her.

Ingrid would flirt with the guys but never appeared to be serious about any of them. She was not just a pretty face but a woman of means. She owned a Kirkwall hairdresser's trading as 'Coiffure'.

Andy played the piano-keyed accordion, more commonly termed "the box". He had learned it on his native Westray.

His mother Bella was a music teacher and their home frequently echoed to fiddles, whistles, or accordions in full cry. She taught him piano, but Andy had always fancied moving onto the accordion. The transition proved something of a challenge, but he was keen and soon mastered the 'baffling' buttons on the bass end.

His life as a fisherman kept him busy but when his dad, Magnus, decided to fish out of Kirkwall, he thought he would have a crack at the traditional accordion competition run as part of the annual Orkney Folk Festival. He put together a 2/4 pipe march, a strathspey, and a cracking reel to finish with. There was no lack of competitors bidding for the cup, but Andy turned in a flawless performance to lift the trophy.

Time for Lady Luck to play her hand...

Andy always noticed Ingrid at the Kirkwall Harbour waiting to welcome her dad's boat. She was the centre of attention. Suddenly, on this particular day, she broke away from her admirers and made a bee-line for Andy.

She greeted him with a captivating smile and said: "You did right weell at the fawk festival, I see." (Andy's success had been reported in The Orcadian).

Andy blushed at the compliment and replied modestly: "It was mair doon tae luck. Hid's easy to mak a mistake when yur under pressure playan' solo, as the judge kin can pick up on the slightest error in both hands, but I hed a gud selection and thocht ah micht get a place."

"Maybe you'll let me hear your competition tunes sometime?" suggested Ingrid adding: "Me dad bawt me an accordjun a peedie while back. I kin play the right han' but canna dae onything wi ma left han'. The buttons are a tawtal mystery."

Andy needed no second bidding and tentatively suggested "I could maybe gie ye wan or two tips if you lek?"

Ingrid replied: "Wid ya? That wid be gret, ye ken."

They fixed a night for a lesson at Ingrid's house.

Andy couldn't wait for it to arrive, and Friday night found him in the Drever's front room with Ingrid's 72-bass box parked ready on the living room floor and Ingrid seated next to him. He discovered that she too was a pianist.

Andy told her that she had chosen well as the accordion wasn't heavy and gave you an adequate range on the bass end. He explained there was a pattern to the buttons which ran diagonally from major, minor, sevenths and diminished chords.

"Let me hear yur competition piece first" requested an impatient Ingrid and Andy obliged.

"You mak it soond so easy" commented Ingrid who clapped her appreciation when he'd finished.

“Weell, I hev bin playan’ the box fur a fair while noo” said Andy, again dismissing the praise.

Just then, Ingrid’s dad, Malcolm, appeared in the room, drawn by the music - “That soondid gret, beuy...do you think Inga wid iver play like that”.

Andy replied: “I dawt see why not, Mr Drever. Her piano knowledge will help her so hid’s chust the mechanics o’ the bawx she hes tae mester.”

“Wid ye mind playan’ me a request? asked Mr Drever. “The band wis playan’ the Rawpe Waaltz the first time I asked me’ late wife up for a dance in the Sanday haall. It sorta becam wur chune.”

“Nae bither” replied Andy who launched into the popular Orkney $\frac{3}{4}$.

Returning to the lesson, Andy drew a map of a section of the bases and started Ingrid off with a waltz introducing the bass chords close together then gradually further apart to the point where she was leapfrogging three and four of them.

One lesson led to another and soon it became a regular ‘date’. Ingrid was quick on the uptake and not scared to tackle the complexities of using bellows control to give tunes lift by cutting notes short.

Andy was concentrating so much on the lessons that the fact that he was conversing freely with a member of the opposite sex had escaped him. There was no stumbling or trying to think of the right things to say that usually came out the wrong way. Talking to Ingrid Drever was effortless - and wonderful.

“Lilt is a vital pert o’ Scottish music, Ingrid. “Imagine you are playan’ at a dance and you are trayan’ tae tempt the dancers onto the flair. If you get it right, their feet will be gaan and they will be itching tae get on the flair. Try it again, Ingrid.”

She did, and she wasn’t far away.

Ingrid complained: “When I get the lift right I mak a mistake in the melody or the chords.”

“Weell, Ingrid...dawnt worry aboot makin’ mistakes. I made thoosands

o' thim. Everybody maks them."

Ingrid flashed a smile at Andy: "You hev a gret wy o' pittin' things Andy".

Andy remembered a phrase he had heard his granny utter a long time ago in Westray. She said that when she first smiled at her husband-to-be - according to him - it "made him gang weak at the knees".

Andy thought it was a daft saying....until now.

During one of the early lessons, Ingrid brought up the question of payment for her lessons. Andy dismissed the offer saying he was pleased to help her but Ingrid was having none of it.

"I'm no takin' yur help fur naethin' Andy. Me playin improves wi every lesson and that's doon tae you".

Andy was adamant: "My best reward is for you tae win the accordjun championship at the next faawk festival." He wasn't going to budge.

Ingrid teased: "Weell, at least allow me tae gie ye a free hairdo. I'll mak ye a bonnie beuy fur yur girlfreen."

There was an embarrassing silence.

Andy was caught on the hop. Was the dreaded Johnston jinx going to strike again?"

"I...I dawn't hev a girlfreen" he stammered.

"Whit! A gud- luckin' lad lek you... I thocht they wid be queuing up."

Andy: "I dawn't hev time for lasses. The sea is me life."

He hurriedly returned to the tuition.

"Mind on the light and shade, Ingrid. The bellows doesn't only control the length o' the nawtes but the volume as weell."

Inwardly, Andy bit his lip. It would have been a perfect moment to tell Ingrid that she was the one for him, that he wished that every day of the week was a Friday and that he wanted to ask her out on a dozen dates. But he hadn't. Anyway, she would have told him it was just the music that mattered and that she wasn't interested in anything beyond that.

However, while his brain appeared to have no problem lying, his heart couldn't hide his true feelings.

Andy tried not to look Ingrid in the eye while explaining something music-wise as he had an almost uncontrollable urge to kiss her but didn't want to run the risk of spoiling everything although Ingrid must have thought it a bit strange. Then 'it' happened... During a pause in the tutorial, caution flew out of the window. Andy turned, looked Ingrid straight in the eye and kissed her. Well... it was more of a hen peck than a full-bodied, lip-smackeroonie!

Andy had no time to think he had perhaps made a terrible, irrevocable, mistake when Ingrid planted one on his lips...yes... a full-blooded lip-smackeroonie! Andy reciprocated and embraced her. It was a long, lingering kiss. It was almost as if they were making up for lost time.

When they eventually parted, they both began speaking simultaneously.

Andy blurted: "I've bin wantin' tae dae that fur weeks, Ingrid, but wisna' sure. Dinna' want tae spoil things wie me geein you lessons, lek".

"So hiv I" revealed Ingrid who confessed she had also found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the music." The outcome was 'pure harmony' and they made a date there and then for the annual fishermen's ball. Andy composed the opening waltz for their first dance - entitled "My Bonnie Orkney Lass."

Where did their romance go next? No prizes for guessing. Andy decided to make their accordion get-togethers a permanent duet.

A couple of weeks later, he popped the question on bended knee after obtaining Mr Drever's blessing. The lessons continued, however, and the day of the accordion championship arrived. On the morning of the competition, Andy stepped ashore with his shipmates after they tied up at the Kirkwall Quay. They couldn't believe their eyes as Ingrid made straight for "her man" and kissed him. It took the crew a wee while to reengage their jaws.

Andy had put together a march, strathspey and reel for Ingrid's championship bid. The march was a pipe 2/4, an Orkney strathspey, and topping it off a Jimmy Shand reel.

It was agreed that he would not be present for Ingrid's performance but it was a hot day and the windows of the church in Stromness were wide open so he was able to listen from outside.

"No 5, Ingrid Drever, Kirkwall" announced a folk festival official.

"When you're ready." Ingrid stepped onto the platform, and it was so quiet the audience could hear the click of her box's bellows strap being unclicked. Ingrid finished her performance with only a couple of slips, to warm applause from the audience.

In his adjudicator's remarks, Noel Donaldson, an ex-Scottish Dance Band player and twice winner of the Folk Festival's accordion trophy said it had been an excellent group of players turning in a high standard.

"That made it very difficult for me to pick a winner, but one accordionist gave me that little extra in interpreting her music with a seamless transition in the tempo changes. Her bass work was a joy to listen to. She did have a couple of slips which I put down to nerves that can happen to any player at a competition. It wasn't so much what she played but more how she played it. I gave her three marks above her nearest competitor which made her the overall winner. Congratulations Ingrid Drever, from Kirkwall."

After she got over the shock, she didn't have far to find Andy who embraced her with the comment -"I told you, you could do it. You were fantastic, I heard you."

"How? queried Ingrid:

"Ah wis ootside", Andy replied.

"You were brilliant, Ingrid".

Ingrid: "Of coorse, but, I hid a gret teacher... Ah think he deserves a drem or two."

They sauntered down the street in the May sunshine, Ingrid hand-in-hand with Andy, swinging her champion's cup. They met her dad on the way.

Magnus whispered as he hugged his daughter: "Yur maam wid hiv bin affy prood o' ye, Inga. She always knew you were talented..."

Eyes from the Water

Emma McGuire

Click! The camera shutter was gunshot-loud in the darkness. With a flurry of wings, the owl launched itself from the leaning fence post and swept over my head. In the stillness, I could feel the draught from its wings touching my cheek as I looked up, the bird a white blur. And then it was gone.

I resisted the urge to check the picture, preferring to draw out the suspense until I was back in the warm. This was my usual mode of operation: the photographs were my reward for spending hours in the cold.

I made a minute adjustment to my tripod, pushing it more firmly into the uneven ground, then checked through the viewfinder. I had altered the target area when I spotted the owl, its white feathers gleaming in the waning moonlight. Now I trained the lens back onto the beach, hoping to catch sight of some wildlife.

I had been doing night photography for a few weeks now. Daytime photography was too easy, too predictable. The night fascinated me. What went on under the cover of darkness? What creatures moved, unseen by human eyes, elusive in the gloom?

I had found the perfect cover - an old croft house, abandoned and left to the harsh Orkney elements. The roof had collapsed long ago, along with some of the outer walls. No windows or doors remained and nature had taken over, snaking long thorny brambles throughout the building. It looked out onto an isolated bay on the north coast, memories of the people who lived there long forgotten. I wasn't even sure if the house still had a name.

During daylight hours, I had created a little hideaway, half-hidden behind a crumbling stone wall. There was a patch of open ground, big enough for my tripod and a little camping stool, which gave me a good sight line to the beach. And so I sat there, a few nights every week, sometimes just for an hour, sometimes for three or four hours, until my

fingers got too cold to operate the camera or I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

Tonight it was still and quiet. If I strained my hearing, I could just about pick out the sound of the lapping waves. It felt like the world was holding its breath. Even the birds had fallen quiet, save the occasional chirp or pip.

The low chink of stones from the beach caught my attention. It was only slight, the pebbles shifting against each other, but the noise had carried on the air. Eagerly, I leaned forward and squinted through the viewfinder, adjusting the focus as I sought the source of the sound.

Seeing nothing through the camera, I straightened up and looked out. The house was set back from the beach, on a slight incline. The land ran straight down to the bay, with a bank on the right side, covered in coarse long grasses. I had a clear view down to the water and along to the left, but the bank hid the beach directly to the right.

I could hear the sound again, faint noises like something moving lightly across the stones. It seemed to be coming from the direction of the bank, where my view was obscured. Perhaps a seal or an otter? No, they would make more noise than that. My heart was pounding - the most exciting thing I had seen so far was a brown crab. Did I dare to move closer? But I would probably just scare away whatever was there. I had to wait, see if it came into view.

I crept closer to the edge of the wall, moving slowly and carefully. My dark clothes and hat helped me to blend into the night and I kept low. Crouching down at the very edge of the house, I peered around the wall, the mossy stones cold and damp under my gloved hand.

There! I held my breath as a dark shape came up over the bank - then released it as it unfolded into a person. I clearly wasn't the only one out at this time of night. It looked like a woman, tall and slim with long dark hair that reached almost to her waist. She was moving away from me, clearly unaware of my presence. I could see that she was wearing a long skirt, but any other details were impossible to make out. I grabbed my camera and snapped a quick picture of her before she disappeared into the night.

The next morning, I woke early, my mind preoccupied with the woman I had seen the night before. I couldn't put my finger on it, but the whole situation just seemed odd to me. I plugged my camera into the computer and loaded up the images.

The next 20 minutes were spent tinkering with levels and contrast to get the most detail possible from the grainy image. It still wasn't great, but one thing was clear - she was barefoot.

I sat back in my chair, my hands folded in my lap, looking at the photo on the screen. Her arms and feet were bare and white in the darkness. I had caught her mid-step and one foot was lightly touching the ground, the sole pale and unmarked. Who went out walking barefoot in the middle of the night at any time, let alone in November? Her whole posture was relaxed, suggesting she was not bothered by the cold in any way.

I squinted at the image, mentally running through all the local people I could think of. There wasn't a single person who fit her description. It was possible she was a tourist, but there weren't many of those around at this time of year. And I wouldn't think a tourist would risk walking along a beach at night in an unknown area without a torch - and definitely not without any shoes! Could she have been drunk? Alcohol was known for keeping you warm - but she didn't appear to have been intoxicated. Her steps had been deliberate and natural, there was nothing drunk about her.

Thoughts of the mystery woman plagued me for the rest of the day. I just couldn't get her out of my mind. There was something about the situation that didn't feel right, that didn't feel normal, and it left me with a lurking sense of unease.

I decided to return to the croft house that afternoon. The day was overcast and there had already been a few squally showers. There wasn't much daylight left when I got to the house. I put myself back in the same position and tried to work out where the woman had come over the bank. Everything looked different in the dark.

Having got my bearings, I headed over to the beach. There was a cold wind whipping off the sea and waves were violently crashing into the

shore. Seabirds whirled overhead, occasionally plunging like stones into the water as they spotted fish.

I was alone. My footsteps crunched loudly over the mixed stones and sand, shells snapping crisply beneath my boots. I moved up closer to the bank where pebbles and rocks replaced the sand, pushed up by winter storms. They shifted underfoot, clinking together to make the sound I had heard the previous night.

I stood still, unsure what I was looking for. There was no trace of where the woman had walked up and over the bank, any footsteps in the sand had been scoured away by the wind. The grasses had merely bent rather than broken as she passed. There was nothing to say she had even been there and had it not been for the photograph, I would have started to doubt myself.

I wandered around for a bit longer until it got too dark to see and the biting wind drove me off the beach. Discouraged, I returned home to heat up some soup and think about my next move. Why was I so fixated on this? It was probably just a crazy tourist who had romantic notions of paddling in the sea at night-time.

To try and put the matter to rest, I took my camera back out to the croft house later that night. For three hours, I sat in my shelter, wrapped in a big coat and gloves. I snapped nothing more exciting than a couple of brown hares and saw no more mysterious figures. And that was the end of it - or so I thought.

A few months later, I overheard two old men in the local shop. One spoke of a stranger, an odd-looking woman who had been spotted around the beaches of the north in the dead of winter, with “nary a stitch on her”. The other nodded knowingly and murmured, “Mibbe the lass be a selkie.”

Selkies. All Orcadian children heard tales of the mythical sea-people who lived as seals in the water and could discard their skins on dry land to walk around as humans. But they were just stories, invented tales to pass the time on winter nights when there was nothing to do but huddle around the fire.

Intrigued by the old men’s conversation, I was driven to return to the

croft house one more time. I huddled in the lee of the wall, my hat pulled over my ears and my eyes fixed on the beach. I strained to hear any sound, but the wind was whistling through the grasses and around the house, making it impossible to pick out anything.

I was just getting ready to pack up and go home when a movement caught my eye. The woman materialised from the darkness; her hair whipped into a maelstrom around her head. As before, her arms and feet were bare and white. She wore a simple dress that went down to her ankles.

Oblivious to my gaze, she cut over the bank and dropped down onto the beach, out of sight. Scrambling to my feet, I attempted to follow but got snagged on brambles as I squeezed past the vegetation surrounding the croft house. Cursing under my breath, I yanked the stems free from my coat sleeve and ran down to the beach.

I switched on my torch, playing the narrow beam of light over the stones, not worried about being seen. But the beach was empty. The woman had vanished. How was it possible? I had watched her come this way just moments ago, but it was like she had disappeared into thin air.

I went to where she had cut over the bank, shining my light on the grasses. I thought I could see a vague gap but then the wind gusted again, and it was gone. As I moved the torch closer to the ground, I saw a dark mound. Closer inspection showed it to be material - it was the dress she had been wearing!

Spinning around, I shone the torch beam out onto the water. The waves were choppy, topped with churning foam. There was a flash of reflected light that looked like a pair of eyes, watching me from just above the surface, then they were gone. And I was left alone on the cold, empty beach, with my heart pounding and my mind full of questions that would likely never be answered.

A harder life, loved

Craig Taylor

1935

It was Magnus, the eldest Thom son of the three, that took the dog home for James on his birthday. He knew that Ma would never give permission to get a dog but also that she wouldn't be hard enough to get rid of it. Magnus had always wanted a dog himself, but fither wouldn't entertain the notion when they stayed in the Harbour Masters house on Shore Street.

"Dogs need a house with a garden, next to fields to roam son" his father Thomas had said to him, on more than one occasion.

A Harbour Masters house went with the job and when the boy's father passed, they had to move. Mary had found a small cottage on the outskirts of town, Braeness would be their new home. The house was at the foot of the brae, just over a hill fae the toon. It was a lovely place to have a dog. The house had a garden to the front, surrounded by a dry-stone dyke, with a fenced area of garden to each end and at the back. The rough stone road passing the house opened to a swathe of green grass known as the kelp banks. Wee stone walls laid out above the shore were layered with tangles. The shore itself was golden sand sloping to the edge of the sea. A canine paradise.

At the top of the brae was the dairy farm of Eastquoy. Although they concentrated mainly on the dairy kye, they also had some sheep. Having sheep meant having working dogs. They had two, both border collies. Jock and Bella. Magnus passed Eastquoy every day on his way to work and he would see the two dogs laying at the byre door. If he had time, he would call them over for a clap and a ruffle of the lugs.

Davie, the farmer, stopped Magnus as he returned home one spring evening and asked if he had seen Bella. She hadn't been seen since morning.

"I can't say I have" he responded.

“Ach, she’ll likely turn up at supper time, cheers anyhow” Davie said.

Magnus hadn’t given it any thought, forbye keeping an eye out for her as he returned home that evening. She was there again the next morning, waiting outside the byre.

A few weeks later, as Magnus stopped to speak to the dogs he noticed Bella had put a wee bit of weight on. Davie came along before he left and as the two chatted away Bellas weight gain was mentioned.

“She’s getting a bit of a puggy on her there” Magnus noted.

“Aye, the dirty wee stop outs gone and gotten herself up the duff” Davie explained. “Yon ither day there, Fraser fae doon the road teen her back, she’d been visiting and his dog had had his way with her”

“That’s a scunner” said Magnus

“It happens, you’re no after a puppy in the near future are you”? Davie asked Magnus. “It seems heartless to drown them”

“Aye, definitely” Magnus’ mouth said the words before his brain engaged, adding “It’s Jimmys birthday in a few weeks and I think a dog would be ideal”

The two men nodded in acknowledgement before parting ways. There would be no financial transaction to it. Here was a farmer that wanted rid of his bitches puppies, and a man that was more than happy to take one of his hands.

James’ birthday was on a Saturday this year, and like every other year he hadn’t asked for much. Content with a sweetie, a wee commando book and Mas clootie dumpling, or’duff’ as they knew it. His brother, Willie would do his chores for the week. Magnus would usually take him fishing for cuithes, but not this year.

As the boys sat down to their breakfast in the morning, James was presented with his gifts. Sweets and a book from Ma, a card with a scrawled chores promise from Willie and a random long thin gift from Magnus, wrapped in last week’s Orcadian.

“What’s this Mansie”? James asked as he felt along the wrapped gift.

“Open it and see”

James untied the string and opened out the paper. The branch, which used to reach over the front path, from the bush in the front garden, appeared.

“Thanks” said James hesitantly “Do I plant it?”

Willie laughed. Ma looked puzzled. Magnus smiled.

“No daftie, you throw it” he stood up and signalled his brother to follow him. James followed, in confusion.

“Let’s go and see whit we can find in the hen hoose” Magnus led.

Willie was quick to reply, “eggs”, chuckling away as he followed.

Magnus opened the hen hoose door and ushered James inside. Ma and Willie peering in behind him. In the corner, in a seed tattie tray, was a little ball of border collie fluff, eyes half opened, laying on one of Magnus’ ganseys as a blanket.

James went down on his knees to pick the little creature up. “Ma, Ma, look Ma” he repeated.

Magnus received a quick skelp to his left lug, enough to sting. “You wee scamp” she aimed her words at Magnus scornfully.

“If he is staying in this house, he’ll be your responsibility James Alexander Thom” Mary bluntly demanded.

“Aye Ma” promised a delighted James.

Willie and James couldn’t leave the wee critter alone, clapping and ruffling at him.

Mary stood next to her eldest son, glancing at him and shaking her head. Magnus felt victorious.

“You can wipe that smugness off your face, you’ll be paying the vet to have it sorted” she said.

“Aye Ma” Magnus replied.

The pup was no near big enough to be gan about itself yet. Four stubby wee legs, three of which were black, with a front leg covered in a white

sock. It could barely manage the step out of the hen hoose.

“What are you going to call him?” Magnus asked James.

“Sammy, like the dog fither used to tell us about” replied James, hugging the bonnie wee critter.

* * * * *

1943

The postman, on his trusty bicycle, drops letters past the small cottage where three brothers had lived. The dog is always pleased to see him. Mary Thom greets him each day, with a stout “good morning, Geordie”.

“Good morning, Mary” he responds, “Two today, one from France”

Nervously, Mary said “ That’ll be James”, before telling Geordie “The kettle was just whistling on the stove, will you take a cup of tea?”

“Aye, that would be great, thanks” he replied. Geordie knew a cup of tea was often just a cup of tea but other times a cup of tea was a need for company. A letter from a soldier might need a shoulder to cry on, he hoped it would not.

“The hens have been laying well” Mary said as she set down a plate of freshly baked shortbread on the table. “Enough to spare some for baking with”, she continued.

“It’s a rare treat these days, Mary, with the years of rationing”

“Aye, it is that, so don’t be spoiling the dog under the table, I ken what you’re like” she warned.

Mary turned to the stove to pour the tea from the dented old teapot, with the string whipped handle, an heirloom of sorts.

With her head turned to focus on making the two cups of tea, Geordie broke a piece of shortbread off and smuggled it down to Sammy, who made quick work of it.

“Come now Mary, sit down and open your mail” Said the postman.

“You can’t change what’s in it” said the friend in him.

Mary sat and took a long breath before slicing the butter knife along the seal of the envelope, it didn’t make the cleanest opening, but it did the job. She took the two sheets of folded paper from the envelope and carefully unfurled them.

“Oh, thank the lord” she exclaimed. “He’s fine, James is fine”. A tear threatened to run from her eye.

Geordie put a hand across to her arm, “There now, no need to fret”.

“He always says he’s fine in the first sentence you see, so I know it’s not a worry to read it all” Mary continued reading the letter in its entirety, becoming lost in the words, and leaving her guest to his tea and shortbread.

Another piece of shortbread found its way to the anticipating dog below.

Geordie raised the flowered cup to his mouth to finish his tea, he missed milk in his tea, but times were hard. He set the cup down.

“Right, I better get on up the brae again Mary” he said as he rose.

As she set the letter down on the table her eyes looked up, full of relief, “Ach, sorry Geordie, I’ve been ignoring you” she apologised.

“Never a bit Mary” he set her at ease.

Geordie didn’t ask Mary about the letters contents, professional as always.

Sammy scurried to the door, getting under Mary’s feet. “Sam, shift yourself” she uttered. “Don’t let him follow you further than the top of the brae, Geordie” she ordered the postie, following him out the door.

“Aye, aye, will do” he replied.

“If he sees the Millers dog at the byre o Hillside he’ll be gone for hours again” she prompted.

Geordie laboured into cycling. “Cheerybye Mary” he smiled.

The bike rattled along the cottage road, weaving around the largest potholes, Sammy alongside keeping pace on the verge.

Mary returned to read the letter from her youngest son again.

‘Dear Ma,

I am heel and weel as I write, but far fae hame.

They say that the war will be over this year, one big push and Hitler will be finished. How good would that be, home for the Ba, all three of us.

Its Willie’s birthday next week, I wonder if he’ll get a duff on the ship? It won’t be as good as yours if he does Ma. I hope you’ve heard from him, and from Mansie.

We had some fresh eggs here the other day. This peedie French wife came up to us with a basketful. We scrambled them wi a smidge of butter. I told the lads I prefer my eggs in a cake. We smuggled some rations to her to say thank you but I think she was thankful enough that we were just here.

Summer’s coming. It’s warmer here than at home but you can still see the seasons change. The daffodils are fading away and crops are growing, where they get peace to do so. The days are longer in light.

How’s Sammy? I miss him dearly. I hope you’re letting him into the warmth of the range and not shooing him away from under your feet. I used to wish that I could’ve taken him with me but I’m glad that he has been there to keep you company.

Your son,

James

Mary sat back in her chair and just as she picked up the stitch in her knitting there was a scrape at the door, followed by a prominent woof. Setting the knitting aside, Mary went to the front door and upon opening it was greeted with an onrushing Sammy, back from his run up the brae with Geordie.

“Ya wee scoundrel, you’ve been trasping through that weet ditch again” she scorned the wet dog. Sammy wasn’t caring as he turned a full circle in front of the range before plonking himself down to get some warmth.

A range in a cottage provided everything. It warmed the water for the house, it heated the main room, and it was where Mary spent many an hour cooking bannocks for the boys. It was Sammy's favourite resting place, an area Mary frequently had to shoo him out of.

Mary shook her head at him before reaching for a broken biscuit on the table and tossing it in his direction. An ounce of happiness in harsher times.

Full Circle

Sue Gerrard

I thought I saw them again tonight. In the blind hour before darkness falls and lights are lit. In this half-light, half formed figures half bent, hesitant in movement shuffled across the road in front of my car.

I wanted to stop, look at them more closely but the sudden onslaught of traffic behind me prevented this as the other cars were not slowing down. It was as if they did not see them.

I understood that Orkney is full of shadows, magic, and mystery especially to a stranger like me. From the bewitching Loch of Harray nestling near Stenness to places said to be the home of Wise Men who engaged in astrological mysteries...

Every day in Orkney was a new beginning.

When I arrived back at my rented cottage, I poured myself a glass of wine and flopped on the floral-patterned sofa. It enveloped me with a sense of comfort. The day was quickly wrapping itself away and the light was almost dead; another day gone forever.

I sipped the deep red wine and reflected on my journey here to Orkney to write about a private dig. This time, not as a tourist, but as a journalist writing a book about the unearthing of the past by the people of today. I seemed to be in no man's land neither a digger nor an Orcadian and I think that made me see things differently. My role was not to do but to observe and record.

I had first come here on holiday with my cousin Sam a few years ago, allegedly for one time only but how wrong could I be? From the first time I crossed the moody, tempestuous Pentland Firth I sensed a time slip within my life, as if on board this modern ferry I was travelling to another world.

The ferry was alive with music from those sailing to take part in the Orkney Folk Festival; it was the songs of the islands which carried on the wind evoking times long gone. Sam seemed untouched by this changing time unfolding around us. She was sat in the lounge reading a

novel when the real story was here all around us.

Stromness beckoned and the next five days were magical. If God had taken six days to create the world, he must have spent five of them working on Orkney.

The place that mesmerised me most was the strong, unbending Ring of Brodgar which had defied time. The world had changed but these stones were ever rooted in the land touching the sky, touching my soul.

So, I thought as I drained my wine glass, my ruby remedy, it seemed as if my life had been shaped into a circle and I had returned.

Sam never came back; I was alone in my passion to return. So, when as a writer my publishers offered me the opportunity to return, I jumped at the chance. I was to cover a new independent dig between the Ness of Brodgar excavations and the Ring of Brodgar, which was looking for a missing standing stone.,

This time the sail wasn't as smooth. It was as if the water was pulling us forward into Stromness, not allowing me to escape this swell in my life, this time, this place.

I was met from the ferry by Doctor Jamie Douglas, the renowned leader of the dig. He introduced me to my new home for the next three months, a small but comfortable cottage in a village with all that I would need for my stay.

“Here you are Kit, your new home. We’ve stocked up with essentials for you and I’ve written down our phone numbers just in case. I will introduce you to the rest of the team tomorrow. Here is a map, the dig is about ten minutes’ drive away, you will soon get used to it.”

He then said goodbye and left me to settle in. He certainly was a no-nonsense man. The dig was the passion of his life as I was to find out.

There were four in the main team but as instructed by Doctor Douglas I was to deal with him directly. Out of the team I was probably closest to Julia because we were similar ages. The journey did grow shorter, and I was so glad I brought my own car especially at first. It was like a bubble that wrapped itself around me, reminded me of home, of the people there, and the part of me that still lived there.

The hours were very long, each minute of light was wrung from the day. Although the dig was a noble cause it still had to be financed. Money in general was tight particularly money for projects such as this.

So, enter Jordan Tucker who had been at Oxford University with Doctor Douglas. Tucker was an American, who had inherited his father's real estate and made millions. Now he wanted educational and cultural status. He agreed to sponsor the dig; however, this man was fast in everything he did and was not used to waiting for anything he wanted. Although told many times that secrets that had been buried for thousands of years were not suddenly going to pop their head above ground because he commanded it, he was still impatient.

He haunted the dig in general and Doctor Douglas in particular with heated discussions usually with the angry threat from Tucker:

“Douglas, make some progress, or I'll stop the money.”

Thankfully he never did.

One day was bridging into the next in this timeless place but the financial clock was ticking quickly. I could feel the pressure, excitement, disappointment; each day was a seesaw of emotions. However, every morning I felt lifted by driving past the Ring of Brodgar on my way to work. Even when tensions were high, and hope turned to disappointment it raised my mood, they were like a stone halo in the ground.

It was after a particularly hard day for the team and a frustrating one for me, as my story was going nowhere. Julia and I, both tired, were leaving the dig at the same time and suddenly said in unison: “Do you fancy a pub meal?” The answer was yes and as we lived the same village, we parked our cars and walked to the pub trying to avoid the mosquitoes' Orkney kiss.

Settled with our meal and large glass of wine Julia told me the legend of the Ring of Brodgar. “It is said,” she paused for effect, “these were the legendary dancing giants who were fearsome. They met one night between the Lochs of Stenness and Harray and began to dance to the hypnotic sound of the fiddle. However, they were enjoying themselves so much they forgot to watch for dawn and when the first sun light

touched the landscape they instantly turned to stone. It is said that the comet stone was the fiddler who tried to run but was caught in the sun's deadly embrace. They are now frozen in time."

Julia certainly told a chilling tale, her voice whipping up my imagination so much so that as I went to sleep that night, I was sure I could hear the fiddler playing his hypnotic music just for me.

The next day was to prove one of the most exciting of my life, in fact, of everyone's life. It was about four in the afternoon when the cry went up and shattered the concentration of all present.

"We've found a stone; we think it is of Brodgar." The words filled the air. The rest of the day was frantic digging. Doctor Douglas checking and rechecking, talking about verification, the team were crying with joy and me trying to get a story.

Verification came quickly and the site became no sightseers, no journalists except for me, what a book I had. Moods lightened and I felt part of an incredible moment in history. Every day as I drove past the Ring of Brodgar it seemed to glow and if I imagined hard enough, I could see the stones swaying to the fiddler's timeless music.

Then like a thunderclap the mood turned black and sour, the air acidic, mood desperate thanks to Mr Tucker. We had all believed passionately that the stone would stay near the ring, maybe eventually that it would be restored to the ring. However, Mr Tucker had different plans. He wanted to take the stone to America after he had taken it on an international tour. All to make money out of this time rich stone.

Everything stopped.

Today I had been to the dig to shape my story when I saw them again. In fact, it had been happening nearly every day and now was nervous of driving home, particularly in the blind hour.

During the day the fiddler's music had looped round and round my head. I felt as if I was tottering towards a place beyond my understanding.

The morning after I felt better, and everything seemed to get back to normal within my world. Then two nights later when I was returning, I saw them again.

The road was empty, the sky darkened, and the bent figures were shuffling across the road. However, this time one stopped in front of me forcing me to stop. In this moment of stillness, the others surrounded me and then rose to their full height. Then I understood I was in the centre of the Ring of Brodgar. The sky went from blue to white to black in an instant as if time itself was changing the landscape. Suddenly sheets of rain fell from the sky, covering the windscreen, blinding me to everything outside the car.

I'm going to die I thought. The stones are going to crush me, kill me.

Instead in the silence after the storm I saw that I was not surrounded by stones but by people. It was as if the rain had washed away their earthly guise. I now saw a man, very tall, straight backed. When he spoke, his voice resonated across the countryside.

"I am Roda, chief of my people here in the circle. We come to you with the hope that you will save our brother Thorne and bring him back to the circle, to his people, to his family."

Then I understood the legend was true, the stones were people who now guarded and guaranteed our tomorrow. I realised that the stone that had been found was their brother Thorne not just a money-making attraction to make a rich man richer. He was loved, of their family and needed to come home to them. I was awestruck and felt such a connection to them. Was this the timeslip I felt when I first came here? The door I had been meant to step through ever since I had

Stepped on Orkney. I promised I would do what I could. The stone, Thorne must remain here.

However, that was easier said than done as Tucker was immovable. Pleadings, threats, campaigns, petitions did nothing to stop his determination to take his stone, my Thorne away from his home.

I was about to leave Orkney as my time was up when the strangest thing happened. Tucker was driving home one night, no doubt mentally counting his money, the money to be made from Thorne, in his cash till brain when he pulled over to the side for no apparent reason. When he was found he was completely incoherent. The police said he was rambling about the stones coming to life and surrounding his car. He left

Orkney never to return. As for Thorne, Tucker's sister, the new boss, said that the stone should remain in Orkney and that is where it is.

As for me I boarded the ferry home, but I knew that I would return to my new family, the people of the Ring of Brodgar.

Queen Esa

Sue Gerrard

Two fishermen Mur and Chadh stood on the frost hardened coast of Orkney and looked at the unforgiving white shivering water. Winter had been harsh. Snow had choked life from the vegetation as it lay underground, wheat had become icicles of nothingness and the fish had become frozen in the sea. They were starving.

They had prayed to the sun to return, but the sun would not answer, the sun would not appear. Every day they grew thinner, frozen flesh wrapped around walking bones with chattering teeth.

“We must fish today.” said Mur, the elder of the two. “We are dying.”

“The fish are frozen, dead - they are of no use to us.” Chadh replied.

“We must try. Let us get out the boat and maybe further up the coastline there will be a thawing place where we may find food.” So, the two men, old before their time, struggled with their white fishing boat to set to sea. Everything was frozen but eventually before the full light of day they were afloat.

They steered an unsteady course through icy waters, weaving between rocks and ice blocks. As they sailed along the Orkney coastline, they saw that the vibrant green land had been transformed into pitiless white. The once blue sky was now ice grey with no speck of sun.

The only light they saw was from the continuing dawn ceremonies held at the Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness to try to awake the sun. The dying flames illuminated the sky, but the sky gave no response.

This unanswered plea for help spurred them onwards, they had to find warmth and with warmth, food. After much uneven sailing and arduous work, the battered, little boat sailed into new waters which were ice free. In the far distance they saw a miraculous and joyous sight; they saw the Goddess of the Sky, faint yet spreading warmth. The life-giving sun was on the horizon.

“We must go to it.” Chadh, the youngest excitedly said.

“No, see how she turns and runs from us. She is fading, leaving us to the mercy of the sea.” Mur said

“We must follow.”

“No, no she is going and maybe leading us into a trap. The ice monster may be hungry for us. This is an illusion, there is nothing here.”

Chadh understood and bowed to Mur’s wisdom. Sadly, tossed and turned by the sea the men turned around to find their way home. As the sky became greyer, a thick, icy-breathed fog embraced them chilling their very souls.

“We are going to die.” Chadh screamed, thinking of all the years he had planned but now would never see.

Mur was silent. He could offer no comfort. Was to die suffocated by the ice monster preferable to starving to death?

Suddenly in this cocoon of desperation there came a translucent golden ray which cut through the sea like a gleaming sword. Is this death they thought come to take us on the golden pathway to the Gods Beyond the Earth? As the brightness faded from their eyes, they saw that it was not death but a beautiful sea maiden, a mermaid.

She was perched upon a large, black rock as a goddess sits upon a throne, as their leader sat upon his sacred chair. Had she come to save them? Feed them?

They waited.

As the gold became yellow, they thought she had no interest in them, for they were not of her kind. Idly she beat her tail on the rock, as if she did not see them, as if she would not acknowledge them.

Sorrow turned to anger.

She, all powerful, Queen of her Sea could help them. She shook her head, the golden hair flowed from side to side. She did not blink. She did not smile.

Anger turned to vengeance.

Then Chadh spoke: “I will die a man fighting for life, I will not shrink from this earth like a shadow fades when away from the sun.”

“I too will fight with you for life.” Mur vowed.

“There are many weeks food in that tail she taps so arrogantly. Think of the meat we could get from that tail if we cut it off. Why we could even barter with our brothers if we can get her tail.” Chaldh said.

“But she is a mermaid, doing that would kill her.” Mur said.

“As she will kill us with her indifference. It is she or us.”

“Then it is us.” Mur said: “Prepare the nets and spears.”

The huddled men warmed by anger talked about a plan as they prepared for the attack. Slowly they approached the rock-throne and prepared their nets carefully. They were almost there when the boat began rocking from side to side, white wood splinters caught in their nets and would not free them. Then a giant gust of wind took their nets and whipped them mercilessly over their bodies and wrapped around them like a shroud.

Some unknown force lifted them roughly and threw them onto the unforgiving rock as their splintered boat sailed away taking all hope with it.

“You fools do you do not know that it is our Queen Esa who calms the tides keeping them safe for you, and she sends singing seas with tides of joy, rich in food to you?”

The men crumpled and dazed followed the loud angry voice to a merman who in turn was bowing before the mermaid Esa.

They were too frightened to answer.

“She was on her way to save you for she has caught the golden rays of the sun in her hair. One shake of her head and the sun rays would have been released on your land and you would have been saved. Now you have tried to hurt her, kill her.” There was no mercy in this voice, only anger.

“We were desperate.” Chadh pleaded falling to his knees, his bravery gone, only terror remained.

“We know that.” said the merman, “That is why we were on our way to save you. Now you have interfered with us and so we have less time to

save your people.”

“We are sorry.” said Mur with frozen tears etched into his face as he fell to his knees.

“We cannot let you go unpunished. You have tried to harm our queen, our light.”

“What will you do to us?” they asked fearfully of this great force.

There was an eternal silence before he said: “You will be turned into mermen and travel the oceans protecting our Queen Esa forever.”

Mer and Chadh thought this was a suitable punishment for them, two men who had had such a heartless plan. Esa, Queen of the Sea would need protecting from a wicked world and the savage whims of mankind.

So, it came to pass that Mer and Chadh would serve the sea as the sea once served them.

Going back to your roots

Marie McColm

The NorthLink ferry was coming into dock. The April morning sunlight glinted through the clouds, and gusts of wind caught her blonde curls, even though she'd tried to shove them under her hand-knitted, blue woollen hat. As she fumbled in her handbag for her sunglasses, her hand touched the photograph. She'd placed it carefully into her bag last night, when packing for the morning journey from Scrabster to Stromness. Careful not to bend it, this precious, old photograph was the reason for their journey.

The clanking of the ship, shouts of the dockers mooring her safely, and the smell of fuel fumes made her nose twitch with anticipation as they disembarked. They boarded the bus for Kirkwall, leaving the ferry far behind. The salty wash whipped against the pier walls, and the sun still shone brightly. They were on a mission. Robbie clutched her hand in his, pulled his maroon hoodie up over his head, and wheeled his new suitcase along in her wake, as she led the way.

The hotel façade was imposing, grey stone punctuated with glints of mustard and violet, the fragile pansies in the window-boxes. They were welcomed warmly by the young receptionist at the hotel, and made their way upstairs, Robbie touching each carved wooden spindle on the way up.

She studied the patterned carpet on their way along the landing towards their room, the swirling design matching her swirling thoughts. It was a homely twin-room, with a view out over the bustling street and harbour-front. This was their base for the next two nights. A few days of exploration, and self-discovery lay ahead, for them both.

It was still early, only around 11am, but she definitely needed another coffee before she could face this ordeal. Rather than the hotel-room coffee or tea, neatly laid out on the customary tray, she decided they'd go out and find a nice café, get their land legs again after the choppy crossing, and she could collect her thoughts.

The St Magnus café caught her eye, strategically placed right opposite the ancient sandstone Cathedral. That would do fine and seemed child-friendly too. She and Robbie entered and found a table in the corner. She ordered a glass of milk for Robbie, and his favourite, millionaire shortbread. He always said he'd like to be a millionaire when he grew up, and never called it 'caramel shortcake'. For herself, she decided on a frothy cappuccino, and scone with raspberry jam - a wee treat. This was supposed to be a holiday, after all. That would set them both up for the day.

They looked at the photograph together. It was dated around 1920; sepia-tinted, a bearded man and his daughter sitting on low stools, making a strange-looking, straw-backed Orkney chair. The woman, dressed in a blouse, tightly buttoned up to her neck, was preparing the oat straw into coils, while he sat, legs outstretched in a relaxed pose, stitching the coils into a wooden frame. They were a team, father and daughter, working quietly together. They both had the same sharp nose and prominent eyelids, as they stared down at their work; her long nimble fingers worked the straw effortlessly, and her neat dark hair was parted in the middle. He wore a crumpled long-sleeved shirt, and tweed waistcoat.

"When are we going to Foubister, mum?" asked Robbie, jolting her from her study of the photograph. "Soon, Robbie, soon . . ."

They caught the bus heading south out of Kirkwall, for the hamlet of Foubister, down past the airport. Robbie looked out the window at the flat green fields. He liked the cows and counted the round bales of wrapped fodder to pass the journey. She, on the other hand, reflected on her memories of love and heartbreak, the stark beauty of this magical island passing her by.

On arriving at the hamlet, they walked past St Andrew's Primary school, where they couldn't resist having a wee shot on the brightly coloured seesaw in the playground. The red and blue paint was flaking, and it creaked and groaned, as they rose and fell, laughing together. It felt like all the ups and downs the two of them had experienced together.

When they came to the house, Robbie knocked, three sharp knocks on the door. They both stood back, waiting. She could feel the sweat

running down her back, and on her brow, and knew it wasn't from the exertions of the see-saw. This was going to be tense; life-defining and she prayed it would go according to plan. The lady who came to the door wore a floral blouse, and jeans, a simple Ortak silver pendant around her neck. "You've come!" she exclaimed, with tears in her eyes. She hugged Robbie and squeezed him close. When she'd stood up again, and composed herself, she shouted into the kitchen behind her: "Robert, they're here!"

He enveloped them in his strong, hairy arms. On his tattooed forearm, a traditional anchor was blurred and hardly visible now.

When they sat down in the kitchen, little Robbie stared, wide-eyed at the straw-backed Orkney chair at the head of the table. While he listened intently to their curious Orcadian accents, recounting the last decade of daily life, Robbie played with the creel at the fireplace, and the iron companion-stand at the hearth. He couldn't remember if he had ever met them before, although they clearly knew him. He felt confused, and gazed out of the window, longing to just go out and play in the sandy bay nearby. He sensed the adults were having an important discussion from the hushed, hurried tones of their conversation, and the gasps and protestations of his mum.

Eventually, they suggested he go outside to explore. All three adults encouraging him, yet looking at him intently, from what seemed like three different perspectives. Robert gave him his binoculars, placing the leather strap gently and lovingly round his neck. "See what you can see wi' those, laddie!" he ordered, his hooded eyes twinkling with mischief.

Robbie felt proud to burst, at being allowed to use his grandpa's binoculars. He could see the turquoise sea stretching away into the distance. Small, white-crested waves rushed in towards the beach, but further out, the seagulls swooped and cried in the blue expanse of the sky. He saw a fishing boat in the bay, and a distant ferry. Using his thumbprint to access his mobile, first he checked his marine vessel finder app, to see the names of the craft. He was fascinated by their exotic names, which were great for him to practise his reading. He sounded out the letters 'S-a-n-d-y L-a-s-s' and always liked to see where they were registered from the colourful flag on the app. Then he took a

few photos, to show mum later.

He loved his tech, but as he threw a smooth, flat stone along the beach, the grey stone felt perfect in his hand too. He hoped tomorrow they would go to see the Churchill Barriers, and the Italian Chapel, and then maybe the Old Man of Hoy. He'd seen pictures online, and thought they all looked awesome, in their different ways. This place was brilliant!

After what seemed an age, they called Robbie back in. He was hungry now, and supper was laid out - smoked crab to start with, then a generous portion of roast lamb, with mint sauce, potatoes, and carrots. She had served the meal on a china dinner service. The plates had a delicate design around the rim, and gold edges. Robbie remembered mum telling him never to put dishes with gold or metal in the microwave!

The food was delicious, and the mood of the adults seemed better, good even, Robbie hazarded to guess. The ice had been broken and whatever big issue they had needed to discuss, it all seemed fine now, much to Robbie's relief. He'd had to develop resilience over these last few years and was highly protective of his mum. She looked happy, and more relaxed. The company was the best.

They talked of fishing, the croft, seals, wartime and emigration. They laughed heartily, cried, and hugged wee Robbie intermittently, as he sat and listened to the tales around the table.

Robert held court, sitting in the straw-backed Orkney chair, so proud and pleased that they had come after all these years. He often paused, mid-tale, and clearly emotional, he wiped his hands on the knees of his worn trousers. The chair seemed so much more than just a piece of furniture. It seemed to hold centuries of traditional heritage, the beauty of the grain on the wooden arms having been brought out by oiling it regularly. As Robert's voice lilted on, mum realised every oat straw making up the back of the chair had been hand-prepared, and fragments of wee Robbie's own DNA were woven into it.

Outside the house, the Bay of Suckquoy looked glorious, the water shimmering like millions of tiny diamonds, as the sun set. The chair seemed to sense they had come and knew that there were several

generations of Foubisters in the house that night. Handed down from generation to generation, it still retained its elegant shape, yet was weathered and worn. Priceless.

Later, they sat outside on the duck-blue metal bench, brought over from the mainland from a garden-centre, and probably mass-produced in some distant Chinese factory.

They watched the sunset together. She was comforted by the reminiscences and at the same time, mesmerised by the rose-red of the horizon.

The golden ball of the sun sank gracefully out of sight, and she knew it was all going to be okay. The night chill forced them all back inside the house, where they moved to the fireside again. Robert mended the fire with more wood and a few pieces of coal, strategically placed in the embers. They toasted 'Old Robert' with a peaty Highland Park whisky, and ate crunchy, earthy oatcakes with little cubes of orange Orkney cheese. As they all watched the glowing fire in the hearth, they spoke of life, forgiveness, and of little Robbie's future. The reflection of the fire on the cut-glass tumblers was entrancing, and she felt exhausted and relieved in equal measure.

The taxi came for them later. When they returned to the hotel that evening, she heard a fiddle playing in the lounge-bar, but it was late, and she carried the sleeping child in her arms, laying him gently on his bed. He was getting far too big to carry now, she thought, and as she kissed him gently on the forehead, yawning, her exhaustion overcame her: "Now you know why we named you Robbie Sinclair Foubister. You've just spent your first ever in that township, where the Vikings settled, so many moons ago."

This trip would give wee Robbie that sense of shared identity and descent, which she had been unable to provide. Since the divorce from his dad, she had done her best, but the lad's roots were incomplete. Maybe one day, his migratory father might bring their son back to Foubister again, and the strands of forgiveness would be complete. But he'd have to come back from New Zealand first...

As she yawned again, she thought of tomorrow; the Italian Chapel

and Churchill Barriers beckoned, as she rummaged through her handbag again, looking for the brochures, bus timetable and burner phone, with the listening device built in. Then she calmly placed the old sepia photograph on the chest of drawers beside the window, and smiled, as she pulled the heavy damask curtains together. She knew that old chair would always shelter Robbie from the storms of life, like a warm embrace, long after she was gone. It had been, altogether, an extraordinary day. Mission accomplished.

Guidman Trowie

Judith Crow

From the moment Yasmin, my agent, suggested it, I tried to explain that a picture book was a bad idea. It was years since I had done any painting and, despite still spinning with the success of my children's novel, a picture book was a completely different beast. Not to be perturbed, Yasmin promised to book me into somewhere stunning.

"Trust me," she enthused. "You won't be able to stop the creative juices from oozing forth."

My tickets and itinerary came the next day and, two weeks later, I begrudgingly packed my mothballed art gear and set off for Orkney.

Yasmin knew me very well: the journey alone was enough to get me thinking about possible storylines and, as soon as the boat came to rest in the harbour town of Stromness, I knew this was just what I needed. She had even booked me in to stay Bed & Breakfast with a lovely and quintessentially Orcadian lady called Sylvia, who devoted herself to making sure I had everything I needed.

The only problem was that it didn't matter how inspired I felt, the storyline and pictures wouldn't come together. At last, in artistic desperation, I asked Sylvia for a list of places to visit and began ticking them off my list, one by one.

I painted the sunrise at the Stones of Stenness; the rippling brook at Happy Valley; and St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. Having walked around Westminster Abbey and Notre Dame, I knew the building was peedie (as Sylvia would have put it) but I loved the sense of wholesome majesty which surrounded it.

Finally, I got in the car and drove to what seemed to be the end of the world. The last place on Sylvia's list: *The Gloup* and *the Brough of Deerness*.

"Noo, yin's *Gloup* like *soup*. Dinno say *Gl-owp* like some puir folk."

Sylvia had been clear enough in that but, when I asked someone the way

to the Brough and pronounced it like Brough in Yorkshire, it raised a smile even from my fellow tourist. She advised me to follow the path past the Gloup and along the cliffs. The Gloup itself was stunning and, for a moment, I wondered about setting up my easel, but I would have obstructed the entire viewing platform, so I settled for photos on my phone and then moved on.

Thank God I wasn't scared of heights or sheer drops, as I followed the hewn stone steps up the edge of the islet to arrive at the Brough of Deerness. A quick glance around suggested I was alone, so I set up my easel and camping stool and began the picture. In my head, my character listened to the same seals as me. Perhaps I could just rehash the selkie stories.

Lost in my own world, I hardly saw the man in front of me until he was nearly knocking my easel over and, despite my initial annoyance, I found myself looking at a weatherbeaten face which I couldn't stay angry with.

"Ah'm that vexed-" he began, but stopped as I held up my hand.

"No, honestly, I shouldn't have just set up camp." I tilted the easel towards him, unquestioning my need for a stranger's approval. "What d'you think?"

He nodded, but I felt like he was damning it with silence.

"You're right," I sighed. "There's something missing." I paused and looked at him again. He was so magnificently earthy that he could almost be a piece of the landscape himself. "I don't suppose I could add you?"

"Mesael?" As his surprise eased, he nodded again, a smile deepening the creases around his mouth and eyes. "Aye."

Once I had painted him into the picture, it was complete, and I smiled to myself. Confident in my self-appraisal, I didn't need his opinion this time, but I showed him and he smiled and thanked me. I gathered my things as the paint dried and then began the descent down the steps, finding the return slightly more unnerving than the climb.

By the time I got back to the cottage, I was ready for dinner and, as I sat

down at the old farmhouse table with Sylvia, I chatted about my day. When I explained about the old man, she tsk-ed and shook her head, although I got the impression she was quietly amused.

“Maggie Eunson,” she muttered. “Cheust like him.”

“Maggie?”

“Hid’s Magnus.” Sylvia rolled her eyes. “He’s a big buddy tae ansur like a peedie-breeks.”

I played back what she had said, before smiling. “He wasn’t too big.”

“Maggie Eunson’s all o’ six feet!”

“It must have been someone else. This man was smallish.” I put down my knife and fork and got to my feet. “I’ll bring you the painting. See if you can recognise him. It’ll be a good test of how my artistic ability’s fared during a decade of neglect!”

Sylvia nodded, and I dashed through to my room to collect the painting. It was at the front of the canvas sketchpad, but it looked as empty and unfinished as it had before I met the old man. The landscape was there in the washed-out watercolour, but the figure whose presence had completed it was gone. I rubbed my eyes, trying to work out what could have caused the mix-up. The scenery was definitely the Brough of Deerness - I could see the little ruined chapel - but there was no sign of the old man. Flicking through the canvas sheets, I jumped as I set eyes on him, just as I had painted him earlier but now standing by the brook at Happy Valley.

I stumbled out of the room, letting the sketchpad drop to the floor, and hurried back into the kitchen.

“Spider.” I choked on the word, accidentally making the lie more convincing. “I’ve squashed it.”

I didn’t wait for Sylvia to say anything but darted out the room. Despite my panic, I didn’t run away. Instead, I collected my art gear and told my host I was heading out for an evening drive. As though I was speaking to my mother, I promised I’d be home before it got dark. I’d already learnt that the sun didn’t set in Orkney until nearly midnight: the compensation, so Sylvia said, for the many hours of midwinter

darkness.

Although I'd made it sound as though I planned a leisurely jaunt, it was panicked urgency which drove me to follow the directions Sylvia had given me for my trip to Happy Valley two days earlier. A young family were tidying up their picnic when I arrived, and they waved across as I snatched my artist's paraphernalia and hurried through the squeaky gate. When I reached the little waterway, I opened up my sketchpad to check I hadn't been hallucinating.

The man wasn't in the painting.

I quickly flicked on to the picture I had done earlier and covered my eyes with my hand as I realised, he wasn't there either. My stomach was pounding almost as violently as my head in my attempt to make sense of what was going on but, just as I was about to put it down to an over-engaged imagination, I turned at the sound of shuffling footsteps.

The old man stood there, just as he had done on the cliff in Deerness, and he moved over to peer down at the picture. I said nothing but moved slightly out of his way so he could get a better view, as though the whole situation was normal.

"Yin's a guid picture."

"Thank you," I mumbled. My stupidity was making me feel naked, as though not addressing the increasing weirdness was sapping away any claim to being a rational adult. Shaking my head so quickly it gave me a head-rush, I looked the old man in the eyes. His wrinkles creased again into a smile, and I felt myself returning the gesture. "I don't mean to be rude," I said at last, "but who actually *are* you?"

"Guidman Trowie," the old man replied, removing the cap he was wearing and bowing his head. "And Ah'm that blide thoor here."

I frowned as I tried to work out what he was saying, but some of the words were too unfamiliar. A strange idea sparked in the back of my mind: perhaps this was my picture-book playing out in the recesses of my imagination. All I needed to do was follow it and Yasmin would get another bestseller. *What would a child say in a picture-book?* "Is there something you need me to do?"

“Ah hiv tae get tae the Watchstone. Can thoo tak mesael?”

“How would I...” I paused, playing back what he said. “Take you?”

“Thoor pictures. Hid’s bin twarthree year Ah’ve bin waitin.”

“You want me to paint you at the Watchstone?”

The old man’s head jerked enthusiastically. “Aye.”

“This better be an amazing book.” I grinned, fully immersing myself in the theory that I was imagining this entire series of interactions. It was the only way to explain it all.

I turned around and walked away, trusting that the strange old man would find his way back into my sketchpad at whatever magical location he preferred. I laughed to myself as I unlocked the car and sat down, pausing for a second to wonder whether I ought to put the seatbelt over the sketchpad to keep old Guidman Trowie safe. *My character would definitely do that*, I told myself, as I clipped it into place.

I took my phone out to Google the Watchstone, and found it was the lonely standing stone I had passed when I had driven from the Stones of Stenness to the Ring of Brodgar yesterday. I had thought at the time how it looked like a sentinel, guarding the water, so it wasn’t surprising that its name suggested such a responsibility.

It didn’t take long to get from Happy Valley to the Watchstone, but the light was changing already: the sky bursting into flames of orange and red as sunset streaked across it. Parking the car in someone’s drive (if this was my imagination then they didn’t have to know, let alone have a problem with it), I positioned myself carefully, so I was painting the stone in the foreground with the raging sunset behind.

“Red sky at night,” I muttered as I put the finishing touches to the skyscape. Then, without stopping, I began to paint Guidman Trowie. It was hard from memory: he seemed to have faded from my mind, leaving only a vague recollection of creased wrinkles and shiny eyes under deep hoods. I closed my own eyes and decided to trust the magic which was sweeping me along on this adventure. Having added the finishing touches, I sat back on the camping stool to admire my work.

I had very little time to enjoy my masterpiece, as the fiery sunset in the painting rippled violently to become actual flames, tearing into my easel so I had to leap back to avoid being burnt. I looked with a sickening lurch of panic as Guidman Trowie disappeared from the picture and, instead, danced out from behind the Watchstone, which seemed to reflect the fire surrounding it from every angle.

“Twarthree year Ah’ve bin waitin,” Guidman Trowie laughed, whooping with unbridled pleasure. Although the accent was still there, his voice had lost the charming wistfulness which had lulled me into the belief that this was some merry adventure. He skipped over to me and looked up, just as I realised he was more terrifying despite having shrunk in stature. “Waitin... waitin...”

I tried to force myself to wake up, but it is impossible to wake from reality.

“Waitin,” Guidman Trowie sang, dancing around me over and over again. “Waitin...”

As he skipped past me for the seventh time, the fire in the sky disappeared and I found myself plunged into an earthy darkness.

Waiting.

Home Bound

Vivian Ainsworth

They say thirty years is a long time, yet it will feel like no time when you're standing still, time lapping at your feet and sand in your hair whilst every part of your fibre warmly remembers what it felt like to be surrounded by those you love.

The clouds were heavy in a dizzily bump of turbulence before meeting the polite car hire man who made light of the fact that the minute I landed and walked directly into the baggage reclaim that my suitcase had burst at the seams and thankfully nothing embarrassing had tumbled out of the partitioned luggage.

I immediately felt my face light up to the melody of the unmistakeable Orcadian dialect as he updated me to the changes in the travel industry in the distance to get to Kirkwall. I felt lightheaded taking in the familiar sandstone buildings with the new road layout and spotting the eco-friendly circular Balfour hospital. After signing paperwork and parking up I reminded myself to keep hold of the car door whenever possible to avoid the North winds from causing it to roam and any hope of getting my deposit back.

There was an air of disappointment as I stepped into my home for the week, not because of the interior but that it was missing the company of a promised mother daughter trip that was being taken alone instead of together thanks to the residual presence of the pandemic that caused a carefully planned only ever adult trip together to come to an end at the airport. I wondered how lonely this week would be mixed with memories and missed ones.

The first night was a true Orkney welcome and the weather had drawn in by morning which had made its presence known at midsummer week with the need for a leopard print satin eye mask as the longitude meant the sun rarely set only to rise again.

I needed to clear my travel cobwebs and felt the draw of the beach calling like an ache in my heart so headed out over the Churchill barriers, everywhere seemed so much closer than the restless journeys

I'd made in my youth, looking out over the expansive skies where it met the sea in tones to match the clouds. There was no one around as I pulled my bobble hat down and freshly bought raincoat closer and laughed at the forgotten unpredictability of summer climates and caught my breath.

Heading out along the increased expanse of dunes with scattering sanderlings and low flying little terns before reaching the mass of smooth sand and being caught up in the wind bringing forward the tide as the waves softly crashed the shore. To my surprise it was deserted but for a dog walker just disappearing out of sight, I followed the tideline and memories of times past filled my eyes with tears of joy, climbing aboard shipwrecks and sun kissed noses from afternoons adventuring, discoveries of pretty coloured shells, giggles and excited dog barks.

I felt the presence of a hand in mine as I walked towards the outline of new and old buildings holding so many happy memories of cousins, grandparents, caravans, and summer holidays well spent. Casting my eyes down the tide rolled back and revealed two groatie buckie shells, I knew then that it wasn't forgotten in time but preserved in the feeling of home I hadn't expected to overwhelm me like it had.

I spent the rest of the afternoon exploring deserted beaches, driving familiar roads stopping often to soak the view in and scanning the horizon for much anticipated but never appearing Orca signs.

In the evening the weather had cleared to delightfully light skies, pre booked concert ticket meant ducking into the spectacular St Magnus Cathedral faded red sandstone glory and listening to the majestic sounds of Brahms from musicians and singers alike, awakening the years spent as a teenager in Choir concerts and seeping through body feeling my shoulders relaxing.

Feeling too invigorated to go back and sleep the next hour was spent wandering the quiet wide paved streets and going to the empty grounds of the Earls Palace to take in the scope of history where the settlement of ancestors to the land had begun.

The next day I vowed to take advantage of the promised better weather and left excitedly with camera, layers of clothing, substance, and a

plan to meet up with relatives in the afternoon. Heading out towards Stromness I couldn't help but divert out to the signs for Brough of Birsay in the hope that I'd timed tides right and stepped across the causeway recalling how in winter this was the place to be to watch thundering waves sweep towards the cliffs with white horses of impressive heights.

I was greeted by comical oyster catchers bending their orange legs and curved beaks strutting over the ruins of stone settlements as I went through a stile whilst fulmars call from nesting sites on the cliffside made like a lover's tiff. I excitedly climbed steeper up the path to find that the edges were peppered with hidden rocky ledges and the smell of salt air mixed unmistakably with the fish diet of the many seabirds seeking temporary shelter.

Friendly fellow traveller greetings were exchanged and even when I found my land legs weren't really keen on the 45 meter drop a Scandinavian couple stopped to offer me some binoculars with a good-humoured remark "you came all this way, you might as well see them properly!"

I had a twenty minute or so encounter with puffins taking flight, landing to greet their mate, and even showering under the cliffside natural spring to take in the splendour of my very first sighting. They were so much smaller than I'd imagined and just as cute sitting in amongst the sea pinks, making their muffled chainsaw like growls. Their beautifully coloured beaks and orange webbed feet visible whilst taking off into the wind like they were falling through the sky, much like their clown nicknames.

I was smitten with them although enjoying watching the gannets and artic turns soar in the sky and a white yacht edge out to sea avoiding the incoming waves. Time was passing and I picked my way happily through the rocks back to road seeing local school children enjoy the hunt for rockpool wonders on a trip.

I headed up the Back Road and looked out towards Hoy as the Stromness skyline, barely changed from times of the Endeavour, stretched below. I hurried to Julia's Café hoping my cousins hadn't beat me there and that the time between meetings would melt away on sight,

ordering a coffee much needed sugar hit of cake.

The rest of the afternoon spent reminiscing of summers gone by and catching up on life stories whilst strolling the unchanged stone streets and imagining the many journeys made reading the blue plaques adorning the walls. I pondered at the idea of my own mother making her way up to the steep Brae with a double pushchair in all weathers whilst taking in the now breath-taking blue sky and hugging my cousins a bit tighter as we said farewell for now.

Not wanting to go straight back I detoured on an archaeological wonder of Skara Brae heading past the deserted visitors centre towards the Bay of Skaill that opened up to a beautiful, sheltered bay, turquoise sea and long yellow sand crescent leading to the dipped nooks of neolithic village life encased in grassy mounds lying low from winds beautifully preserved.

Being midsummers' night I decided to head back past the Ring of Brodgar, see if I could spot a faerie or two if it wasn't too crowded already. To my surprise it was just a trickle of people, a couple had set up camping chairs ready for a long haul on the neighbouring mound whilst it was amazing to see the clouds disperse over the sky like a blanket of candyfloss, fluffy peaks, and the softest glow of yellow meeting the blues and greys. This was contrasting with the green earth, soft brown moss, and the solidness of the thirty-six standing stones covered in many centuries of lichen taking in the expanse of this meeting of nature felt grounding.

I secretly hoped some magic had seeped through whilst wandering back to the car and a steady flow of others arrived.

I filled the next few days with wandering round the streets nipping in various shops and museums, marvelling at the local produce and jewellery or craft makers. I took in the beautiful grounds of Tankerness house and marvelled at the array of plants, flowers and trees alongside the young sparrows calling it home and bees dancing from giant red poppies to sweet yellow tea roses. I ventured to Scapa beach to dip my toes in the water and laugh at the joy it brought.

I knew that before my final day I would return to familiar places again,

more memories relived and uncovering a bit more of what had come before in the family life of times gone by. It was on the clear blue sky departure flight that I found myself with a full heart looking fondly over a very special collection of lands that would forever hold a part of my own history that my eyes overflowed with the thought of leaving and knowing I would return to share it again with a new generation to enjoy.

North Links

Lucy Fraser-Gunn

A Druid Summer Solstice

Mara loved this night. She was old enough now to sit near the Wisemen. Across from where she sat with her mother, she could see her grandfather, their leader, seated by the fire hearth; all watching the cold, white moon sink behind the Hills of Hoy. The sky was clear for once. The moonlight laced its silvery trail, over the black waters of the Loch of Stennes, stopping, just short of the water's edge. Everyone from their village had gathered here, her people. To wait.

Tonight her grandfather wore his best robe, woven from the finest wool from the sheep that grazed on the seaweed shores of their Orkney homeland. His long white hair disappeared among its soft fibres. She watched as he picked up the horn cup and poured into it a drop of the golden liquid, she had seen him prepare from the barley. He took time to put his lips to the edge of the vessel, to savour the aroma, sip slowly and, finally, pass the cup round; each Wiseman took a sip before sending it out of the circle, to where the younger men sat.

The women, some with infants cuddled to their breasts, shared another drink. Mara had helped to gather the berries her mother used to make it, sweetening them with honey. Stealing a sip, while it cooled in the flagstone press, the bittersweet taste made her tongue tingle. Next year she would be included in this ceremony.

The soft murmur of conversation between the adults stilled around her as her grandfather stood up. He was going to speak. She was proud of her grandfather, loved to hear his gentle, lilting voice, re-telling the stories from his father before him, and before him, and before him, over the ages, sharing them with the next generation. She wondered if she might have his gift – her dreams often wakened her, they were so real. She tuned into his voice; it was different tonight:

“And these people, mothers, fathers, children, the very old and the young, lie dying, all around their worlds. No one will know how, with their own soft mist of breath, they killed each other, leaving no mark on

their bodies.”

The story he was telling tonight was not of great battles fought but of a time beyond this life. She shuddered, even though she was well happy in her woollen cloak. She was glad of the warmth, and comfort, of her mother sitting close beside her. His words scared her, but she knew she must listen.

“But you my people, my children, need never worry. For you know how to look after our world. Take care of it, and all that it holds; and it will take care of you. Care for each other, and every living thing. Respect it, and it will give you food, good health and shelter all your days, forever and ever.”

‘Care for each other...’ just as the strange seal people had cared for the stranded whale in her dream last night. Her heart leaped again, as she remembered cowering behind the rocks, awaking, shaking, not sure where she was, until she heard the soft snores of her mother beside her.

Perhaps Mara would tell her grandfather about that dream? He might explain what she had seen. What it meant to see a whale washed up on the beach. It still felt so real in her mind, as it lay exhausted, struggling to get its massive body back to the safety of the deep water; it seemed to be entwined in a thin, barbed creeper, not unlike the bramble thorns that scratched her as she picked their berries.

Mara was sure this beautiful creature was going to die. Tears fell in her helplessness but she rubbed them away quickly as she watched two boats, filled with seal people, for that was the colour of their skins, come round the headland. She watched as they drew closer to the struggling animal. Amazed, she saw some of the people step into the waves. They seemed to be walking where she knew the water to be so deep a man would disappear.

These small craft were bigger than the animal skins, tied over sturdy branches that her people used for fishing in the shallows. Behind them, she saw a massive creature, so big it filled her eyes! A huge mother whale! It was far, far bigger than anything Mara had ever seen come out of the sea. A monster! Had it brought these strange creatures to help her? Quickly, she crouched down behind the rock, still watching the seal

people, too scared to move.

Now, they had all gathered around on one side of the whale, and as each wave came over, they worked together, to help it lift itself into the deeper water. One man had a tool and was cutting away the barbed thorns. A final push and the sea lifted the whale off to safety. Great shouts and cheers came to her ears, from the seal people. She watched the whale slowly get its direction and head off back into the surf. One very tall man turned then, looking back to the shore, where she, Mara, was now standing. Even in her dream, she knew he was a good man; a man who cared, like her grandfather.

She saw him now, her grandfather, he smiled across to her, reached out his hand, beckoning her to come and sit by him.

This solstice feast was most welcome; it had been a long, hard winter. The beef, cut from the bones of the last of their cattle, killed before they ate the last of their harvest grain, was roasting on the hot stones in the fire hearth. Tonight their bellies would not be empty. The harvest had been poor last year, but the villagers had shared what little they did have between them. The soil was so wet from all the rain that fell, that most of the seeds rotted before they got a chance to grow. Sometimes she heard the young men talk of taking their families off the island, to where the land was more fertile. Who would take care of the elders if they did leave?

But tonight was not a night for worries. In a few hours the sun would return to them. The days would start to stretch, and warmth would come back to the soil, into their bones. Already she could see the first rays of its light rising above the horizon, turning the massive stones around her fiery red. She sat still, spellbound, next to her grandfather. The circle of men parted, allowing the sun's light to come through the gap. She gasped as she followed its strong beam crossing the ground in front of her, lighting up each stone, until each appeared as a pillar of fire.

So many moons ago, such long days of darkness, had passed, since they had watched the last rays of the setting sun together, coming through into the entrance passage of Maes Howe, to pierce the darkness in there. Her grandfather had told her then that the sun was going to bed for the winter.

Looking up at him now, she saw the new sunrise reflected back in his eyes; felt his warmth.

2022 Summer Solstice

“You’re a bit old to go gallivanting away off... to God knows where? Where did you say you...?”

“Orkney! And it’s not that far away, and what do you mean too old? You’re only eighteen months older than me, though you wouldn’t think it... listening to you. I’m thirty-nine! Not ready to kick the bucket...not yet!”

“Don’t speak to me...like a child...after what I’ve just gone through...”

“It’s always about you...always wittering on about yourself, can’t stand it anymore... he was my Grandad too, and he died! Died before any of us could get up to see him... all alone...”

“So what’s the point of going away up there now? He’s not there, no one is...”

“Don’t you think I don’t know that already? How many times did we say we would visit Grandad after dad died? And every time I booked time off work, every time, you always had something more important you couldn’t leave.”

“But you’re forgetting I had the children...”

“Jack had man flu – he was nineteen, living in his own place! Or Dennis wouldn’t manage without you? It was seven days, not seven years! I should have just gone myself. I’m going now!”

“But Margaret, you know I’m no use on boats. Sick as a dog... even flat calm...”

“You may be my sister but for once, just once, I wish you would think of someone else, besides yourself!”

“It’s all right for you with no one to answer to... when you have your own family...well... its different!”

“So now you’re saying Grandad wasn’t family! I give up. I really do!

I'm going...now!"

Aberdeen Harbour

I tug my suitcase up over the kerb, feeling the sweat trickle down my back, angry with myself; that my sister can still make me feel like a child of twelve. Oh why had I packed so much stuff? Will I really need my walking boots? I'm only going for a week. And why hadn't I told my sister about the letter? From Grandad's solicitor inviting me to a reading of his Will; if I could attend at his office in Kirkwall on the 24th of June, he would be much obliged. His words were so old fashioned, and I wonder what more he will have to tell me. Not long to wait.

I'm on my way there now. It's a short walk from the bus station in Aberdeen to the Northlink ferry terminal. There's plenty of time as I'm booked on the late afternoon sailing which will get me into Kirkwall at 10.30 tonight. The automatic doors open as I haul my case over to the girl on the desk. She smiles as I pull out my paperwork and returns my boarding pass. I suppose she's used to passengers having their tickets on their phones, but I like to be sure.

Thankfully, there's a lift up to the ferry, the deckhand checks my boarding pass, and points me in the direction of my pod.

"Good choice. It's going to be a beautiful moon tonight. You wouldn't see that from a cabin."

"Thanks. I'm looking forward to my trip."

As I say the words, I realise I really am. Soon I am settled with my book. Lulled by the gentle motion, I must have dozed off but something's wakened me. I'm not sure what. Getting up, I realise the engines have stopped. That's what's different. Looking around, everyone is either reading or asleep. The girl from the ferry reception desk is sitting across at the bar, chatting to the deckhand, laughing together, when another man stops beside them. A few words are spoken, they all look serious now. Both men leave quickly. I decide to speak to the girl. Something's not right.

"Oh, you mustn't worry. The captain has been asked to help with a

whale rescue, that's why we have stopped. We have a crowd of surfers on board and one of them has been following a pod of whales as we came up through the firth. He saw one going too close into the shore and realized it would get stuck. It seemed to be entangled in some fishing line. They have their own dinghies so they asked Captain Littlefield if he could stop the ferry to let them launch a rescue. My brother is the Coxswain on the Kirkwall lifeboat and knows these waters so he's going with them. We're just an hour from berthing so he'll meet us back at the harbour."

Orkney, a special place

Aiden Schinkel

Gently bobbing up and down, navigating through the slowly ebbing tides of the Pentland firth on the Hamnavoe, we penetrate the mist and through the haar the towering cliffs on the island of Hoy come into view. The Old man of Hoy sticks up vertically out of the ocean, at 137 metres it is up there with some of the tallest sea stacks in the UK. Speaking of high, vertical objects, not far from the Old Man is St Johns head, at 336 metres it is the highest vertical sea cliff in the UK. Soon after, we are sailing through the hoy sound and are entering the port of Stromness. To the left, Warebeth and to the right Ward hill on Hoy, the highest point in Orkney at 481 metres. The two huge, glacial valleys either side of Ward hill, blanketed in heather look like an appropriate setting for a seventh *Jurassic Park* movie.

The Orkney landscape takes on a dramatic transformation as the Hamnavoe docks in Stromness on the mainland, the hills become greener and less steep, views less obstructed and livestock becomes more abundant. Immediately I am greeted by the charming town of Stromness with its winding, historic cobblestone streets and alleyways which always seem to lead you somewhere different. Maybe to the shoreline which is lined with houses all with their own peedie slipways where an old Orkney yole would be launched from, or to the heights of Brinkies Brae which offers panoramic views across Orkney.

As you leave Stromness whether by bus or by car, or bike or on foot, the magic of Orkney's landscape and history seeps into you as if you become part of it. My first stop are the dramatic cliffs of Yesnaby, it was a remarkably clear day, the dull, dreigh morning seemed a world away and so did the island that I could see faintly imprinted on the horizon to the west. Only, I had looked at maps of Orkney before I arrived, and I was sure that there were no islands to the west. Could it be the Hebrides? No, they were further south. I looked back but there were no islands, no nothing. I must have been seeing things I thought. So, I put it to the back of my mind and instead focused my attention to the spectacular cliffs and turbulent seas below me.

The next day I crossed the Eynhallow sound over to the island of Rousay. Rousay is known as ‘The Egypt of the north’ due its astounding 166 archaeological sites. I started my circumnavigation of the island at the quaint village of Brinian at the very south of Rousay. I decided to go in a clockwise direction. The first thing I noticed about Rousay was that if the mainland hadn’t felt like an island, Rousay most certainly did. Everyone I passed on the main road waved at me, and someone in an old tractor started waving about a mile away from where I was, the people I came across in Rousay are probably the friendliest I have ever met.

Soon I arrived at Midhowe broch, perhaps the most well-known place in Rousay and I can see why, this iron age broch is situated right on top of a rugged sea cliff, whether when it was built it was that close to the edge, nobody knows. If anything, it just adds to the amazing spectacle, the towering cliffs of Costa head across the Eynhallow sound on the mainland, the huge waves where the Atlantic Ocean meets the North Sea and the broch which stands proudly on the headland in front of me. I was awe struck. It was then when I gazed out across the sea I saw it, yet again, the island, imprinted on the horizon. I kept my line of sight and without really realizing, it faded slowly into nothingness. There was no denying it now, that was twice in two days now when I had seen this “island” silhouetted on the horizon. Maybe it was something to do with the atmosphere up here, after all, I was very far north. Again, my mind was at peace with this undoubtedly mysterious happening.

I continued my journey around the heather-clad island for another few hours until, at last I arrived back in Brinian. I was absolutely exhausted to say the least, it was a mark of how exhausted I was and the friendliness of the people in Rousay, that I felt it appropriate to knock on the door of a quaint peedie house and wait for a response. Sure enough someone came to the door, an old man, I explained my situation to him and surprisingly he let me inside. I thanked him gratefully, and if letting me in his house wasn’t enough, he proceeded to make me a cup of tea, as well as offering me a digestive biscuit. We sat in awkward silence drinking our tea and eating our biscuits.

After a few minutes I asked “have you ever seen a faint island over to the west?” It was only after I had said it, I realised how stupid it had

sounded. Only one side of the old man's face was visible, illuminated by the firelight.

"My granddaughter" he said dramatically "many years ago went missing" I sat quietly, listening to the gentle crackling of the fire alongside his voice, which he spoke in a broad Orcadian accent. "One day she was out up at Muckle water, playing, looking at the trout I expect."

"She never returned that day." I thought I saw a tear welling in his eyes, but it seemed to disappear as soon as it had appeared.

"My son spent days looking for her, in fact he died looking for her." I sat there not sure what to say.

"He went out west on his yole and never returned, a few weeks later that washed up." He pointed to a framed, washed-out looking piece of paper with some smudged writing on it. I walked over to it and read, she's here, on Hether Blether, she's safe here, don't come though, it's not safe for us I expect they will get me soon enough, the Finfolk, Jack.

I turned to look at the old man and asked, "What are the Finfolk?"

"You mean who are the Finfolk?" he replied disapprovingly.

"Yes" I said hurriedly.

He sighed and said, "I don't like talking of the Finfolk but... okay" he sighed again and began "many people don't believe they exist, they are meant to be very vicious creatures around Orkney who kidnap unsuspecting islanders and take them to what we Orcadians call Hether blether, the so-called island you speak of. Nobody has ever dared sail in that direction apart from the odd again, unsuspecting tanker or cargo ship on its way to America, all of which have gone missing."

I left the old man's cottage only because it was time for my ferry to leave for the mainland, as I watched it dock, I thought about what he had said. Was there really such thing as Finfolk or was that man just playing with me because he saw the opportunity?

The next day I decided to do something some might call 'irrational.' I had seen a summer wildlife cruise advertised on the Hamnavoe when I had arrived for this particular Sunday. My plan was to ask the captain if

we could ‘stray’ further west away from the designated route in the hope of catching a glimpse of this ‘Hether blether.’ It was time to put my plan into action, luckily on this cruise passengers were given access to all areas of the ship, including the bridge. So the first place I visited was of course, the bridge.

The captain greeted me, and I commented on the exceptional cleanliness of the ship before I made my move.

“Would there be any chance of us, veering away from the coastline at some point?” As I would like to see it from a bit further out?” I asked hopefully.

“Well... I don’t see why not to be honest.” He replied, “In fact yes, we could “veer” away from the coast if you wish, as there isn’t much of a point of doing the same route twice. We could go further out on the way back?”

“Brilliant,” I said almost too enthusiastically and with that I went back outside to enjoy the trip.

The huge engines started to hum louder and slowly we left the quayside. The views were absolutely magnificent, when I had arrived there was a layer of low-lying fog or ‘haar’ as it is known locally, not today however, the Hoy hills such as Ward hill and the Coulags (which are technically mountains) stood out amongst the rest of the relatively low-lying scenery. People by the shore could no doubt see the striking Viking ‘Magnus’ logo which dominates the side of the Hamnavoe gleaming in the sunlight as we left the harbour on this very un-Orcadian scorching summers day.

On our journey we passed landmarks such as, the Black Craig, Yesnaby, Skaill bay and perhaps most stunning, the RSPB bird reserve of Marwick head, which are eighty or so metre high cliffs, which in winter are grey, but because of the large sea bird colony which are there in the summer, are white, due to bird excrement. All of the locations mentioned are still incredible.

At our final destination before we turned back, the Broch of Birsay, the Captain made a short announcement:

“Due to a special request we will be sailing out further west for the

return leg, Apologies for any inconvenience.” It was only when we started to sail out to sea, I started to feel concerned, what if there were such things as Finfolk, what if that man was telling the truth.

I looked out to starboard and, sure enough there it was, getting closer and closer with every thump of the engines, the haze which was apparently Hether Blether. About fifteen minutes later I realised what the haze was, it was sea spray. The Hamnavoe began to rock violently, one second all you could see was sea, the next, sky. They say Orcadians are good sailors and, I can confirm, they are. The captain expertly sailed the 112-metre long Hamnavoe through these storm-like conditions with ease. The whole thing felt like a twenty first century *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, except it would be called ‘ferryman of the Atlantic’ instead. It went on for what seemed like a decade with the Hamnavoe smashing down hard on the raging sea. It came to the point where we weren’t allowed outside for our own safety, suddenly the seas calmed, and when you looked into the water you could see bright colours glinting beneath the waves.

We came to a stop at a sandy shore with, people on standing on it, we all went back outside to get a better look. I, however, went a step further, I jumped into the cold, bracing sea and swam ashore. The onlookers still onboard looked on with amazement as I got out of the water and approached these ‘people.’

I took a deep breath and said, “Who are you?” they did not reply, they did not speak, but what they did do was, each one of them, take out a fiddle and bow and began playing what sounded like a traditional Orcadian tune, and right before my eyes, in light blue, an image like no other unfolded in front of me forged in the sand, a labelled map of Orkney. The Mainland, Westray, Papay, Sanday, North and South Ronaldsay, Eday, Stronsay, Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre, Shapinsay, Hoy, Graemsay, Flotta and then to the west, Hether Blether. I looked up, but they continued playing on into the future... and that is when I realised that the Orkney Islands, the archipelago off the Northeast coast of Scotland is a truly, special place.

Odin

Moirira Weir

I have visited Orkney for many years as I have family connections there. As a small child I would walk to Scapa Flow with my Auntie's neighbour's children and play for hours without thought of lunch or dinner time, returning home when the tide came in and washed away our designs in the sand. Or going into St Magnus Cathedral for a seat and looking at the gravestones, feeling scared of the skulls depicted on them, whispering to each other as it felt wrong to talk out loud. Imagining what it must have been like to be thrown in Marwick's Hole and only seeing the window where so called witches were kept. Then reading the Viking names on the family tree and thinking of Viking warriors.

Every year when I go to Orkney, I always visit the standing stone rings and feel at peace in their presence, they are the familiar friends I remember as a child standing looking up at them towering above me, leaning against them, feeling the warmth emanate from the stones on my back and feeling safe and protected with the giant figures watching over me.

I was always fascinated by the Standing Stones, the Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness. The stones stand tall, some as tall as 4.7 metres, they stand majestic looking over the nearby lochs of Harray and Stenness and holding their secrets of who placed them there and why. There have been many explanations of their purpose, Brodgar supposedly the temple of the dead whilst Stenness the temple of the living. The stones are older than the pyramids and many have fallen but their presence is still powerful, dominating the skyline.

Between the two stone circles is a narrow area of land with a Watchstone standing proud at the start of the road. A find of a beautiful, incised stone in this strip of land in the 1920's was forgotten about until 2003 when a farmer was digging up his field and found a huge stone. The site was about to give up the secrets it held for many thousands of years, archaeologists started digging in the strip of land and uncovered a

series of remains of buildings which they excavate every year producing more and more significant finds allowing us to begin to understand the people who inhabited Orkney as far back as 5000 BC. The site is called the Ness of Brodgar.

The site continues to surprise archaeologists who come from all over the world to have the privilege to find out its revelations. It consists of a massive complex of remains of Neolithic buildings, some of which are believed to be temples, uncovering their treasures of pottery and coloured walls. Pavements and remnants of Standing Stones which once would have stood proud at the buildings entrances are easy to see. Remnants of pots and utensils have shown the skills of the craftsmen and women who once lived there. I like to imagine who last touched these items and were they treasured belongings of the people. Where did they find their inspirations for the many designs that have been unearthed on walls and pots and how did they make the colours they decorated them with. Would those who used the buildings either for sacred ceremonies or every day activities resemble the people of today? The findings by the archaeologists show that over 400 cattle and deer were slaughtered as a grand ceremony to revere the site perhaps to mark its end, why?

Over the years I have owned and loved several dogs who I take with me to Orkney, and they have all visited the Standing Stones and more recently the Ness of Brodgar with me, until recently.

One of my Labradors, Odin, (yes, I know a Norse God) has been coming to Orkney with me for seven years. From a pup he happily got out the car and started to walk with my husband and I towards the Ring of Brodgar, he made it from the car park and along the path, through the gate and stopped dead refusing to take another step. We thought he had spotted a rabbit or bird until he started to howl, we tried coaxing him further and he made it to the stone circle but continued to howl all the way round, becoming more distressed and alarmed. We met a young student from Glasgow at the stones who was going to camp there overnight; when he saw the reactions of Odin, he changed his mind very quickly.

Every year we tried to encourage Odin and reassure him that he was

safe, but he still acted distressed and eventually we gave up with Odin staying beside my husband whilst I walked around the Ring of Brodgar with my other dog that happily enjoyed visiting the site. Four years ago we visited the Ness of Brodgar to learn of new finds as it was open when we were in Orkney, we had taken my oldest dog here before and everything went smoothly as dogs are welcome. It was a warm day, so we took the two dogs with us as it was too hot to stay in the car.

Odin had never been there before, and eagerly jumped out of the car smelling the air for new smells. We walked the short distance past the information caravan and made it to the trench of the main body of the dig. We stood for ten minutes watching the archaeologists dig and record their finds, a talk had started telling the eager crowd about the buildings and Odin started to back away pulling on his lead. He was looking into one of the trenches and the howling started, growing louder and more urgent. It immediately caught everyone's attention on a very busy day with lots of tourists.

One of the archaeologists enquired if he was alright and we told her it was his first visit but also about his reaction at the Stone circles. We made a hasty retreat as he was causing a lot of fuss and attention, as soon as we got into the car and made it out of the car park he quietened down.

The following day we were in Stromness walking back to the car park when a man and a woman approached us. I recognised the woman from the dig as the lady who had enquired about Odin. The two people approached us, and I could hear the lady stating to her companion, "This is the dog I was telling you about yesterday."

The man introduced himself as an archaeologist who was working at the dig, they both expressed their excitement and told us they had never experienced a dog react like this to the site, they were fascinated by his reactions. The male archaeologist said that he wished he could see and feel what Odin did at the stone circles and the Ness of Brodgar dig. He was sincere in his view that Odin was sensing or seeing something that perhaps others don't have the ability to see. Odin has never reacted this way to any other area we have visited in the whole of Scotland.

I too wonder what it is that Odin sees or senses when he was there, is

it the spirits of long-gone civilisations or is it the essence of whatever ceremonies that were carried out by the people at these sites lingering in that other world? The whole area around the two rings of standing stones, Ness of Brodgar and surrounding historical sites was obviously of great importance to the people of Neolithic Orkney and chosen carefully as the site of their most significant buildings and a place for gatherings and sacred ceremonies. It will be fascinating to see in future the findings of the yearly digs and the revelations they will show of the people, beliefs and everyday life that existed at the Ness of Brodgar, which still today and for many years to come will have a great importance to Orkney.

The Stones of Brodgar and Stenness will stand watching over the lochs and the people who will come to walk round them wondering of their purpose and the people who erected them. Orkney is a magical place with many secrets still in its safe keeping.

My Orcadian Lass

Steve Ewens

I suppose my obsession with the stunning Scottish scenery started with *Braveheart* - despite Mel Gibson's appalling take on the accent. I loved the picturesque Highlands and Islands, fictionally populated by rugged, bare chested clansmen in tartan kilts with bulging biceps, staring moodily out across a storm lashed moor or ocean. Then, a few television centuries later, came *Shetland*, with our hero staring pensively across the wave tossed Bressay Sound as a force 8 gale whistled atmospherically through the streets and alleyways of Lerwick.

I had been summoned to Orkney for an entirely different reason, but the romantic in me still yearned to follow in those idealised cinematic footsteps. I wanted to stand on deck, gazing wistfully out across the treacherous Pentland Firth, wrapped up in several layers of thermal clothing, hood pulled tightly around my salt splattered face. However, in late June the reality was a little different. The Scottish weather gods had been kind, the temperature was in the low 20's, and as the bow of the MV Hrossey slowly started to disgorge cars and lorries onto the Stromness quayside, I disembarked in denim shorts and a white t-shirt, searching for my RayBans to block the glare from the bright summer sun.

The reason I had travelled from my home on the south coast of England was hopelessly starry-eyed, and a source of both mystery and great amusement to my friends in Brighton. Running along the Sussex Downs some months previously, I stumbled upon a fellow athlete lying on the ground, obviously in some discomfort. Descending the steep scarp slope too quickly she had tripped on an exposed tree root, and in falling had turned her ankle on a rock, cutting it deeply in the process. After helping her gingerly to her feet and, with my arm acting as a crutch, we hobbled slowly back to her car on top of Devil's Dyke, where her hired Ford lay parked amongst the hubbub of the holidaymakers out to savour the spectacular views over the Weald and, to the west, a hazy Isle of Wight. Once she was safely in her car and had promised she was able to drive

the few miles to her parents' house to be patched up, we said our goodbyes.

“Before you go, I just want to thank you” she said in a beautifully soft and delicious Scottish accent. “I’m only here for one more day - I fly back tomorrow - but if you’re in Orkney on Midsummer’s Eve, I promise you something more wonderful than you could ever imagine....”

Her gentle, lilting Orcadian accent rose and fell like the sound of waves lapping on a sunlit beach. As I pondered what she meant by this cryptic message, her long auburn hair reflected the rays of the golden sun. From that moment on I was bewitched, entranced by her beauty.

Over the months and the miles we kept in touch through social media, and so, despite some misgivings on my part and against the mocking advice and jeers of my peers, I stood on Orkney’s bustling Stromness quay on Midsummer’s Eve.

Gradually, as the cars & tourist coaches disgorged themselves to soak up the atmospheric shops, bars and cafes of this historic Viking port, the waterfront emptied. I was all alone, save for a lone child of about 9 or 10, who slowly made her way toward me and shyly pressed a note into my hand, before scampering off behind some lobster creels towards the safety of the town centre. There were just 8 words, written in an exquisite hand.

‘Find the Blackening, and you shall find me.’

Puzzling over this strange message, I strolled the short distance into Victoria Street. It’s cute arty shops and cobbles could have been straight out of central casting. People were sitting lazily outside coffee shops, drinking in the summer sun. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted on the breeze. Children gently guzzled ice creams as pet dogs eagerly sniffed out every lamppost and fence. Suddenly, this bucolic idyll was shattered by a cacophony of sound.

A battered pickup truck rounded the corner, rock music blaring. In the back were 10, maybe 12, young men banging drums, old plastic barrels and tin cans. All were clutching beer bottles and covered in brown and black molasses from head to toe. Their unkempt hair lay matted to their

faces, their ruined t-shirts adhering like glue to their bodies. Some of the faces were unrecognisable as flour and feathers clung to the dark gooey mixture that slowly dripped down. All were in high spirits, shouting & singing loudly, and as the truck roared through, belching fumes and noise, it swiftly disappeared up the cobbled street, the tumult and pandemonium slowly fading into the distance.

I looked at the passers-by. The ones who were obviously tourists stood staring open mouthed, but the local Orcadians seemed not to have even noticed or registered the intrusion that had broken the tranquillity on this beautiful sunlit day. It was as though it had never happened.

I found a seat outside a small, independent coffee shop that doubled as a delicatessen and ordered a cappuccino. As the waitress brought the coffee I asked querulously “What was that? A stag do, or the Young Farmers letting their hair down?”

She laughed “Oh, that’s just the Blackening. A few weeks before a wedding the boys drive round town, covering themselves in molasses and feathers, before stripping the groom down to his pants and tying him to the market cross up by the pier. Nobody knows exactly where or how it started, but it’s been an Orcadian tradition for hundreds of years. If he’s lucky they’ll untie him & throw him in the sea. If not, it’s a long, sticky walk home!”

I re-read the note, quickly finished my coffee, and walked the short distance to the cross. For once I had no need to look at a map, as the clamour of the drums and tin cans getting more thunderous by the second gave away the location. Two highly excited youths, stripped to the waist, were busy wrapping the groom to the ancient cross using yards and yards of industrial cling film.

A large good-natured crowd had gathered, busy filming the event on their smartphones, cheering as more and more layers were added. Mothers and daughters, presumably from the prospective bride’s side, laughed as the future son-in-law took his punishment. Cans of beer were shaken & sprayed over the poor unfortunate groom, who accepted his humiliation in good spirits, trying desperately, and unsuccessfully, to keep the streaks of treacle, beer, eggs, and flour from dripping into his eyes.

One of the blackened youths approached me, leaving a slimy, muddy brown trail in his wake.

“You must be Finn. My sister asked me to give you this” and he gingerly passed me another beautifully written note into my hand, somewhat discoloured from the abuse it had suffered in the back of the pickup truck. The paper and writing matched the one I was given at the quay.

‘Come alone, at sunset on Midsummer’s Eve, to the Kitchener Memorial. Once there, you will know what you’re looking for.’

My heart hammered in my chest. My journey, which started two days ago on the English Channel, was coming to an end, and soon all would be made clear. But first I had to locate the Kitchener Memorial. Giving silent thanks for Google Maps, I saw it lay some 10 miles north of Stromness, high on the steep rock faces overlooking the Atlantic.

There were still some five hours before sunset, so I checked into my hotel, showered, changed my clothes, and pondered what awaited me on top of those cliffs. As the hours ticked by, I felt my anxiety levels rise, and started to regret my impetuosity. Had I been too rash and hasty? Should I have stayed in Sussex? Or was I about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime?

The time to leave had come. It was now or never. A decision had to be made, and taking a deep breath, I summoned up courage from the depths, and by the harbour found a local taxi driver that could take me to the monument, and more importantly, wait for my return.

30 minutes later, as the taxi dropped me off and I climbed the steep slope from the tiny hamlet of Brockan, I could see the streetlamps of Marwick twinkling brightly below, strung out like fairy lights at Xmas. In the gathering gloom I could just make out a few yachts bobbing at anchor in Birsay Bay. A sole fishing boat scuttled past Brough Head into the open water beyond, searching for that all important last catch of the day. Breathing heavily, I reached Marwick Head at the top of the hill and, rounding the summit, stopped, and marvelled at the glorious reds, yellows and oranges of a spectacular Orcadian sunset.

Silhouetted against the dying light I could see the memorial, standing

proud. What I had travelled all this way for. Beyond the sunset to the west lay 3000 miles of wild ocean and Canada. To the north lay an unbroken fetch of inhospitable storm-pummelled sea until punctuated by the shores of the frozen Arctic wastes of the North Pole.

Once on top of the cliffs it took only minutes to stroll the remaining 500 metres to the solid square tower, some 15 metres high. A plaque high on the eastern wall commemorated Lord Kitchener - he of '*Your Country Needs You*' fame - who died with his men on that June night in 1916. But more poignantly, surrounding the seaward side of the tower was a low memorial wall listing the hundreds of other brave souls killed on HMS Hampshire in that stormy sea over a hundred years ago. As I read the names, each with a mother, a father, perhaps even a wife and children, I stopped and thought of those courageous men who perished on that cold night and pondered on the futility of war and the heartbreak it brought. One-minute sailors chatting and laughing in the galley with friends and colleagues, steaming ahead to protect your country, the next a stray German mine ending life in an instant, as fear and panic rushed in with the encroaching cold Atlantic Ocean.

Suddenly, as I scanned the wall I stopped, transfixed as I read my name. Not just my initial and surname, but my exact name, Finn Braithwaite McEwan. A shiver ran down my spine. Next to my name, a neat chalk arrow, freshly made.

My eyes followed the arrow. It pointed to the tower. Gingerly I made my way to the sandstone monument. I felt uneasy as though someone was watching my every move. I looked around, but there was nothing, not even a bird in the sky. The wind, which had been gradually increasing as I made my way along the cliff top, had died. There was not a breath of a breeze or a whisper of noise. In that instance on this lonely Orcadian cliff top I had never felt so isolated and alone, and yet I felt a sudden inner peace course through my body. At that moment I knew my destiny - my future - lay here on this enchanting island.

On the seaward side the tower had an old oak studded door, with three black rusted, weather-beaten hinges. It looked far, far older than the 100-year-old tower, but there, in the ancient lock, was a glistening silver key. The feeling I was being watched grew stronger, and the hairs of the

back of my neck stood up, whether because of the cold, or fear, I knew not. As I walked to the door, I checked again for anyone observing me, but in the silence not a soul stirred.

Slowly and carefully I grasped the key. It turned effortlessly, and I gently pushed the door....

Orkney

Mirran Hall

I live in Orkney, and there are lots of things to do and to see,
It has very nice places to come to visit,
Lots of shops to see and museums,
Orkney is a lovely place to visit,
And has good beaches too,
Stromness is a lovely town,
The MV Hamnavoe sailing from Scrabster to Stromness is a 90 minute crossing.

Homecoming

Vincent Fox

This was Evelyn's first visit to Orkney, but she had heard so many stories.

When she was younger, her grandmother used to tell her stories steeped in romance of her childhood. Winter nights never ended, and summer days gradually faded to the 'simmer dim'. But the spectre of war pulled them from their home on the mainland finally to settle in Clydebank's shipyards.

Through family tragedies and acts of the gods, Evelyn now found herself walking along the shores of the Loch of Harray where her recently departed uncle had owned a small holding. She thought it was some kind of wind-up when her uncle's solicitor rang out of the blue to say that she had been left his entire estate.

The NorthLink ferry had brought her into Kirkwall only one day ago. She awoke this morning at 4.00am by the dawn's warming glow casting a golden beam of light into her eyes. Now, almost 15 hours later and still basking in the ethereal twilight she stood with a group of equally engrossed outsiders watching the Solstice festival at the Comet Stone. Despite its pagan roots she felt engrossed in its magical rituals and festival spirit.

As is always the case in events like this, Evelyn found herself talking to the man standing next to her. He had introduced himself as Huginn (one g and two n's) Black which she found very amusing and was the starting point of their conversation. A very unusual name she thought. She made a mental note that she would look him up tomorrow on Facebook, just to make sure he really was called Huginn and not just making it up. He pronounced it *Hug inn* but she mistakenly called him *huge 'n'*.

After a few pieces of honey cake and more than enough ale, Evelyn, Huginn and a few other hardy individuals decided to stay and watch the sunrise on a new day. Darkness never truly fell, and the sun rose far too quickly.

During the night, Evelyn had talked about her grandmother, her uncles death, and the reasons why she was Stennes that night. Huggin came from a long line of islanders, he told her; but lost his home in an unfortunate incident in the winter of 1814. He described how a ferrylooper had just moved to the mainland and was upset at the number of people crossing his land to visit Huginn's ancestral home. Three homes had been knocked down that night, but one was later rebuilt.

Evelyn could see the pain in his eyes as he described these events. She thought she could see the beginnings of a tear well up in the corner of one eye.

As the conversation progressed, he invited Evelyn to take a walk with him to the site of his ancestral home. It was only a mile or so down the path beside the brook. Twilight's simmer dim was being filled with the golden glow of a new dawn as the sun began to rise as they followed the path to the Southeast . As they walked, Evelyn could see two or three large monoliths jutting out from the ground. Even from this distance their sheer scale was overwhelming.

Evelyn was curious. From this distance they looked to be like 4 ghostly figures standing guard, bolt upright on the otherwise flat landscape. Huginn was more than happy to bring her closer to them to explore.

One stone was separated from the rest so the two explorers decided to start there, it stood nearly 20 feet from the ground and guarded the entrance to, what Evelyn thought could only be a stone circle. She could think of no other word but 'awesome' to describe the wonderous site before her. But there was something else, a feeling, a thought, a heaviness around her; almost foreboding. Evelyn put these feeling down to the primal emotions when confronted by such ancient history.

As they walked towards the centre of the other stones, an altar like structure greeted them. Evelyn wondered what sacrifices had been offered there. She imagined virginal maidens, almost in a trance, dressed in white robes being led by hooded figures to her gruesome fate.

Three more stones stood resolute against the elements as they had for thousands of years. Grey and scarred with age, they towered above the pair in an act of defiance against the forces of nature that had been

battering against them for millennia.

The sheer, ominous weight of the surroundings began to fill Evelyn with a sense of foreboding. Despite Huginn's reassurances, she wanted to return to her bed and breakfast accommodation.

As she turned to head back, she could see something emerging from the dawn mist. This stone wasn't as tall as the others but there was something different about it. She tried to remember if she had seen it on the way in. It was just getting light at that time and surely something that big would have been noticed.

As they drew closer, they could see a large hole cut into the stone.

Huginn described how this stone had a special place in the folklore of the islands. He brought Evelyn to it and led her to one side and then stood at the other, facing each other through the large hole in the rock.

He described how locals used to come here to pledge their love to one another, describing how they would join hands through the stone. Evelyn didn't hesitate. Being caught in the moment, with the memories of previous night giddily running through her mind, she thrust her arm into the hole. Huginn copied her and their hands joined in the middle.

Suddenly the air became thick, and the stone was enveloped in a thick fog. Evelyn tried to remove her hand, but Huginn's grip was too strong. She tried to scream but her voice was silenced in the fog that surrounded them both.

"200 years ago"; Huginn's voice sounded shrill, almost bird like, "on this spot stood the Odin Stone".

Lightning began to pierce the clouds forming above them. Evelyn tried to scream but her voice was lost in the thunder.

"For 6,000 years it stood as a guard, proclaiming Odin's supremacy over Midgard. My brother Munnin and I dwelt in the Stenness Stones until a man came to this island and destroyed them. He took a hammer to them, razing two to dust and toppling a third; my home, over there in the circle."

"For decades my brother and I were lost to time until my home stood once more. Then I set about finding the man who did this so that he, and

his descendants, could atone for their crime”.

Evelyn Mackay felt powerless, caught in the talon like grip of Huginn’s anger, her voice drowned out by Thor’s wrath; her final scream echoed to emptiness as the cloud and fog cleared leaving nothing but a memory of a life and the electric smell of the rain after the storm.

Orkney Diaries

Ceri John

Diary Entry, 6th August:

I'm finally here! After all the planning and excitement, I'm finally in Orkney. I've always wanted to come here; it looks so wild and beautiful in the pictures. And my god, it does not disappoint. As soon as I stepped off the ferry, I was hit by the most incredible smell of sea air. And the sky! It's so big and empty and full of stars. I feel like I can breathe properly for the first time in months.

I'm staying in a little Airbnb just outside Kirkwall, and my host, Lorraine, has been so kind and welcoming. She took me on a little tour of the town today, showed me all the best places to eat and drink (which, judging by the amount of whisky I saw being drunk, is quite a lot).

We even went to see the famous Standing Stones at Stenness. They're incredible! I can't believe how old they are. Lorraine told me that some of them are even older than the pyramids. I'm feeling really lucky to be here, and I can't wait to explore more of this amazing place.

Diary Entry, 7th August:

Today was my first full day on the island, and I started it with a lie-in. It's so peaceful here; there's no traffic noise or sirens or anything. Just the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. After breakfast, I went for a walk into Kirkwall. It's a lovely little city; very different to anywhere I've ever been before. There are so many little nooks and crannies, and the people all seem so friendly. I popped into a few shops, and even managed to find a present for my mum back home.

In the afternoon, Lorraine took me out to one of her favourite spots on the island, an old, abandoned quarry. The views were breath-taking; you could see for miles. We even saw a seals basking on a rock in the distance. Lorraine told me that Orkney is one of the best places in the world for wildlife watching. I can't wait to see what else I can spot during my time here.

Diary Entry, 8th August:

I've been here for three days now, and I'm starting to get used to island life. It's so different to anything I'm used to, but I'm really enjoying it. Today, Lorraine took me on a tour of some of the island's historical sites.

First up was Skara Brae, an incredible ancient village that was preserved beneath a sandbank for thousands of years. Seeing it was like stepping back in time; I couldn't believe how well preserved it was. We also went to see the Ring of Brodgar, another ancient site that is said to be even older than Stonehenge. It's just incredible to think about how long humans have been living in this part of the world.

In the evening, Lorraine took me to see St Magnus Cathedral. It's so beautiful; Ness told me that it's one of her favourite places on the island. We sat in the graveyard and watched the sun set over Kirkwall; it was absolutely stunning.

Diary Entry, 9th August:

Today was my first day exploring Orkney on my own, and I have to say, I loved it. I rented a bike from a shop in Kirkwall and cycled out to see the standing stones at Stenness once more. The ride was tough (I'm not used to all these hills!) but it was so worth it when I reached the top and saw the most incredible views. I sat at the stones for a while, just taking it all in. It's hard to believe that humans have been living in this place for so long; these stones are older than anything I've ever seen before. It makes you realise how small and insignificant you are in the grand scheme of things.

After a while, I started to feel a bit chilly, so I cycled back into town and stopped at a little cafe for lunch. The food was delicious, and I even managed to strike up a conversation with the woman who served me. Her name is Isla, and she's lived on Orkney all her life. We chatted for ages about everything from life on the island to our favourite books. It was really nice to connect with someone who knows this place so well.

Diary Entry, 10th August:

Today was another beautiful day here in Orkney. Lorraine took me out on her boat today; we went exploring around some of the smaller islands nearby. It was so peaceful out on the water; just the sound of

the waves gently rocking us as we sailed along. We even saw some dolphins! They were swimming alongside us for ages; it was such an incredible experience.

In the afternoon, we anchored up near a small beach and went for a swim. The water was freezing but it was so refreshing after being in the hot sun all day. We lay on the beach for a while afterwards, just chatting and watching the world go by. It's funny how quickly you get used to this slower pace of life; back home everything is always go-go-go but here everything is so much more relaxed. It's nice to just take a step back and appreciate life for what it is sometimes.

Diary Entry, 11th August:

I'm starting to really fall in love with this place; there's something about Orkney that just feels so magical. Maybe it's because it's so different to anywhere else I've ever been? Or maybe it's because of Lorraine...

I spent most of today with Lorraine; we walked along the coast path and picnicked on a cliff top overlooking Kirkwall Bay. The views were incredible; we could see for miles out to sea. After lunch, we went down to Stromness harbour and pottered around some of the shops there. Lorraine bought me an Orkney jumper (she says it's essential for keeping warm in winter!) and we got ice cream from an adorable little cafe overlooking the water. In the evening, we went for dinner at one of Kirkwall's best restaurants (Lorraine knows everyone on this island!) and then walked back along the waterfront towards my Airbnb.

We stopped at a bench overlooking Kirkwall harbour and watched the sunset; it was absolutely stunning. As we sat there in silence, staring out at that view, I realised that I'm starting to fall in love with Lorraine... and with Orkney itself.

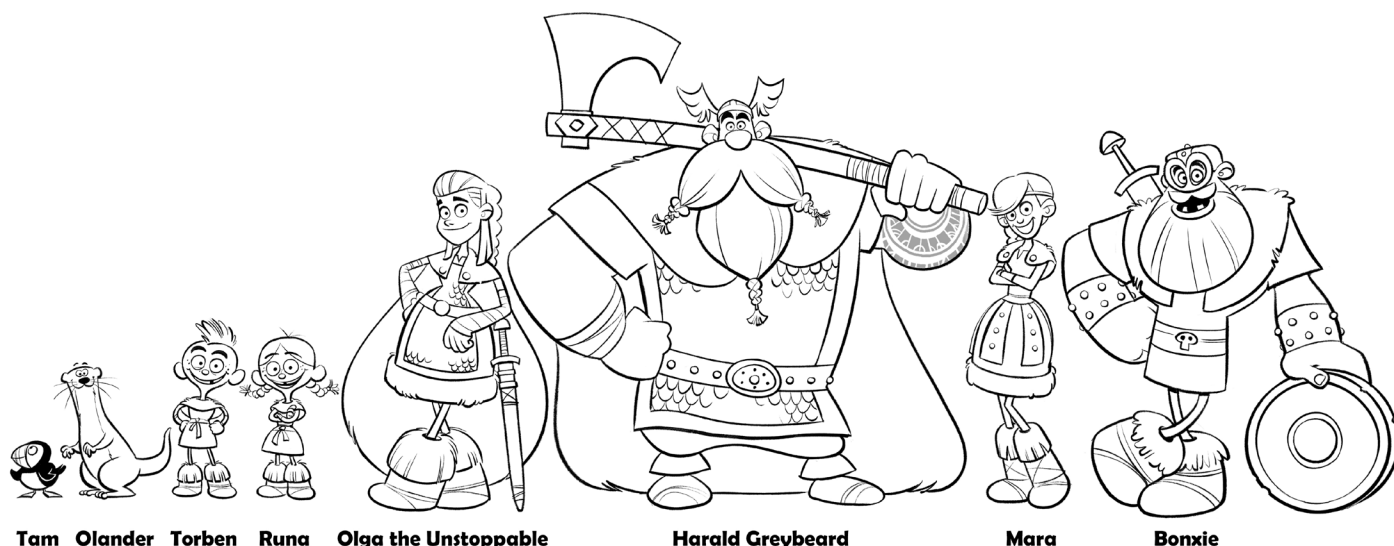
Diary Entry 12th August:

Today is my last full day on Orkney; tomorrow morning I'll be getting back on the ferry and heading back home. I can't believe how quickly this week has gone; it feels like only yesterday that I arrived here. But at the same time, I feel like I've been here forever – like this place is somehow part of me now.

Lorraine took me on a tour of some of Orkney's best-kept secrets today;

hidden beaches and sheltered coves that only locals know about. We even found a spot where we could sit and watch seals basking on the rocks in front of us. It was such a special moment; just sitting there in silence with Lorraine, surrounded by this incredible natural beauty.

As we watched the sun set over Orkney's dramatic landscape, I knew that this was a moment I would never forget... and neither will my memories of this amazing place... and of Lorraine herself.



One Day in Orkney

Jenny Beal

The breeze carried Tam across the wide sheltered water of Scapa Flow beneath. Tam is a puffin and in Orkney they are known as ‘Tammie Norries’. He is part of a family called the Vicklings whose members are Harald Greybeard, Olga the Unstoppable, Runa, Torben, Bonxie, Mara and Olander the seal.

The whole family love bannocks and Tam had flown into Kirkwall to fetch some beremeal from the Orkney store to take back to the longship as Mara would be baking later. As he flew over the patchwork of islands, he thought how they had changed since the Vikings had first arrived, many, many years ago.

Hovering in the wind over The Man of Hoy seascape Tam could see the ferry approaching bringing with it visitors to the islands. It was a brilliant sunny day and he decided to fly over to Scrabster as Olander the otter had said he was going to swim over there in search of fish and would later meet up with Tam at the beach.

On the ferry in the bright sunshine travellers were hurriedly leaving the decks and making for the car deck eagerly awaiting their arrival at Scrabster and the Orkney Islands. It had been a lovely journey and the children had played on the ship before eating lunch. Evelyn and Clara had travelled from Nottinghamshire and met Estelle and Elliott who

had travelled all the way from Canada, they met a small boy called Sebastian who had travelled from Northumberland. Together they had lots of fun playing on the ship in the Vikling's Den and filling in activity sheets. On these they had been introduced to a family called the Viklings. They were Vikings now living in modern day times, a bit like time travellers Clara thought.

Voices of the past came to Tam as he flew over Scapa beach where Olander had finally come to rest after fishing. They met on the beach and heard chattering in the distance. Rollers of gem blue dashed the sand as it contrasted with the bay it was a wonderful day to relax and unwind. The families of the children on the ferry had become acquainted and decided to spend some time on the beach before checking into their caravan and hotels. All the children were paddling in the sea and adults had laid out throws and had food and drink laid on them picked up at the village store.

Tam and Olander joined the children who were surprised to see them.

"You are real!" Evelyn shouted, "We saw you and your family on the ferry and your family dress very differently to the way we do."

Surprised at the question Tam and Olander made no reply. Estelle and Elliott wondered if they spoke French as the area, they came from in Canada did. Olander said they used to speak 'Old Norse' but had now learnt to speak locally. They too had arrived they said from other countries before settling in Orkney. Some of their relatives had landed at Newfoundland in Canada but that was many, many years ago. Tam and Olander knew Northumberland also as previous relatives had lived there when Sebastian asked. Nearly everyone knew Lindisfarne Evelyn and Clara had been there for a holiday and Tam and Olander had visited with their family by Longship.

Everyone was surprised when Tam and Olander joined the family for lunch. Could they really be members of the Vikling family or were they just a puffin and seal who talked? They all tucked into Bannocks and Orkney cheese followed by Beremeal shortbread. What a feast and what a stunning place to eat looking out over the bay on the wide sandy beach which glistened in the sun. Evelyn's mum started to sing a sea shanty, and everyone joined in.

Tam explained that now you can buy the bannocks and shortbread from the store but that at home they still baked them in the traditional way, a Viking way from the past. The beremeal is very specific to the islands and the grain as it grows quickly in the short days Vikings had there. At home Runa would be making bannocks today and would heat a large stone until it was hot and put the prepared dough on this. That's why he had flown over to fetch some more beremeal for baking. In all the excitement of meeting the ferry travellers he had forgotten and must fly off to fetch it. Olander was still enjoying playing in the sea with the children. It was strange how past had met present and it was quite an uncanny feeling.

At last the cars were packed with food, buckets and spades, blankets and people including Evelyn, Clara, Estelle, Elliott, and Sebastian. Tam and Olander went off on their journeys. For a brief moment in time their paths had crossed, and all the children and families waved goodbye until they faded into the distance.

Tam and Olander arrived home there was a large fire burning with stones ready for the meal to be cooked. Runa helped by Torben set to work on the bannocks. As they sat in the evening leaning on the longship, they told the rest of the Vikling family about their adventurous day eating bannocks cooked on the stone and fish Olander had caught. Also about meeting the children and people who had travelled on the ferry. Harold Greybeard, Olga the Unstoppable, Torben, Bonxie and Mara had all had days they could share with them which would be shared in the days to come.

In Kirkwall all of the children and families had arrived, adults were enjoying their evenings and the children were fast asleep. All had memories of travelling to Orkney, time on the ferry, beach, bannocks and cheese, shortbread meeting part of the Vikling's family. Were they just a puffin and seal or as the children thought the real Viklings? As it was only the first day of their holiday maybe there was more time to find this out. The concept of past, present, and future is known as time. Today past and present met, time will produce the future. Only beremeal they all thought would produce the bannocks!

Bomby's Orkney Adventure

Rebecca Hay

“Bomby to ground control. Bomby to ground control, coming into land, coming into land”, bump, bump, skid, skid, ouch, ouch, bang, “och I’m here at last folks”

A huge gasp went up as Orkney went black for a minute as Bomby righted himself and landed softly on his huge hooves or tarsal claws, if you want to be scientifically correct.

Bomby looked around at the thousands strong crowd straining to see the much-anticipated new addition to the islands.

He was for a minute slightly terrified, well who wouldn’t be, surrounded by humans who have a habit of treading on creatures like Bomby. And there were no trees, no trees!

Relaxing as he realised special floral fencing surrounded him, he stood back and stroked his massive (and I mean massive) yellow tum in contentment as the welcome chants continued.

Never before had Orkney seen such a sight since Hercules the Bear had hit the big time on the wee island of North Uist. And he was a big fella, I can tell you, with teeth as sharp as a tiger’s.

But what a sight it was, Bomby, the Great Yellow Bumble Bee or *Bombus Distinguendus* to give him his official title was on a nectar finding visit to Orkney after discovering the islands are the bees knees when it comes to having acres and acres of machair, which is fertile and low-lying grassy plains to you and me.

You see Bomby has a big, big appetite and the food around the lowlands of Scotland, just does not do it for him.

As big as a child’s thumb and covered in sandy yellow hairs, with huge, long legs and a black band across his head, Bomby is the king of bees, and he knows it.

But as well as being number one in the bee world, he needs lots of tucker to keep him happy and able to give that wingspan some welly

when its needed on long trips.

And boy what a long road trip it had been from Glasgow to Orkney, dodging the big trees of Perthshire and the huge rivers and lochs of the Highlands, before a swift right turn from Aberdeen and across to Orkney, passing what looked like a huge blue and white boat with a mighty Viking on the side, full of people having fun and eating tablet.

Bomby knew he was in for a good time and first impressions at his ceremonial landing meant the trip was looking grand. But there were no trees!

First things first and after a quick brush up, Bomby was whizzed up on to the red carpet to meet Orkney's Mayor who worn a very large red and black (a no no for Bomby as bees hate the colour black) coat and one huge necklace with some sort of crest on it.

Presented with Orkney's finest fudge (oh to die for) and a large bottle of Puffin beer (which was a bit daunting for Bomby to gulp down a fellow winged person), Bomby said a few words of thanks and told the crowd about his food finding trip to the islands.

As well as finding the best machair in Scotland, Bomby was determined to put his wings to good use and explore the islands and find some trees.

And who better to show him around than a couple of Orkney born and bred honeybees, who popped out of their hives for a six-mile tour, six miles because that is all their Queen bee allows them to fly.

Hamish and Hector from the Hay clan of bees had been chosen to escort Bomby after undergoing a yearlong gruelling bee camp to make sure they would be able to keep up with the big fellow. They had some big biceps; I can tell you.

And so they set off, on a clear and sunny day, perfect for bees. First stop was the Skara Brae Prehistoric Village, made up of ten old stone cottages in various states and ideal for low flying and chomping . Dating back to Neolithic times, it was right by the sea and Bomby could not resist a dip of his wings in the water, before the trio headed off to the Ring of Brodgar, an ancient circle, protected like Bomby by special heritage soldiers.

By this time, Bomby was feeling peckish and so he headed into the main town of Kirkwall and rocked his chops around a scrumptious tablet ice cream, before the boys were back in the air and off to the Scapa Flow, where there were lots of German boats were sunk during the First World War.

But the piece de la resistance was the Italian Chapel, made by prisoners of war during World War II from two Nissan huts and using old tins and cutlery for decorations and lighting.

Sight-seeing over and back to business. Bomby was keen to discover the six best places in Orkney to find his beloved machair and after a short flight, to a secret location (to protect the machair from predators), Bomby found himself in bee heaven, but no trees.

Acres and acres of one of the rarest habitats in Europe and enough to feed Bomby for a while, well a few days at least.

The machair is famous in these parts because sand made up from crushed shells is regularly blown onto land from the Atlantic and crofters work it into their land to create a special fertile land which in turn creates the most beautiful and nectar filled flowers.

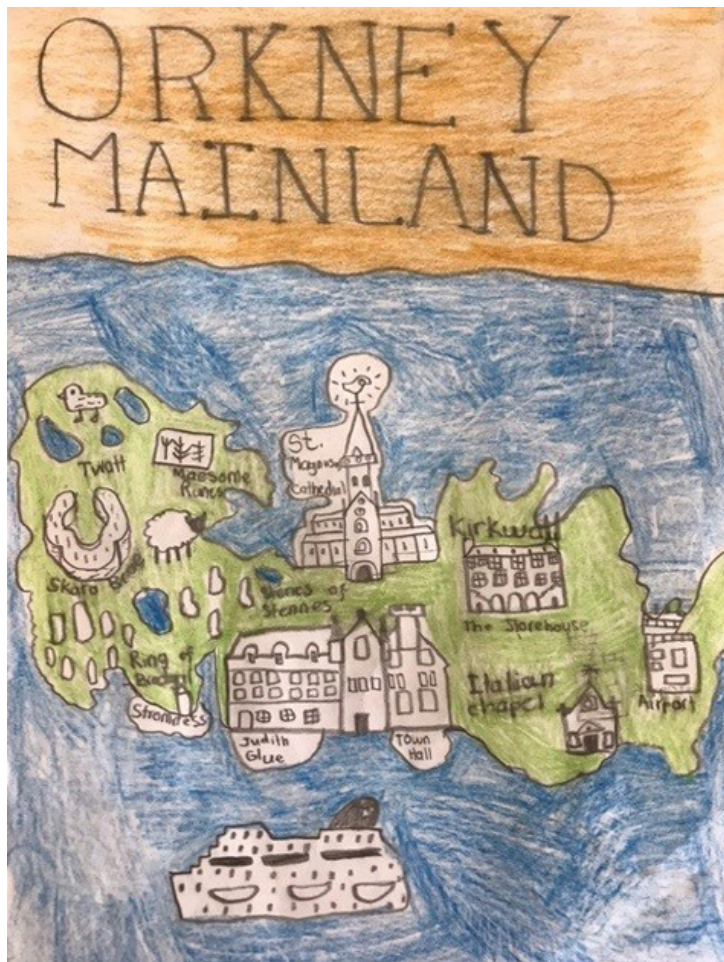
From bright yellow flowers to red, white, and blue, the mass of flora was amazing and Bomby licked his lips, ready for some serious scoffing.

But before he got chance to get his snuffly snout down into a flower, in flew the equally rare Belted Beauty Moth, Brenda.

And a real beauty Brenda proved to be, her only downside being, because of her short wings, she can't fly, which touched Bomby's big soft heart and before you could shout "honey", Bomby was off collecting some food for Brenda to chomp. Still no trees.

It was love at first sight and as Bomby and Brenda relaxed on the beach later that night, with a roaring fire and a pile of flowers by their side, Bomby stretched a wide wing around Brenda's peedie stumps, ruffled his fluffy tum and wooed her with poem, which summed up his love for Brenda and Orkney.

And guess what it was all about? Yes, trees!



Exploring with the Elephants

Catriona Stevenson

Once there lived three Elephant brothers called Fuddley, Alfred and Huggady. It was the first day of the summer holidays and the three elephants packed their bags for their holiday in Orkney.

Suddenly Fuddley the elephant heard a noise. It was a piece of paper falling from the roof of St Magnus Cathedral. It was a treasure map.

It was time to go so they caught the bus just on time. After a few long hours they reached the Ferry terminal. They all boarded the ferry and had some snacks. At 4:00 pm they had found themselves in Orkney.

Fuddley, Alfred and Huggady all went to the beach to play. It was getting late so they went home. They were staying in Skail cottage.

In the morning the three elephants got ready for a trip to St. Magnus Cathedral with Gerald the tour Guide.



Gerald came and drove them to Kirkwall. When they got there, they went to the Judith Glue café. After a drink they visited the cathedral. There were lots of interesting things in there. They listened to the story of St. Magnus and his cousin. There were markings on all the bricks and lots of patterns on the rugs.

Suddenly Fuddley heard a noise. It was a piece of paper falling from the roof. It was a treasure map.



Gerald told the elephants he would take them to Hoy the next day. The elephants all decided to go tomorrow.

The next day Gerald came to collect the three elephants from Skaill cottage. They took a look at the map and saw that they had to sail to Hoy from Houton. They drove to Houton and caught the ferry to Hoy. The elephants were astonished by the beautiful view of the sea from the ferry.

The ferry was approaching Lyness on Hoy. When they all got off the ferry, they started to explore the island.



When they wandered further onto the island, they met three frogs called Tady, Toady and Fergus. They were looking for the treasure too.

The frogs were determined to find the treasure before the others so they rushed off before the elephants could even talk to them.

The elephants headed off to find the treasure. It took hours to reach the location of treasure, but they kept on going.

Soon they came to a beautiful beach with sea as clear as glass. The elephants saw no sign of the frogs they met earlier on. Fuddley found some rocks in a cross shape. That must've been the cross on the treasure map.

The three elephants got out their spades and dug a big hole. Huggady's spade hit something hard. It was a treasure chest. They all helped lift the treasure chest out of the hole.



Soon the frogs come over sadly because they didn't find the treasure first. Alfred told them they can share the treasure with them.

So they all made friends.

The End



Shetland

Moa Patience

“Why’ve you invited your friends to our wedding?”

Liz is incandescent.

“They won’t travel to Shetland,” Tel soothes.

“There’s a free bar.”

Wedding-day.

Church.

Feast.

Speeches.

Before the dancing.

Tel reads his friends’ telegram.

“Sorry we “mist” your wedding day, due to the mist.”

Liz thinks “Thank fog for that.”

Orkney

Moa Patience

The water is warm.

There are only a few other folk in the Scrabster pool.

After a long day on the bikes, they enjoy a leisurely swim.

They are the only customers at the nearby greasy spoon.

They are served generous helpings.

When they are replete, Connor asks if he may use the phone.

The ferrymen help them to load their bikes onto the boat.

The crossing is smooth.

The summer air is pleasantly warm.

They are met by Patsy at Stromness.

She invites them to her family's farmhouse for soup.

She says they don't need to camp on the lawn.

It is standing room only at the Kirkwall bar.

Patsy and Connor are deep in conversation.

Connor's friends are surprised to find that they can see each other across the crowded room.

The guests settle down for the night in sleeping bags in the sitting room.

Patsy kneels beside Connor.

Connor's friends fall asleep to the sounds of Patsy and Connor kissing.

Patsy returns from her Tae Kwon Do lesson and the hairdresser.
She takes them out for a drive in the family car.
She shows them the peaceful, unspoiled beaches where she goes with her pony.

The guests take the bikes to Skara Brae.
The tour guide's voice sends them into a hypnotic trance.
At home, Patsy plays the piano and knits a lacy, seashell scarf.

After tea, they drive to one of the smaller islands.
A Norwegian cover band plays to a largely empty hall.
A girl in orange trousers makes full use of the open space.

The morning after, Patsy has a bitter pill to swallow.
In her sunny, yellow kitchen, Patsy's mum cheerfully
Serves Connor and his entourage a right royal, hearty, valedictory
breakfast.
When they are replete, Connor asks if he may use the phone.

Shetland

Moa Patience

E-mail warning, incoming rellies
from the land of parkas and wellies

while we've got the place to ourselves
we clean out some shelves

can't dust, and display
and be present today

they come tonight, where's the time gone
still got cleaning to do, must press on

they phone to say their camper has died
we go to the rescue, after the AA man tried

he high-tailed it, he had not made it right
even switched his phone off for the night

we pick them up from the side of the road
return to our humble abode

after dusty, midgie-bitten hours
they freshen up under long, hot showers

over food, coffee, and red

we hear the tale of AA man faffing, and how he fled

it's a long, involved, complicated story

the AA man did not cover himself in glory

the best bit is the boat

it gets the five star vote

Wedding

Moa Patience

On the announcement of her engagement, Patsy receives a toaster from her granny.

If the wedding is cancelled, she wants it back.

Connor wants to wear yellow tartan.

Patsy forbids it.

She tells Connor that he needs a haircut and a shave.

It's okay for her to say that to him, but if he were to say that to her...

Connor takes his kilt to the tailors.

At six o'clock in St Magnus Cathedral, Patsy is a vision of loveliness.

Her dress is beautiful.

It is so beautiful, that the tailors displayed it in their window.

Photos taken at the reception show Connor to be a true Scotsman.

After a big night out, one of Connor's chums fa's by.

He finds that Patsy's dress makes an excellent quilt.

Boat

Moa Patience

Patsy irons her linen trousers.

Connor rolls up his youngest t-shirts.

Patsy takes her tablet.

Connor swears by light refreshments and swaying with the boat.

They tuck into fresh, hot, crispy fish and chips.

They haven't left the harbour yet.

Patsy feels green about the gills.

She retires to their cabin.

Patsy lies down.

She soon migrates to the ergonomically designed en-suite.

Still seated, Patsy puts her head in the sink.

Connor is not there to hold her hair back.

Connor joins his chums in the packed lounge.

They sing along to 'This is the Age of Aquarius'.

Patsy sips her breakfast tea.

Connor shovels in a family-sized fry up.

Connor leans back.

He stretches mightily.

Connor reaches into his trouser pocket for his hankie.

He blows his nose on a pair of pink pants.

Simmer Dim

Moa Patience

Connor tours the mainland.

He stops for mince and tatties at the hall.

Connor sits at a trestle table.

He holds his empty tankard over his head.

Connor parades in a headscarf and skirt.

His vaporised undies have lost their elasticity.

Connor climbs the fort wall.

The ticket collector is there to greet him.

Connor sings about a philatelist.

He bounces to 'Born to be wild'.

Patsy runs him a hot bath.

Connor puts his grass stain kneed jeans in the machine.

Up Helly Aa

Moa Patience

Connor has a beard.

He borrows Patsy's aerobics outfit.

Patsy freezes on the sidelines.

Asterix lookalikes pass by.

Patsy's eyes sting, she vows to wear protective glasses next year.

Those fire torches shed ash.

Patsy recognises a few faces.

She finds it hard to tell who is wearing a mask and who isn't.

The beautiful, newly built boat waits near the water.

The fire torches arc through the cold, dark, night air.

Patsy gasps as a knife throwing skit begins.

Connor's Jane Fonda sendup causes much hilarity.

Patsy and Connor have reestit mutton soup and bannocks.

Connor moves on to the next hall with his squad.

The band plays the St Bernard's Waltz and the Boston Two Step.

Outside, the squad vans gently rock.

Patsy picks up Flora.

Granny has painted Connor's bedroom pink.

Patsy and Flora walk to The Harbour Cafe.

They watch the bacon sizzle to perfection under the grill.

The cook slides it into the bin.

It is deemed to be overcooked.

The man at the next table finishes his KitKat.

They watch, fascinated, as he deftly fashions the silver foil.

When it's time for him to leave, he stops by their table.

He kindly presents Flora with a tiny, perfectly formed, silver trophy cup.

