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A Theory of Primal Writing: Refocusing the Narrative Lens upon the Non-human

by

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ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CREATIVE WRITING

English Critical and Creative Writing

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

A THEORY OF PRIMAL WRITING: REFOCUSING THE NARRATIVE LENS UPON THE NON-HUMAN

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The contention of this thesis is that the environmental crisis is a result of cultural attitudes to nature as much as it is of material human impact. This study therefore seeks to address a fundamental issue for literary studies, namely the representation of nature in literature. This critical / creative project forms a natural progression from past considerations of eco-criticism, which explore how nature has been represented historically, while the creative element takes the form of an experimental young adult novel¹ that correlates with the critical part of my thesis. Following an outline of cultural notions of nature and wilderness in Western culture and how these inescapable historical concepts shape perception of the non-human, my research then consists of two main elements. These investigate how an understanding of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology in conjunction with a Kristevan theory of language can reveal how nature is portrayed in YA fiction. The critical element will attempt to develop and implement a new eco-critical perspective and apply it to the literature of David Almond, while my creative research exploring the effects of environment on human identity will be formed by a YA novel, entitled *Pinhead*. Central to both, will be the examination of how the ‘gestural’ origins of ‘semiotic’ ‘wild language’, are fundamental in shaping narratives which reconnect readers with their own innate sense of primal ‘carnality’. The thesis will explore how a narrative drawing on the ‘gestural’ elements of the poetic voice can represent humanity and nature within a unified biosphere, rather than as separate entities. In short, *A Theory of Primal Writing* aims to utilise aspects of Kristevan semanalysis to provide a connection with, and a framework for, aspects of

¹ Henceforth, the term ‘young adult’ will be referred to as ‘YA’.

Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, particularly the concept of an 'affective material dimension of language, that contributes to meaning', which is common to both theorists. This hybrid position allows the development of a new ecocritical perspective which encourages new readings of how nature is portrayed in fiction. It also, through the identification of relevant narrative techniques, develops a creative tool with which to foreground nature.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I,

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

A Theory of Primal Writing: Refocusing the Narrative Lens Upon the Non-human.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

Date:.....

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Thank you Stuart Adamson.

Pinhead

the ghosts of trees

sometimes
sometimes
sometimes
it feels like I'm reaching out to you
flailing through the trees
failing sometimes I'm exhaled flickered
in a sun-glint through lucent branches or falling
in leaf-dreams settling in a lace of withered veins
across your eyes your cheeks your lips
as you sleep can you feel me now
I am salt-air breath Now I am rain-milk-sap
Now I am earth root meat
Now Sky
whitefire-fingers
now reef-wood now
sand-thunder-dust
Now I am adrift
in an ocean of trees

a tartan of feathers

Tsil-tsil-tschil!

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

I can hear the eagles calling overhead, circling above us on the mountainside.

Toh-tSchil!

Their wings can't sweep away this fog that drifts, surrounds us here on An Cliseam. We're bloody lost. Grandad's lying tangled on the rocks, where he fell. He's not moving.

Is he dead?

Please.

Don't be dead. Don't be dead. Don't be dead.

Fingers of wet heather soak my tartan trousers as I kneel and lay my head on his chest. Through his rough woolly jumper I can just about feel the thud of his heart. Weak. Slow. Faint. Like distant wings beating. Shit, the light's fading. The rain's falling harder, big drops splashing onto the dirty shale and scree. I lay my biker jacket under his head. Suddenly, he starts trembling and opens his razor-grey eyes. Then, he squeezes my fingers with his big weaver's hands.

'Grandad?'

'Come here, Stew.'

His words are unclear. His stubbly jaw scuffs against my cheek. I can hardly hear him.

'Don't worry,' he says. 'Just give us a minute.' His face is like ash, his lips are bloodless blue. The fog boils around us. He sips some water from the bottle shaking in my hands.

'Gabba gabba hey,' he whispers.

'Gabba gabba hey, Grandad.'

He winks at me, smiles slowly.

Closes his eyes.

I clutch his wrist and time his pulse - it's barely there. The second hand flicks on the scratched army watch - his gift to me. Then, his eyes flicker open, staring and wild. His words stutter between weak breaths as he clutches my hand.

'Not so good, Stewie... Look in the rucksack... Cover me with feathers.' Then, 'It'll be OK, boy... Stay with me...' He fades into unconsciousness.

Cover me with feathers - What does he mean? I rip open his battered rucksack and pull out cheesy spare socks, some bruised apples and a crinkled map. Then, a penknife and something soft - a blanket. It'll keep him warm. I wrap it around him with trembling hands. It's a great length of plaid, richly coloured - cobalt tartan shot with deeper greens and blues. I can recognise his

Pinhead

handiwork in the colours of the craft he was teaching me. But, there's something else, something golden woven into the cloth – tawny barbs and after-feathers, primaries of amber in the twisted Harris wool. An eagle cries mournfully overhead. *Cover me with feathers*, Grandad said. *Cover me with feathers*.

The rain is falling hard now - like icy bullets - striking through my Ramones t-shirt. I blink away the drips on my eyelashes and try to focus as an eerie light smoulders from the blanket.

'What the fff...'

It's the feathers - the feathers in the tartan are glowing. I rub my eyes and run my fingers through my sodden, faded, orange spikes of hair. I've got to keep him alive. I've got to keep him warm, keep him here with me. My teeth chatter and I lay as close to him as I can. Fingers of heather twitch in the rain. Beyond them, past the rocks, hidden by the mist, I can feel the ghosts of trees watching us, standing there.

Patient.

Silent.

Still.

Their phantom sap seeps into the shallow soil of the mountains. It runs through the veins of all my family. But the roots of the ancient Caledonian forest run deeper than ours. They reach down deep in the peat - to the rocks. We all cling on in these islands.

With roots.

Cold fingers.

Or talons.

Toh-tschil!

'Hang on, Grandad.'

He's got to hang on. I can't go back. I ain't going back to London. Please, don't let his clock stop. I close my eyes. The rain taps its distress code on my back. And the heather whispers *Scratch-scratch* against my jacket.

Toh-tschil!

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

Above us, the eagles are circling, watching, waiting, unseen.

the rain of Leòdhas

It was tipping it down when I landed on the Isle of Harris - seasick and shivering in the grey squally dusk. A Blackbird was singing. I gripped the big roll of tenners in my biker-jacket pocket and wobbled back onto the ashen land, towards an unreadable sign - English? Gaelic? - all the same to me. The sign clanged as it swung. I clung onto the post, and threw up. A gust blasted the puke-splash all across the drab quayside curb and a mass of gulls squabbled around the ferry, billowing up into the dingy air - like white litter and old ragged newspapers. One dim lamp lit a yellow oil-skinned figure, struggling, weaving buffeted by the wind, towards me, along the grey quay. I shivered and turned up my collar against the sting of spray, as the angry Minch chucked another leaden wave against the granite rocks that formed the harbour wall.

‘Aaaatchooo!’ The yellow figure stood about ten feet away, coughing into its fist.

‘Grandad?’ I said.

Beneath the Sou’wester, his face was about as cheerful as the black clouds brooding over the dark hills behind him. I looked away and tried to hide my bandaged wrist. A stream of warm blood, the colour of paint - Cadmium Red Deep, trickled down my palm and dripped into a puddle, mingling with the rain. The jagged wound under the dressing had nagged at me all along the endless journey up the mainland.

Dead.

Boring.

Colourless.

Shitty Scotland. Blurred miles of rain-soaked fields, sad snakes of rivers and dim shadows of mountains. Wet rock hulks hidden behind phased hazes of mist, as the jagged lips of the gashed wrist whispered to the rhythm of the train - *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch*. I wiped my hand across the sodden red of my tartan zip-trousers and lugged my bulging Adidas holdall a few paces towards the dirty-yellow man. He pushed back the Sou’wester and scratched his head.

‘Hello,’ I mumbled. I hadn’t seen him since I was five, but knew him from the one photo we’d kept at home - the stooped lankiness beneath the oilskins, the steely grey eyes, the wild bog-brush of hair. He was the spit of my Dad, and me, but even at eighty one, he was still the tallest.

‘Coit do'n buin sibh?’ he said.

‘Eh? Pardon. I don’t get you.’

The grooves in his forehead cracked deeper.

Pinhead

‘Could... can I stay with you?’

He shook his head and limped away. After eleven years, that was his welcome. I followed him along the quay. Rain dribbled off my chin as the rear door of his battered green Land Rover creaked open. It stank of dead fish and diesel. The Blackbird stopped its singing.

‘Chuck yer bag in there,’ he said, gesturing with his thumb. ‘Yer better get in yerself, too.’ I went to climb in the back, but he welly-booted the door shut.

‘Gah! In the front, boy.’

Again, his thumb jabbed, his voice growled. I clambered into the scratched, rusting cab, out of the bitter wind. The doors slammed - closing us in. Suddenly - together. Hailstones drummed like giant fingers on the roof as he glowered at me. Then, his cough barked out, water sloshed from his oil-skinned arms, and the engine roared into life. He jammed it into gear and we rumbled out of the small car park, up a steep hill and past a tall, dark-towered church. We clanked along the track beside a black wall of hills. On, to Grandad’s croft. To the dark hidden meadows and lochs and the loom of high mountains. Towards An Cliseam.

*

I clung to my seat as the old man pounded the Land Rover up the trail. The engine groaned - metal clunked against metal like something was going to fall off - something important, like a wheel. The headlights picked out low farmhouses with lit kitchen windows, flashed across lost looking sheep and sudden walls of rock. The beams revealed a shadowy world through a blinding spray. Wiper blades juddered-and-stuck, juddered-and-stuck - failing to clear the windscreen. For miles Grandad said nothing, never turning to look at me once. His eyes stayed glued to the winding track as I wrapped my handkerchief around my left wrist. It was sore and beginning to bleed again. Grandad slammed on the brakes and the Land Rover skidded to a halt.

‘Get out,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I said, get out!’ He ripped off his Sou’wester and pointed at my door.

The headlights showed only rain lashing the air. There was nothing but empty night.

‘Go on, go on!’ He climbed out.

He slipped and battled round the bonnet to my side. He gestured wildly. I braced my door against the blast and squeezed out onto the roadside rock. The squeal of the wind was deafening - bitter cold after the muggy warmth of the cab. Looking down - there *was* nothing there - nothing but a swallowing drop into darkness. Salt-spray stung my face and lips as waves thundered into blunt teeth of rock, about a mile below.

‘Jump!’ he yelled, his voice nearly lost in the storm.

'What?'

'Go on, jump! If yer really want to kill yerself, this is the place for it!' He tugged my arm and pointed at my bandaged wrist.

'Get off me, you nutter!' I screamed. Dad always said he was a *crazy old bugger*.

'Jump,' he said again.

'Get off! I didn't try to kill myself! I was drunk - messed up! I *didn't* want to!'

'Is that the truth, Stewie? Is it? Is it?' He grabbed my arm again.

'Yes, it bloody well is! Now, get off me!'

He let go. 'Right, then. That's good.'

We both stood there, breathing hard, rain and snot dripping from our noses, the wind nearly toppling us into the sea.

'Jesus bloody wept!' he yelled. The sound blew away into the dark. 'Hah! Right, lad. Now, get in and drive us both home!'

'Eh? I ain't passed me test, yet.'

He squeezed past me and climbed into the passenger seat. 'Hah! This'll be yer test,' he said.

'Learning young is the best learning there is.' He slammed the door and sat there waiting. My head reeled. I shuddered - weak with cold and hunger, yet he expected me to chance this old banger along a cliff. It was just a week since I'd wrecked Dad's Granada. A week since I'd hit him. Smacked him in the face.

Legs trembling, I crept back from the cliff edge and edged into the driver's seat. Grandad turned his shaggy dripping head and looked at me with eyes the colour of my own.

'I didn't believe yer meant it, Stewie. Not really. Yer don't want to waste yer blood - that good red stuff. There's too many dead'd be grateful for a drop o' their own still flowing. Now, try not to kill us both, eh?' He shook his head and coughed again. 'And, welcome to the Na Hearadh. Hah!'

The engine juddered into life and I tried to pull away from the cliff edge. The tyres slipped. My knuckles showed white on the gearstick as I tried not to picture the drop. The wheels span. Then we lurched forward, off along the craggy trail, Grandad yelling at me to, "Mind the bloody gears!".

For what felt like hours we wound on through an endless black moonscape bordered by fog, past giant slabs of rock and more bedraggled sheep. I rubbed my eyes on the back of my dressing and drove until my lids began to droop.

'Grandad, I... I can't...'

'Here we are. The family Blackhouse.' He pointed to a small speck of light. 'Car a`mhuiltein.' He said. 'That means Somersault. Yer'll no remember the last time yer were at the Croft. Eh, boy?'

Pinhead

‘No.’

At last the Land Rover clattered into a small yard bordered by a rock wall. Some low dark buildings and a taller barn sat opposite a small, thatched, one-story cottage. The engine juddered as I stalled to a halt.

‘Gah!’ said Grandad.

We wrestled with the doors and leant into the smack of the wind as rain drove across the yard. Grandad clapped me hard on the shoulder.

‘Not bad,’ he growled. ‘But yer’ll strip me gears if yer carry on driving like that.’

He carried my bag from the Land Rover, opened a low door in the dimly lit cottage and stooped straight inside a glowing amber room.

‘At least yer didn’t hit any bleaters,’ he shouted. ‘Come on.’

As I ducked my head to follow, a strange yelping cry came from a large shed behind me, across the yard.

‘What was that?’

‘Yer’ll learn soon enough,’ he said. A squall rattled the prison-like building. ‘Tomorrow, mebbe,’ said Grandad. ‘First some broth, and yer bed.’

The wind roared like a beast in pain. It flashed across the yard and thwacked the barn door back and forth on its hinges. Grandad gathered me inside the Blackhouse and shut the door.

bedstorm

We ate without speaking, warming-up in a low, wide kitchen and living-room, all in one. Bent spoons chinked on chipped bowls as the fire hissed and crackled through the open door of the stove. Jagged shadows flickered across the walls. The warm air filled with an earthy tang of smoke. Slurping at the peppery brown sludge of mutton broth, we mopped it up with slabs of bread and sized each other up across the notched planks of a massive table. A top-heavy pile of hefty looking books was balanced at one end. Nets and warped bits of driftwood stood against the stained walls. Everything - table, floor-boards, rickety chairs, even Grandad, looked like they were chunked out of the same stuff. Everything, except for a Phillips transistor radio - plastic, gleaming on the mantelpiece. He shovelled some sugar into his pint of dark tea, swigged it down and shoved the mug away, leaning back in his chair with a gasp of satisfaction.

‘The bog’s out the back, boy. No luxuries here, but plenty of newspaper if yer don’t mind smudging yer arse. There’s wellies and a Mac by the door, if yer have to go. But no wandering around in the dark.’ He raised his eyebrows. ‘And stay away from that shed. D’yer hear? I’ll be up early to fix that barn door.’

I nodded, reddening at the thought of *smudging my arse*.

‘G’night, boy. We’ll work out what to do with yer in the morning. There’s the bedroom.’ He jabbed his thumb at a door.

‘Can I stay, then?’

‘Did yer not hear me? I said, tomorrow.’

He cleared the bowls from the table and handed me an iron candle-lamp, then fumbled with the leather strap of his wrist watch, which he laid on the edge of the table. He settled into a low deformed armchair beside the smouldering hearth, made a few notes in a leather-bound note-book, and clapped it shut.

‘Goodnight,’ I said.

He grunted.

Wax trickled hot on the back of my hand as the lamp cast crazy shadows around the room. His eyes were tight shut. I picked up his watch, slid it into my pocket, glanced back. Eyes tight shut. I closed the bedroom door.

Inside the musty room a bulky wardrobe loomed beside a small chest of drawers. Framed photos glinted in the flickering light as I settled the lamp onto a low bedside table. I unzipped my Adidas hold-all, pulled out the t-shirts, jeans and my red mohair jumper. I scrummaged around for a sock, took the big roll of notes from my jacket and stuffed it into one. It would be safer

Pinhead

scrunched up, hidden at the bottom of the bag. I rammed the clothes down on top of it. Five hundred quid - more than I'd ever seen before yesterday. It would come in handy, if I had to get away. The bed creaked as I lifted out the new box of Rowney oil paints that Mum got me, last birthday. I laid it on the bed, opened the lid and sniffed the new wood and bitter oils. I fingered the unused tubes - Payne's Grey, Lamp Black, Permanent Blue - number 325, 327, 298. Mum told me all the names. I'd learned all the colours and matching numbers by heart for art lessons - it stopped the other kids in art class taking the piss. I'd never used Mum's new paints and I never would, now. But I'd never leave em behind, either. The pages of the unused sketch pad were smooth under my thumb - still dry, the rain hadn't got in. The tips of the brushes felt soft - stroked against my cheek. None of the knives and pencils were bent or snapped up. Fuck knows why I brought em, really - never used em any more - just couldn't leave em behind. I laid them gently on the table.

The candle fluttered in a draft, sending shadows lurching around the room. I shivered. Shit, it was grim here. In all the lucky dip of stuff hidden in the socks and pants at the bottom of my bag, I fingered the clutch of watches, stroked the straps of leather and link-chain, felt the little winders, touched the tiny buttons, the shining glass faces; all safe at the bottom of my bag. I imagined the second hands of the clockwork watches rotating, the hidden cogs revolving, ticking - like little hearts beating. They hadn't stopped. They were still dry. Finally, I took out the packet of unopened letters - laid them on the bed.

I stripped off my wet clothes,
puffed the candle out,
slid between the cold blankets.

Coarse old covers chafed on my skin - a rough nest of musty wool on a mattress of stodgy porridge. The gash on my wrist whispered *Scratch-scratch...* but I was too knackered to listen - closed my eyes.

My head was full of memories - the bloodshot eyes of the doctor who'd stitched me up at casualty, glaring at me through his smudged bi-focals. "Keep the wound dry... and avoid alcohol," he'd snapped. A pretty nurse clanged her bucket, jerked a disinfectant bottle and sloshed a mop through the fresh splashes of my beer-vomit. The doctor's nicotine-lip curled up and down as he propped the specs back on his nose with stained, yellow fingers. "We've only got time here for those who want to live", he said. I rolled over and put Grandad's watch in amongst the others and zipped up the bag.

Live.

Live.

Live.... There's only time for those who want to live.

I'd wanted to explain, tell him what had happened. But, I wasn't sure myself. I shifted in

the bed, catching fading glimpses of cloud through a ragged curtain that shifted back and forth as the storm rattled the windows. I fell into the dream - the usual dream.

*

At first, she is there - my mum - pale, bright, walking silently towards me through a forest of dark shadowed trees. She starts to fade into nothing and I call 'Come back!' But she makes a sound like little birds laughing. Her mouth stays closed, tight shut. She stares - her face as sallow as a Tesco butcher's chicken skins - yellow, death-coloured, like the last time she'd tried to smile goodbye, morphined-up on the cancer ward - fading in and out - of life. When I touch her, she's hard and cold - an empty shell - somehow still her - somehow not. Something stiff and dead laying cold in her best pressed clothes in a chapel-refrigerator. Hands hard as iron. Skin sharp as frost. All colour lost. Her warm eyes closed - tight shut. Then, the dream turns and she holds me and she's soft again - she's my Mum and I'm hers - just for a moment. But the jagged bloody mouth on my wrist whispers *Scratch-scratch* - the dream turns again and she falls from me - falls away in a blizzard of leaves, her mouth moving. Silent.

*

All night, I twisted between the waking gale and a stormy sleep - hiding from nightmare coppers in clock-shop-doorways and phantom doctors in churchyard-hospitals. In and out of dreams - in and out of tastes, smells, sounds - images from the train-ride up, the ferry and the sea - a litter of gulls, huge candy-floss sheep, and the cliff top drop. I twisted and rolled between repeat meetings with Grandad, the scream from the shed, and the looming dead black stump of a tree. I felt the scruff roughness of the bed and heard the voice of the gale shifting the curtain between sleep and the world. A nameless animal cried like a human baby in the squashed dark shed and echoed over the babble of faceless mourners surrounding my bed. Then, I heard a clearer voice.

Coit do'n buin sibh?

Shell down, boy. Shell down. Sheer are We... Soon enough us flukes'll tear us red flesh and marrow. We'll rip this shack, sail back on voice of air - back to the High - to singing crags. We shun beLow. Watch your fingers, boy! Follow close the fame of your fathers. Watch for ghosts of trees! Coit do'n buin sibh?

Sheer are We...

Now, shell down, boy. Shell down.

Shell down... shell down.

Pinhead

'Wha... what? Who's that?'

Twisted over and fell. Something hard bit my cheek. Bricking it, shaking, heart racing. Pushed my face away from a cold wooden floor - Shit! Where was I? Surrounded by screaming wind - a... a storm. Flopped back onto the bed I'd just dropped from. Nearly as loud as the wind outside was a closer sound - like a log being torn by a giant saw... Somebody snoring. Fumbled towards the door and peered out. There was a figure asleep in a chair, lit by the glow of a fire - it was my Grandad. I was... on Harris ... the middle of bloody nowhere. Grandad snuffled and grunted, shifting himself in the chair, stretching his boots out towards the dying embers.

Someone *had* spoken, but it wasn't him. Some other voice - from a dream. I knelt on the bed, drew the dusty curtain back, rubbed my eyes and looked out. Rain joined in veins and bled down the dirty windowpane, water fell from the eaves like dripping clots into dark pools and ruts across my family's old croft. I pulled a fusty cover around my shoulders and shuddered. *Stay away from the shed*, Grandad had said. Across the yard, beyond the Land Rover, the knackered old building waited - dark and squat - battered by screaming *voices of air*. The barn door walloped against its shattered frame - swinging open, and shut. I peered closer through the wall of rain. There was something in the barn - a shape behind the door. The broken door juddered half opened, then swung shut. I couldn't make it out - what was it? I squinted through the window. My eyelids drooped lower, lower. But, then the door swung back and there it was - my eyes glared wide and my heart jumped in my chest. It was short, squat, black - sitting in the barn - The dead tree stump from my dream.

The door swung open -

Banged shut.

Stayed shut.

I fell back onto the bed, staring into the dark, heart pounding. Had I dreamt it first, or seen it first? Had I seen it at all? Couldn't be sure. I shivered and wriggled back under the covers. Gradually, I got warmer and my eyelids drooped lower, lower. Questions could wait 'til morning. I lay back into the lumpy mattress. Sleep settled over me again, warm, like eiderdown.

Coit do'n buin sibh?

Shell down, boy.

Shell down.

Pinhead

Wham! Wham! Wham! Someone was bashing something - really walloping it. I moaned and rolled onto my back. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* It sounded like a giant smacking a door down with a massive hammer. My eyes slowly unglued. Sunlight stabbed through holes in the ragged curtain and I peered out between my fingers. This wasn't my own room, what was this strange place? Beyond the foot of the bed, a massive wardrobe was backed into a corner, like a giant upright coffin. My pale face stared out like a ghost from a stained mirrored door. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* I watched myself groan as I remembered where I was and who was making the racket - Grandad must be fixing the barn door. Shit! I wanted to be home, not in this dump. I wanted my den - my own room with its fuggy stale scent of past crafty fags, half-mouldy cups of coffee, Brut 33, and the grubby mountain of jeans and t-shirts piled on the floor. I looked up for my Airfix models. My Spitfire, 109 and a Lancaster Bomber swooping from the ceiling - No, nothing. There was nothing. No threadbare Gonk perched on my desk, or fluorescent Frankenstein lurking on the window sill. The chipped plaster of these walls was bare. No posters - no *Scream*, no *Kiss*, no *Girl with a Red Blanket*. Nothing I'd drawn - no *Silent Mouth*, no *Angry Eyes*, no *Deaf Head* - nothing of mine, anywhere. Back down South the snarling black and white punk-seed heroes leaped from my walls - *Siouxsie*, *Johnny Rotten*, *Joey*, *Dee Dee* slouching off the back of my door. My orange hair-spikes drooped on my head in my hands. *Wham!* No toy family. *Wham!* No punk family. *Wham!* No bloody family at all. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* All back in Hampstead - ripped like my artwork, or busted like the toys I'd chucked across my bedroom floor. Unless Dad had tidied up the mess. But that wasn't likely. He hadn't cleared up anything else I'd shredded or smashed - like the doors of the drinks cabinet, or his *Granada* wedged halfway through the garage door. And now I could never go back to what I'd fucked up, what I'd destroyed.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Outside, the hammering grew louder, more intense. I bet Mum's ashes were still lying where they'd fallen - under the living room mantelpiece, scattered over the orange carpet. Maybe even Dad was still there, frozen like a dummy, staring - like when he sat through my interview with the hospital psychiatrist - like after he'd picked me up from casualty. Glaring, grey, hunched on the sofa, his head in his hands, staring at the precious grey powder on the floor - gravelly scats of bone that used to be his wife.

My Mum.

Now, she was dust.

I couldn't go back - ever.

A red clot of panic screwed up in my chest and I seized at breath in gulps. Panic! Every

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morning... remembered she was dead... sucked back to the hospital... to the second... she'd stopped breathing. The clench-fist of dread spread through my chest, my pulse mimicked the *whumm-whumm-whumm* of the hospital generator. That morning, I'd woken up to see the dawn rise beyond the council car park, and for a few seconds it was like leukaemia was still just a word, not a nightmare, and Mum was well again. Then, I saw her bloodless face and heard my dad's stifled moan, and I got wrenched right back to reality.

Death was real - laying there in front of me.

Death was at home, and it was here.

Death would always be with me.

Wham! Wham! Wham! The hammering outside grew louder, louder than the hammering in my chest. I flung off a tartan blanket and sat on the edge of the bed, gasping and rocking myself back and forth, gripping my shoulders. Gradually, I started to breathe a bit easier. Maybe Grandad wouldn't send me back. I didn't need medication, like the Doc said. There was nothing wrong with me. The hammering stopped. I scrabbled among the socks and watches in the bottom of my bag for a dry pair of pants - dragged out the itchy nylon ones with printed dragons and pulled em on - struggled into my jeans - jerked back the ragged curtains. No sign of him. The storm had passed. No rain, but a heavy grey misty sky. Across the puddled yard the barn door swung crooked, but upright on its hinges. The shed was hunched against the barn, like it was going to collapse. Whatever the screaming thing inside it was, it was silent now. I rummaged for my favourite black Ramones T-shirt. Its white bannered eagle called me to arms - *Hey, ho! Let's go!* I sneezed heavily as I stood up. Thick layers of dust coated the bedside table and wooden chair beside the door. A collection of paperweights and photo frames glimmered from a chest of drawers. I shook a snow-scene and watched fake white flakes fall and cover the little Santa and reindeer. The polished silver photo frames were chilly on my fingers. No dust on the shining, glass covered scenes. A tall, spike-haired man in an army uniform grinned from the top of a horse-trap. A pretty young nurse with two long blonde braids sat smiling from a doorstep, cradling a baby in her arms. A sulky looking kid my own age slouched against a five-bar gate - his hair slicked back in a greasy black quiff. Then, a picture of all three of them together in front of Grandad's Blackhouse. Their black and white eyes stared back at me. These people I didn't recognise. This family from the past. The room felt cold, dark and grey.

A hinge creaked loudly from the kitchen. A door banged. Knuckles rapped on the bedroom door.

'Are yer awake, Stew?'

'Er, yeah. Just coming.'

I pulled on my t-shirt and opened the door. The dirty boards of the kitchen were rough and cold on my feet. Grandad was filling a kettle.

'You'll be hungry?' he said.

I nodded.

'Pinhead all right for yer?'

'Pardon?'

'Porridge, boy. Porridge.' He growled, glanced at my bandaged wrist and tutted. 'Sit down. Ye're fair ghostly.'

'Er, Grandad.'

'Aye?'

'Where's the loo, again?'

He coughed. 'Round the side, boy. Wellies by the door, like I told yer. And yer can use me duffle coat till yer jacket's dried. There's a brisk wind picking up again.'

My bare feet slopped in the huge wellies and the coat hung off my shoulders. It smelt of stale sweat.

Outside, the fresh air nipped at my ears. The barn door swung wide open but there was nothing weird to be seen. I looked inside - nothing. Nothing, but bales of straw, ladders and loads of tools. I'd either dreamt up the tree-stump, or was going barmy. The shed door had a big padlock on it. Whatever had made the screeching noise was silent now, or just my weird imagination.

Beyond the ramshackle buildings, almost surrounding me, long steep hills rose upwards into a heavy roof of moving mist that weighed down on everything and made the whole world grey. I splashed my way across the yard, dodging through massive puddles of mud and... ugh! Dollops of some kind of shit. Ugh! Round the side of the cottage was a small shed with a low plank-board door. I dragged it back and ducked in. No lock. A draft whistled through jagged holes in the rusting corrugated walls. A couple of spiders scuttled back into their webbed corners. There was a weird mixed smell of musty earth and sickly flowery disinfectant, but at least the splintery wooden seat was clean. I hitched up the coat and looked around for the dreaded sheets of newspaper that Grandad had mentioned, but there was only a fresh new roll of pink loo-roll.

When I'd finished, the grey mist-roof was lifting from the land. The duffle-coat was rough, but snug. I wrapped it around me and gaped around at the wide open, lighter world. I'm not into this nature stuff - it's always cold or raining out in the country. The city's warmer, darker, no big spaces. Safer. Mum dragged me up Epping Forest a few times. That was all right - she liked it. But I ain't into hugging trees and all that hippy shit. And as far as art goes, I definitely ain't into drawing the sweeping vistas and noble majesty of the wilderness. I ain't interested in landscapes. I like doing machines - motorbike wrecks and smashed up cars, or people's faces and hands, but as my old art teacher Mrs Altmann said, "Zu mus luk vor ze fess ov netcher wivvin ze lendskep." Altmann - she's nuts, Austrian, like Hitler, but she's all right. Apart from Taffy Davies in fifth year

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Mechanics and Motor Maintenance, she was the only teacher I had time for. The only one who ever had any time for me. Didn't treat me like a retard, like the rest of those bastards. She got me into colours and let me use the school's oils instead of those kiddie's poster paints. I memorised all the Rowney oil colours and numbers. It kept the other arty farty students off my back. Kept em guessing. Altmann's all right - she got me into the Jugendstil - Klimt, Schiele, and other stuff like Munch. To be honest, though, snatching a look at them, maybe even I might have a crack at these hills - with me oils. I'd use Mum's present for the first time - mixed those colours just right - Perm Light Green, Yellow Green, Terre Verte Hue - get some dirt in it - dirty, brilliant, growing green. Yeah, maybe I'd have had a crack at this. I rubbed my knuckles into my face and blinked as the sun came out from behind the mist. It... it was all so... so... big.

The Blackhouse was in a dip - one side bordered by these vivid grassy fields - bigger than fifty football pitches, filled with massive grey lumps of rock. Altmann would have loved it up here. So would my Mum. It looked just like a painting. Every now and then, beams of sunlight filtered through gaps in the cloud, and the hills glowed with a thousand muted browns, dark ambers, and deep, raw reds. Yeah, raw - Raw Sienna, Venetian Red. On the other side of some grassy dunes, below the house, was the sea, or maybe a big loch. Some big waves flopped onto the pure white sand. The sky was so blue that you could almost feel the colour in the cold air. I breathed more deeply. I breathed the colour in. Brightness poured in through my eyes and lungs and reached into the darkness inside.

It blinded me.

Too big.

Too bright.

By the time I trudged back past the open kitchen window, the tang of frying food was wafting out. Mmmm - eggs - blimey, I was starving. Then I froze - hearing a voice I didn't recognise - posh, official, BBC. *Rockall, Malin, Hebrides. Moderate five, falling to three* - It was Grandad's radio giving the weather report.

The heavy door clunked shut behind me. Grandad turned the programme off, placed the shiny radio back on the shelf, and carried on cooking with his back to me, at a small blackened stove. He didn't look round as I hung up the coat and sat down, sliding my bandaged wrist under the table. Then, he turned and slipped two eggs onto an enamel plate in front of me.

'Thanks.'

He grunted back at me. I waited 'til he turned to the stove, then scooped the eggs down. After that, he spooned a kind of heavy grey cement-mix into two enamel bowls and plonked one down in front of me. He sat across the gnarled table trickling a spoonful of honey onto his own mixture, then he blew on it loudly and shovelled some into his mouth. I paused before the lumpy looking dollop.

'It's Pinhead,' he mumbled, through a gobful of it.

'What?' I said.

'Pinhead, porridge,' he said. 'Go on, tuck in.'

I prodded it, then spooned a heavy lump of the stuff into my mouth. It looked awful, but it wasn't so bad when I put a load of honey on it. Nutty and sweet, but stodgy enough to dislocate my jaw.

'Gabba gabba hey,' I mumbled.

'Eh? What?'

'It's... a song,' I said. 'Pinhead.'

'What?'

There were long gaps between mouthfuls and words as I tried to free my tongue and teeth from the syrupy glue.

'It's a song... by The... Ramones... Pinhead... Gabba..... gabba hey.'

He stopped chewing, looking puzzled, wiping some porridge on the sleeve of his woolly.

'The who?'

'No, not The... Who... The... Ramones... They're Yanks..... Punk band... I like.' My face glowed. I spooned more porridge in to block the laughter that was fighting to burst out.

'Punk... Puh!... Pinhead... Phwuh!' he said, in between chews. 'Sounds a right load of old tosh.' He poured two big enamel mugs of steaming dark tea, and blew and sipped until his jaw freed up.

'Grandad, can I stay?'

He grunted and chewed.

'Grandad?'

He paused. 'I don't know.'

'But...'

'I said, I don't know.'

I gave up and struggled on with the bowl of grey sludge. He sat staring at me, rubbing his chin.

'It's a bit thick this morning.' He nodded at my breakfast. 'Yer don't have to finish it.'

I had a few more mouthfuls of porridge and pushed my bowl away. 'Thanks,' I said. 'Have you got any orange juice?'

He just looked at me.

'Any orange juice... please?'

He laughed. 'Juice? I'll give yer juice.'

Ting-ting! He whacked my mug with his spoon. Tea slopped over the sides onto the table. He shook his head and watched me drink.

Pinhead

I looked round the kitchen. 'Where's your telly then, Grandad?'

'Hah! Television? Fraid not, boy.'

'You're kidding me.'

'I've no need of it,' he said.

'What do you do, then?'

'What d'yer mean? What do I do?'

'In the evening?'

'I listen to the radio. Or I read. Books, boy. Books!' He tapped the top book on the wobbling pile.

N...No...Nor... Norse S... Sag... Norse Sagas. The letters swam.

Grandad was going into one. 'I get some rest after a hard day's work. That's what I do. Gah! What do I do, indeed?'

'What about football? Match of the day and that?'

'The world doesn't revolve around television, boy. Or football,' he said.

'Blimey. I only asked.'

He looked at me, shook his head and stood up. 'Right, then. I've things to do. Yer can wash yerself in the sink there, if yer've a mind to.' He pulled on his yellow mackintosh. 'And yer can wash up the breakfast things, while yer at it. Yer'll have to pull yer weight while yer here, boy.' He picked up his mug of tea, sloshing its contents over the floor as he stomped off. 'Television, Hah! Orange juice... Phwuh!' He slammed the door behind him.

Almost immediately, he burst back in, plonked his empty mug down on the table and grumbled out again. The door whammed shut again. I heard him splash off across the yard.

The steaming, bitter tea burnt my lips and I cradled the mug in my hands. It tasted like shit! I chucked it - *Clang!* - into the fireplace. Tea splashed up the wall behind Grandad's chair. I cradled my head - my hair soft in my hands. I clenched my eyes shut - shouldn't have come here. Didn't want to stay here, with this old Miseryguts, but couldn't go home - back to the psychiatrist and the stupid bloody tablets, back the ashes on the floor and my smashed up room. *Scratch...* The painful clot in my chest screwing up tighter, tighter. *Scratch...* I knew I could stop that kind of pain - I knew the best way how. *Scratch... scratch.* I picked at the dressing on my wrist. Last night's blood had dried into a deep crimson scab and glued the ragged gauze to the skin. Raw Sienna. A flaking stain across the back of the hand made it look corpsed and dead. I clenched and unclenched the fist, cracking the dirty film that coated the fingers. *Scratch... scratch.* Taking the fork from the plate, I unpicked the dried mess of blood and cotton at the edge of the bandage. Layer by layer I worked down to the flesh of the hand that lay on the table. *Scratch... scratch, Scratch..... scratch.* A new kind of pain pulsed from the hand on the table. The knot in my chest loosened. *Scratch... scratch. Scratch... scratch.* Gradually, working deeper, the knot was worn

away. The new pain was gentle, physical, good - good because I'd made it and could make it stop, whenever I wanted to. But not just yet - *Scratch... scratch* - deeper into the good gentle pain, and the hand became my hand. The pain became my pain... and I stopped. Then, something cried out - loud and piercing, from across the yard.

the edge of the world

My chair clattered over the floorboards as I dashed to the window - nothing. Through the stringy net curtain, the yard looked the same. Then again, something cried out - a kind of whistling yelp. It was the same cry I'd heard the night before. Suddenly, the shed door smacked open and Grandad burst out, clutching his hand. He booted the door shut and frantically struggled with the padlock, but he straightened up and tried to look a bit more dignified when he saw me watching, so I pretended to wash up. I twisted the big tap and cold water splattered into the deep pitted sink. By the time I'd grabbed some breakfast dishes from the table, the kitchen door crashed open and he staggered in. He was muttering, very red in the face and clamping a handkerchief to his hand. It was stained with blood.

'What yer gawping at?' he said. He pushed past me to hold his hand under the cold water. It sprayed up his blue overalls.

'Gah!'

He sucked in sharply through his teeth as red water splashed into the white sink.

'Are you OK, Grandad?'

He grunted and drew long, deep breaths. 'Aye, lad. Just a scratch.'

'What happened? I heard that weird sound, again,' I said.

'Questions, questions, questions. Yer nosey bugger,' he grumbled into his scarf. He breathed in through his teeth again.

I shrugged at him.

'Yer like the cat that fell in the porridge pot,' he said.

'Eh?'

'Too curious.'

'Well, I wouldn't fancy falling in your lumpy old porridge.'

'Hah! Yer right enough, yer cheeky bugger. Anyways, yer' too nosy... just like yer Grandad,' he said. 'Well, I s'pose it was too much to hope for, keeping em a secret. I wasn't expecting visitors, after all.' He turned off the tap. 'Let alone me long lost Grandson.'

'Keeping *what* a secret?'

He filled a clean bowl with water, sat down at the table and inspected a large flap of flesh that stuck out from the base of his left thumb.

'Fierce wee buggers,' he said. 'Anyway, make yerself useful. Get me a medium field-dressing from the cupboard. They're in a tin. Says, First Aid on the thingamabob... on the... on the lid.'

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He nodded to the place where most of my tea had landed. I hoped he wouldn't notice the stain, quickly ran a cloth over the worst of it and opened the cupboard door.

'There, that's it. What yer doing with that cloth, lad?'

There were lots of big tins in the cupboard, all with labels on. I made a guess and pulled out a new one with a paper label cello-taped over a picture of cake.

'No, there. Not the watchamacallit... cake tin. Can't yer read, boy? No! Not biscuits! The First Aid one. What's the matter with yer? Can't yer read?'

I looked again and saw a Red Cross sign with a label taped over the scratched khaki lid. I held it up.

'Aye, that's the one. Bring it here, will yer?'

I put the tin on the table next to him as he hunched over his hand. The wound was deep.

'I'll need a couple of stitches,' he said. 'Pour some spirit on it.'

He nodded at the tin and I pulled the lid open. Inside was clean and bright, like new - packed with loads of packets of dressings and pins and dark bottles with more labels on - spidery, black scratches of words.

'Surgical spirit,' he said, waiting.

I hesitated.

'The big 'un,' he said, frowning at me. He held his hand over the bowl. 'Go on, pour it. Don't bugger about. Plenty of it. Yer have to watch out for infections with animals.'

I wrenched open a green bottle and tipped some clear liquid over his hand. It dripped onto the kitchen floor, as he hissed in through his teeth, again.

'Jeeesus wept!' he said. 'Phwaw! Surgical spirit... I bet yer enjoyed that... torturing yer poor old Grandad, eh?' He laughed grimly, then carefully chose a packet from the tin. With a quick snap of his free hand he shook the dressing from inside and deftly wrapped it in precise figures of eight around his palm and the base of his thumb. He glanced down at my crimson bandage as I held the tin for him.

'That should hold it,' he said, and studied my face. He took the tin from me. 'I reckon you need a fresh wrap on that little scratch of yours, too.'

'No... no. It's OK.' I backed away.

'Sit yerself down, boy.' His voice was firm, business like - milder than before, but I stepped back further.

'What's in the shed, Grandad?'

'Sit yer down,' he said, again.

I didn't move.

'What's in the shed?'

He sighed. His shoulders sagged a little.

'All right, well... I'll show yer, later.'

'Promise?'

'Promise? Phwa!'

He motioned for me to sit.

I stayed put.

'All right, all right. I'll show yer... I promise. Scouts bloody honour! Gah! Now, come on, sit down.'

I sat down, held out my arm and studied the crusty mound of my old porridge, still sitting on the table. Grandad pulled up his chair and gently unwound the crimson bandage from my arm. He sucked in through his teeth again, when he saw my cut. Neither of us spoke. The wind skirled under the eaves of the old cottage, echoed by slow rhythmic whistles of breath through his nose. The top of his head was dense with wiry grey spikes of hair. It bobbed closely over my arm. He smelt of wood-shavings and cups of tea, and something else I'd smelt outside - the blue air and the sea. I glanced down at my glistening gash - the clamped grim lips smiling inside my wrist. The room started to blur. He sighed again and I looked away. Shaky waves washed through me. I felt like I was going to chuck my breakfast up.

'We're a right couple of wounded Charlies, eh boy?' he said.

I nodded. My body trembled and my vision was fuzzy at the edges. His big hands dabbed a swab carefully and precisely across my skin as he wiped the dried blood away. I winced at the sting of the spirit.

'Whoops! Sorry,' he said. 'Just getting my revenge.'

He winked at me and wound a clean gauze strip around the wound. The clock above the mantelpiece ticked loudly.

I tried to concentrate, so's not to fall over. 'What is it, Grandad? In the shed?'

He stressed his words with nods of his head.

'Like I said, I'll show yer, but not now. I need to get stitched up, and we need to let them calm down.'

'But you said...'

'Whisht, lad,' he said, softly. 'You'll see em soon enough. We better get to Doctor Mackenzie's. I'd stitch myself up, but I'm all out of thread. There, that'll do.' He patted my arm and admired his handiwork. 'Right. Let's be off.'

I pictured Grandad grimly stitching up his own hand - he could have done it, definitely. I braved the smell of the tent-like duffle coat and followed him on wobbly legs, out to the Land Rover. My wrist throbbed, but the new bandage felt secure - a gag across the whispering lips. My head began to clear in the fresh air as we stood breathing for a while, then he threw me the keys.

'You'll have to drive boy,' he said, gesturing to his bandaged thumb. 'I can't grip the

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wheel.'

My legs stopped wobbling and I tried to hide my smile - another crack at driving. Last night's journey had scared me, but I'd get the hang of it better in the daylight.

'Try not to wreck me gearbox, this time,' he said.

'Course not.'

But it wasn't long before my control let me down.

He started moaning at me, as we lurched out of the yard and wound along the track. 'Yer like a bloody kangaroo, boy. Clutch! Clutch! Stop laughing! It's not bloody funny!'

Gradually, my driving settled down. The world shone through the murky windows. The blackhouse stood sheltered between rising hills and the craggy shore of a small sandy bay. A high, blue loom of an island stood out across the sea. As we climbed along the road the sun lit a long series of bays hemmed in behind by steep slopes of green and tan that rose up into thick mist.

'Caolas Tharasaigh,' said Grandad, nodding at the sea.

'Uh?'

He pointed towards the blue island. 'Tharasaigh,' he said. 'Taransay.'

Mists of white spray fanned off the tops of blue-green waves that broke over shale-grey rock or silver sand. The air seemed alive with the brightness - rocking the Land Rover with invisible hands, slowing it with great blustering gusts. But, wow! The colours! The blinding colours! I nearly blundered off the track. Pure 299. Pure 123. 112. 382. 338. French Ultramarine, Coeruleum Hue, Viridian, Viridian, Emerald Green Hue.

'Concentrate! Concentrate! Look where yer going! Staring about like a tit in a trance.'

'All right! All right! Keep yer hair on.'

I ground the gears again.

'Jesus wept! Poor old Seonaidh, battered inside and out,' said Grandad.

'Who? What?'

'Seonaidh, the name of the poor old lass whose gears yer mauling.'

'Eh?'

Grandad laughed.

'I named this old mechanical beastie after a sea sprite, boy. She drinks the diesel like a sprite drinks the brine, that's for certain.'

I tried to be gentle with the old banger as it dipped and clattered round the bay. Eventually we reached a small cluster of low houses with tile roofs and juddered to halt outside a pebble-dashed two storey house. A red bicycle leaned against the wall beneath a front window.

'Don't look like he's in,' said Grandad. 'But Lorna's bike's there, maybe she can do it. Get out and knock for us, will yer?'

I climbed the steps to the black front door and dropped the heavy iron knocker, three

times. The sound bounced back from the little house across the track, where a crack in the curtains twitched at one of the windows.

‘Take a look round the side, Stew.’

I hesitated, put my hands into the deep pockets of the duffle coat and fingered through the contents - downy fluff, cold metal tacks and bits of sandpaper.

‘Go on. I’ll get the gangrene at this rate, boy.’

I slipped and slid round the side of the house, past a high window, calling quietly. Grandad was shaking his head.

‘Hello... Hello,’ I called, softly.

At the back of the house was a fenced-in bird-shed, where some chickens and big white duck-type birds pecked at flecks of grain in the mud. The ducks honked loudly and flapped their creamy wings. Beyond the shed, was a small rich green field that bordered the shore of the bay. A whacking great finger of rock stood right in the middle of the field. There was a load of sheep around it, nibbling away like puffy lawn-mowers, but no people. They stopped feeding and raised their heads, chewing slowly.

‘Hello... Hello.’

The ducks and chickens were making a right racket. I knelt down towards the wire fence, trying to make soothing clucking sounds.

‘Are yer stealing our chickens?’

I nearly jumped out of my skin, turning around and slipping in the mud, banging my head on the wooden frame. An upstairs window was open and a girl about my own age was leaning out, towelling her dark head, trying not to laugh.

‘Er, no. No. I ain’t.’

She laughed. ‘Didn’t think so. What *do* yer want, then?’

‘It’s me Grandad, he’s cut his hand on... something.’

‘Is it serious?’

‘Quite a big cut, yeah.’

‘OK. I’ll be right down.’

She shut the window and disappeared, so I edged back past the ducks, which were going berserk. Round the front, Grandad opened his door.

‘Well?’

‘Yeah. I think she’s in.’

He climbed out of the cab.

‘You *think* she’s in?’

‘Yeah, she’s in, I mean. She’s in.’

The front door opened. The girl stood in the doorway, still rubbing her head with a towel.

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She was gangly and tall. Her thin flowery cotton dress clung to her wet body as the wind whipped it against her. She looked pink and clean, like she'd just been scrubbed. No make-up. No black eyes or lipstick like the Siouxsie lookalikes I fancied back home. Punk must have passed her by, stuck up here on this island.

'Are yer all right, Mr MacLeod?' She quickly made a turban out of her towel and struggled to get her arms into a threadbare pink woolly cardigan - all angles and elbows. She had bare legs and a man's big tartan slippers on.

'Aye, just got a nick, Lorna. Need a couple of stitches. I'm all out of thread. Could you do it? Save me waiting for yer Dad.'

'Sure.' She looked at me. 'Who's this, then?'

'Grandson,' said Grandad. He walked past her, into the house. I felt the duffle coat flapping about me like a tent. My bare feet felt cold in the huge muddy boots. I hadn't had a chance to wash.

'Yer coming in then, Johnny Rotten?' She flashed me a quick smile and followed Grandad. I tripped up the steps, shut the door behind me and followed the sound of their voices down a short, dim corridor. Some framed paintings hung on opposing walls. Broad, bold stroked splashes of amber, green and blue captured the landscapes that I'd seen on the drive over - nice stuff, pretty good. All landscapes, except one. There was a dark portrait of a raven-haired woman with a gaunt face and bright red lips. Grey rings circled the big black eyes that looked right at me out of the picture. Scary - mad - nice. Under the portrait stood a small antique table with a fancy table lamp, a telephone, a notepad, and a half empty cup of tea on it. Beside the cup and saucer was a gold watch, with a tan leather strap. I leant forward, guessing at the words in the gloomy corridor - S...W... Sw... Sw... Swiss, O... M... Om... Om... Omega. 24 - twenty four carat gold, 16 - sixteen jewels. I stroked the glass with my fingertip. Nice - maybe it was the Doctor's.

I heard Grandad moaning. Lorna was laughing. I followed their voices into a small sitting room that looked like a doctor's clinic. White, glass-fronted cabinets covered the walls, full of bottles and jars and packets of medical supplies. Shining steel equipment gleamed from shelves, lit by sunlight which streamed through the window I'd passed at the side of the house. The room smelt of disinfectant.

'Let's have a look at yer.' Lorna unwrapped the binding from Grandad's hand. 'I see you've lost none of your old skills, Mr MacLeod.'

Grandad mumbled something while she inspected the wound.

'Ooh, nasty. How did yer do that?'

He raised his eyebrows at her.

Lorna shook her head, knowingly.

'Oh, right.' she said, and cast a glance in my direction. 'Take a seat... Johnny?'

'Stewie,' said Grandad.

'Take a seat, Stewie. Have a read,' she said. 'Then, I can take a peek at that bandage of yours too, if yer like.'

'Er... no thanks.' I chose the most comfortable chair and plonked myself down.

She took a long look at me before getting back to Grandad's thumb. I picked through some crinkled magazines neatly piled on a wooden table - pictures of woman in knitwear, a woman riding a horse, a woman in a kitchen holding a loaf, a man in long boots standing in a river, fishing. Big words were spread across the cover - F... l...y... Fl... y... Fly. F... i..... s... h... Fi... sh i...n...g Fishing. Fly Fishing M...o... The letters began to swim. Fly Fishing Mo...n. The words rippled like waves, so I closed my eyes - starting to feel like throwing up, again. I tried to look again, turned the pages and thumbed through the pictures of fat, smiling men in wax cotton jackets, holding big, dead-eyed glassy fish. With every page my heart began to beat faster. Spidery black letters and diagrams of rods being waved. C...a...s...t - Rods being cast. The letters swam again - Look away. Focus on pictures - pictures of tied up flies that looked like little water animals. S... h..... r... i - Shri...m...p - shrimp. The jagged lips of my wound began to whisper again... *Scratch-scratch... scratch-scratch*. A clot of pain slowly began to grow in my chest. The letters swam, then grew jagged and my stomach turned over, so I put the magazine down. The clot began to shrink. I yawned and stretched my legs out. The letters crawled like spiders - itching in my brain.

'What yer reading, boy?' Grandad was watching me intently.

'Eh? Oh, just something about fishing.'

'What's it say?'

'Nothing much, just fly fishing stuff.' The jagged letters prickled inside my head.

'Oh, aye? Anything interesting?'

'Crikey, I dunno. Just boring stuff. Read it yerself.' I held the magazine out to him.

He grunted and looked down at my feet. 'Yer could've brushed yer boots afore yer come in,' he said.

There was a grim mixture of mud and duck-shit caked round the soles of my Wellies. Grandad tutted loudly and glared at me.

'Yer messy bugger.'

'Not to worry, Mr MacLeod,' said Lorna. 'Dad never bothers.'

'He does in his clinic,' said Grandad.

Jagged, jagged.

'Sorry... I'll... er...' I could feel my cheeks burning up. I just wanted to get those itchy words out of my head. The girl had said she was gonna check my bandage. I stood up. 'I'll just have a walk.' I stalked off down the corridor. The Swiss watch glinted beside the teacup. The clot in my chest was building up again. I paused beside the table, lifted the watch to my ear. Nothing. I

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tapped it but the second hand didn't move. It was dead. I slipped it into my pocket and strode down the corridor.

'Don't get lost....' I cut the sound of Grandad's voice, slamming the door behind me.

Bloody Misery-guts! What the hell was I doing here, with this horrible old git? The clot of pain screwed tighter. Raw-word-spiders creeping. Stumbled down the steps and began to jog round the side of the house, past the window. A white Land Rover was coming towards the house along the track. Broke into a run through the din of manic flapping ducks that honked like car horns. Skin - itching. Prickling. The sheep scattered bleating across the field as I vaulted the low stone wall. Bolted through them. Legs pump. Arms pump. Heart pumps. Jagged. Leaned into the sea wind blowing off the bay. It blasted against my chest, but I fought back, gasping hard as the duffle coat billowed out behind me, like a cloak. The watch inside my pocket dug into my thigh, bare feet slipped inside my boots - legged it across the open space past the tall finger of dark rock. Jagged word-spiders scraping. Jagged, jagged, jagged. Bumps and sudden dips slowed me, grass grasped at my legs and whipped under my feet as I struggled to keep upright, pelting across the treacherous earth. Jagged, jagged. Out of breath, out of breath, stumbled to a halt, bent double, gasping, holding onto knees - toppling over. After a few dizzy minutes, I straightened up - staggered across a blur of silver-white sand beside the rushing reach and draw of the shifting shoreline. My lungs stung with the fresh cold air and I turned to where high tufts of grass wove themselves deep into the low sand dunes. I slumped down, rolled onto my back and looked up into the sky. I felt sick from the effort of reading and running. My pulse flickered rhythmically through every inch of my body and I gripped the sand with my fingers. It felt like I'd fall off the world and into the sky. Small wisps of cloud flew from right to left across the blue until they disappeared beyond the dark green horizon at the edge of the bay.

As my panic left me, I felt the sun's warmth glowing in the damp sand beneath me. Ghosts of sand blew along the empty beach. This place was the edge of the world. The colours and sounds here were strange and dreamlike and the huge distances around me made me feel dazed. But, I was getting used to feeling dazed. Most of the last year had felt more and more unreal. I remembered the day they told me about Mum. *Sit down, Stewart, they said, there's something we need to tell you.* Right then, I knew something was up, because I was only *Stewart* when I'd done something wrong, or if Dad's posh guv'ner, Arthur Burden, was round for *Charades*, or a *Whiskey Mac*, or some other bollocks. And sorry, it wasn't *they*, it was *she* who'd told me. He - Dad, had just sat there looking angry, like it was my fault. Anyway, at the time I thought perhaps there'd been a letter from school, that they'd finally sussed my afternoons nicking off round Sumo's house. Then, she'd said - *We don't want you to worry, but...* But. That made my ears prick up. But, is a very small word to carry such a big clout. But, like a smack in the head, it's often followed by other knuckle-duster words like *You will do as I tell you, You will be in*

detention all week, I don't fancy you or I don't want to go out with you, or on this occasion, something even worse, like when Mum said... The Doctor says I've got cancer. It's funny, but as soon as she said it, I knew she only had a year to live. And I was right, almost to the day.

I tried to be her *Big strong son*, but it made no difference. It was no use, whatever I did. I made her cups of tea, brought her bunches of flowers, and I prayed - prayed on my knees at night in my room, crying to God, begging *Please God, just let her get well again, just give her one more year.* But... the bloody trying and the bloody praying and the bloody begging, was all meaningless bollocks. In the end, it was all worth nothing. The tea made her throw up and the flowers died and rotted and stank. And at the very end, my fear-slippery fingers and tear-trembling words couldn't hold her here in the world with me for one more second, let alone another month, another year. Every day since she'd gone felt like she'd only just died. Every day, I thought the pain would stop me from breathing. But, I was still here, still sucking the bloody air in, and blowing it out.

Seagulls drifted in two's and three's across my eye line, the sound of their grieving blown away, muffled, by the constant rush of wind. The constant patterns of cloud grew faint behind the blur of my eyelashes. The waves washed and rushed over the sand and rocks, drew slowly back, and washed and rushed again.

The sound of the waking world faded away, then I heard the voice I'd heard the night before.

Am fear a gheallas, 's e dh'iocas... He that promises must pay. By the wash and rushes, boy - clamp down. Sheer are We... The voice above the stones. Our far-eyes pour across beLow. If you, like other treaders fall, we'll thew your long gone meats to rivers of air. Watch for ghosts of trees. No pecking scrabblers or clucking beaters, boy!

Sheer are We...

We are...

'Stewie? Stewie?'

A woman's figure... a woman's figure was silhouetted against the sky.

'Mum?' I said.

'It's Lorna, Stewie. Yer know... from the Doctor's. Lorna Mackenzie. Yer were asleep. I think yer were dreaming.'

I sat up, shielding my eyes, squinting up at her. My head swam - confused with that strange voice still echoing inside me - *Am fear a gheallas, 's e dh'iocas... Sheer are We...* What did it mean? I tried to focus.

'Oh. Yeah... Lorna. All right?'

She sat down next to me, on the sand. Her dress rode up her leg a bit - she'd put some

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thick green woolly tights on.

'Aye. Yer grandad sent me down to fetch yer back. But, there's no hurry. Me dad's come back and stitching him up.'

'OK. Right, thanks. I was just having a sunbathe and ended up having a kip. Nice here, innit? When it's sunny.'

She didn't say anything. She just sat looking out to sea. Her long dark hair wrapped across her face in the wind. She pulled it away and faced me.

'Are yer OK, Stewie?'

'Yeah, me? Fine.'

'Are you sure?'

I dug a laugh out from somewhere. 'Yeah, course I'm sure.' I practiced some drum rolls on my knee.

Lorna was still looking at me, wouldn't look away. She looked young, but maybe she was older than me - about eighteen or so. Older than me.

'He told us you'd been having a tough time of it.'

I snatched a quick glance at her eyes - green.

I laughed. 'Hah! Oh, he did, did he?'

I looked down at the sand.

'Aye, he seemed quite worried about you.'

'What? Old Miseryguts? Nah, not him.'

She wrapped a frond of grass around her index finger. 'Yes, him. Oh, aye, He's a big softy, Mr MacLeod, when yer get to know him. Just a bit crusty from being on his own. It's just him all alone studying his old books. If yer'd seen the loving way he's looked after those spiteful...' She stopped herself.

'Looked after those spiteful what?'

'Nuthin, spiteful nuthin,' she said. 'But he's worried for yer, I know.'

She looked out towards the sea. A mist of sand a foot high blew across the beach, and spray flew up from the waves as they fell. I stole glances at her as she watched it all moving around us. What was Grandad looking after? What was in the shed? What was Lorna keeping from me? Her round, freckled, rosy face gave nothing away - changing constantly - reacting as she looked around. She lowered her long lashes and chewed her dry lips as something shifted behind her Permanent-Light-Green eyes. She ran fistfuls of sand through her fingers, letting the grains blow behind us. She frowned, smiled, asked a question with her eyes, then, she looked right at me.

'What's London like, Stewie?'

'London?'

'Aye, London.'

London was a long way off.

'Er, well, it's big... and, er... it's really big...'

'Big? Yer don't say?'

She grinned at me and laughed. Big giggles of laughter. They rippled into me until I laughed back at her.

'Yeah, it's really big,' I said. 'And... busy.'

The sand ran slipped through her fingers. She stopped laughing.

'I want to see it some time. I've got to. I've never... I've never been off the islands, yer see. I've been to Skye, of course. But, not the mainland.'

'What? Never?'

'Never.'

The colour drained from her face.

'How come?'

'Oh, well... reasons' She looked at her wrist-watch. Disney - Minnie Mouse - no kidding. 'Oh, c'mon. We better get back, now.' She started to get up, but sank back.

'How come you've never been off the islands?'

She frantically traced lines in the sand with her fingers. 'I have... have to... I have to stay here and help Dad.' The lines became ruts as she gauged deep into the sand. 'I have to... look after... things. But... but... one day I'll go. I see it. I'll see it all. A West End show, or Star Wars if it's still on. Ballet, the Tate gallery... I don't know... everything. Everything. I'd do almost anything to get away from here.'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'It'll wait. London ain't going anywhere.'

Her face became less agitated. She smoothed the sand with her palm. Her eyes flickered, searching my face. They were the same colour as the woman's in the portrait.

'What... what if someone steals it before I get a chance to visit?' she said.

'Nah, can't steal it.' I said. 'It's too big.'

The colour seeped back into her face as she laughed again. She sprang up lightly, brushing the sand off her tights and her dress. 'Better see how Old Miseryguts is getting on,' she said, and winked. She smiled and frowned and asked questions with her green eyes. 'Come on..... Johnny Rotten,' she said.

the doctor

The walk back across the field was silent except for the rising breeze and the sheep bleating - like a bunch of chilly kids moping in a winter PE lesson. The wind blew away Lorna's stuttering questions about London, and mine about the island, so in the end we gave up shouting at each other. Nearer the house it was more sheltered. She stopped, picked up a lamb and hugged it.

'I think I'll name it Stewie,' she yelled.

It wriggled in her arms and bleated up at me, as I stroked its matted wool.

'She likes yer,' she said.

We plodded back through the grass and sheep, past the big dirty-white ducks, which started flapping wildly.

'I reckon they've taken a shine to yer, too' she said.

'Those ducks are bloody loopy.'

She laughed at me. 'They're geese, not ducks. Yer big silly.'

'Oh.'

It was suddenly quiet out of the wind, behind the house.

'Don't spose yer have too many geese in London? Eh? Anyway, at least yer've made one new friend.' She giggled as the lamb licked my fingers. It scarpered off as soon as she put it down.

I smiled at her. 'Maybe,' I said.

Maybe.

Maybe, I'd got a new friend.

Oh, Shit!

I'd got her dad's watch in my pocket. Shit! I'd have to try and put it back on the table when we got back into the house. When Lorna wasn't looking, I transferred it from my jeans to the duffle coat so I could slip it back on the table, nice and quick. But, when we walked round the front Grandad and the Doctor were already outside, admiring the new white Land Rover I'd seen coming along the track.

'I'll probably be needing a new gearbox, for mine,' Grandad said, to the thin angular man, who was puffing a pipe.

'Ah, Stewie, this is Doctor Mackenzie.'

The Doctor nodded in my direction. 'Stewart.' He spoke through gritted teeth, like a ventriloquist, clenching the pipe, so that words and dirty brown smoke gusted from the side of his mouth. He dragged and exhaled. 'Welcome to Harris. I trust you're enjoying your stay here?'

I nodded at him as he looked me up and down. He studied my hair closely, my jeans, my

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boots. He took his pipe out and spat into the grass. I clutched his watch, bits of fluff and wood-shavings, deep in the pocket. He looked like a lot of the passengers I'd seen leaving the island when I boarded the ferry. Flat cap. Scruffy tweed jacket. Corduroy trousers. Red face. Tie strangling his neck. Like Lorna, he had a lilting island accent, but unlike her, he seemed glad to be rid of his words and made them go a long way. He gripped my hand, shook it with what felt like a bunch of bony bananas and looked into my eyes.

'Can yer play chess?' All I could think about was his watch.

'Er... Yeah... yeah, a bit.'

'Then, we'll have yer over with ourselves, for a game. I expect yer better than yer Grandad.' He let go of my hand.

Grandad, made a rumbling sound. 'Pah! I can beat you, Mackenzie.'

'He thinks he can play, too. Maybe he can give you a game so yer can both get some practice.'

'I can beat both of them,' said Lorna.

Grandad nodded his head ruefully. 'Aye. Yer have as much chance of swimming the Minch, as beating Lorna.'

'Aye. She's not natural,' said Doctor Mackenzie through a pall of smoke. 'Chess should be a social pastime. She treats it like a war.'

'It is a war,' said Lorna.

'I like not pullets becoming cocks, girl. It's a man's game,' said the Doctor, through his gritted teeth.

'It's all a man's game.' She said under her breath. Her eyes flickered.

'Hah!' said Grandad, and clapped the Doctor hard on the back. 'Yer should never have taught her if yer didn't want to get beat.' He motioned for me to take the driver's seat, climbed into his own and wound down the window. Lorna walked up the steps and stood in the doorway. The wind whipped her dress around her green woolly legs. I got into my seat carefully, so Doctor Mackenzie's watch didn't fall out of the duffle coat. I'd never get it back into the hallway now.

'C'mon, boy'

I started the engine and tried to concentrate, praying I wouldn't stall or grind the gears in front of everyone.

Doctor Mackenzie leaned close to the window. 'Right, Doug. Go easy with that hand.' He turned his eye on me. 'Keep an eye on him, Stewart. He's not as fit as he thinks he is.' The Doctor nodded at me to make sure I'd understood. He blew a cloud of stinking smoke into my face.

'Maybe we'll see yer at Kirk, Sunday?'

'Pah!' said Grandad. 'Let's be off, boy.'

Lorna gave a brief wave from the top of the steps and her dress whipped up in the wind. I

let the clutch out slowly. We turned away from the white house and headed smoothly back the way we'd come. Nice - I slipped second gear in OK. Then, as we gathered speed, I let the clutch out too soon, couldn't find third - so it made a bloody awful racket when it engaged.

'Jesus wept! Show some care, boy. Show some care.'

'It ain't my fault the gears are knackered.'

Grandad wound his window up. Seonaidh's springs creaked and clattered.

'Well, aye. They are a wee bit notchy. I'll give yer that.'

'Well lay off me, then,' I said.

'All right, boy. Calm down.'

We made our way back around the bay in silence. I carefully changed up and down as we dived down the track or climbed steeply above the shoreline.

'That's better, Stew.'

Ahead, the blue sky was disappearing behind big fresh ranks of heavy cloud. When the sun was blotted out Grandad reached across the dashboard and switched the headlamps on. My stomach rumbled and my lips and tongue were dry. I was relieved to spot the blackhouse, nestling below the rocky slopes. I managed to pull into the yard and stop without stalling. I was glad to be back.

'Yer getting the hang of it now, eh?'

'Cheers, Grandad.'

'Let's get in for some lunch before it rains,' he said.

Despite my growling stomach I was even more hungry to find out what was hidden in the shed. But I stopped myself from asking, just in case he lost his rag and broke his promise. Inside, the kitchen was cold and Grandad prodded the fire. He chucked some driftwood on it and put what looked like a lump of mud into the stove. Then he dished up some big slabs of bread, strange smelling cheese and Branston pickle, while the kettle boiled. Soon, he faced me across the table, mugs of tea steaming between us.

'Try not to dent my beautiful crockery, eh, Stew? Against the wall.'

'Eh? Oh. Sorry.'

He nodded.

'Not to worry. I'm a miserable old sod at times. Yer get a bit cranky when yer on yer own.'

We sat and slurped while the fire crackled. Rain began to rap on the windows and drum softly on the door. I thought of the photographs in Grandad's bedroom - of the Grandmother I'd never met, and my young Dad with his greasy quiff. I was part of that family too, the one Grandad had lost touch with. He leaned back in his chair, drained his mug and smacked his whiskery chops.

'I was gasping,' he said. He looked at me. 'No doubt, you'll be wanting to know what's in the shed, eh?'

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'Is it some kind of animal?'

He rose and stretched with a groan, then he lit an oil lamp with a taper from the fire.

'Grandad?'

'It'll be better if I just show you, boy,' he said. 'Are yer ready?'

the shed

'Yer can't muck about with these buggers, lad.' He held out his bandaged hand and raised his eyebrows.

'No, I won't muck about.'

'Are yer ready, then?'

I nodded, but when I stood up, there was no strength in my legs. My mouth felt dry again. We put our coats back on and crossed the yard, leaning into the squall that had blown in. Grandad pulled out two dead rabbits from the back of Seonaidh and held them up.

'Courtesy of the good and pious doctor,' he said. 'Grab hold.'

He thrust the limp animals into my hands. Fluffy like cuddly toys, but heavy and real. Disgusting. Ugh! I shuddered at the blank dead eyes and felt the meat - still warm, beneath the soft, damp, grimy coats. Mud was stuck to the fur in clumps, like on my footy socks, after a match. Grandad fumbled with the padlock and pushed the rickety door open. The wind was singing in the eaves of the shed now, and the thin plank walls shuddered and quivered with the whack of each fresh blast that struck. He pulled the door shut behind us and took the rabbits from me, his stony face lit by the oil lamp.

'You'll have to stay quiet,' he whispered. 'No sudden movements. Let me go first.'

It smelt mouldy and damp, and of something else I couldn't recognise.

'It niffs a bit, in here.'

'Shushh!' I could feel Grandad glaring at me in the gloom. Water dripped from the roof beams into my hair as I followed him, ducking through the brush of cobwebs that clutched at my cheeks and lips and eyelashes. He held the lamp up high and made his way forward into the shadows, surrounded on all sides by weird warped shapes. Gradually, more light filtered in through a dust encrusted window on our left. As my eyes grew used to the darkness, the shadows and shapes became trestles and frames, benches, oil drums and big wooden chests.

'This was my workshop,' he whispered. 'My old looms. When I was a weaver.'

The squall outside was over almost as soon as it began. The beating of the rain on the roof died down and the wind fell silent. There was a low whistling sound and something moved, out of sight, at the back of the shed. I trod softly forward, trying not to trip over the tools and boxes that littered the floor. I peered around, holding my breath - nothing. What'd made the sound? What'd nearly ripped Grandad's thumb off? The workshop was much bigger than I'd imagined, filled with dusty looms, cupboards and stuff that look liked it hadn't been touched for years. An old motorbike leaned against a wall. Three tailor's mannequins slumped drunkenly against mouldering shelves piled high with drab swatches of decaying tartan. Suddenly, the hidden

occupant of the shed shrieked out - I flinched at the piping whistle and grabbed Grandad's arm, startling him.

'Jesus wept! Get off me, yer big Jessie!'

'Sorry.'

Bloody hell! What *had* he got in here? We inched forward through the dark, closer... closer. Then I saw them at the back of the shed, standing motionless - still as stone - like two living statues.

Against the back of the shed, Grandad had rigged up a thin wall of wire fencing which spanned across the room. It had a little wooden framed door built into it on the right, where it met the wall. Behind the wire stretched a long horizontal beam. Perched on the beam, side by side, were two eagles. One, golden-bronze and massive. The other smaller, mottled.

'Stay back, Stew,' said Grandad, softly.

The ear-piercing whistle sounded again, as both eagles opened and shook their wings a little. The big one ruffled out its head-feathers like a crown - fixing me in a stare I couldn't hold or turn from, the other fidgeted in anticipation as Grandad held up the skinned rabbits and set the lantern down on a bench.

'Whisht, now. Whist now,' he crooned at them. 'It's just me and the boy, to bring yer dinner.' He laid a rabbit on a bench and chopped it in two with a meat cleaver. The eagles whistled and ruffled. Two Harryhausen harpies, come to life, in my grandad's shed.

Cautiously opening the door, he swung the two halves of the carcass, one to each eagle, up onto flat wooden trays that were attached to each end of the beam. The eagles flapped their wings, casting huge splayed shadows against the back wall. I gasped - for just as Grandad stepped out of the cage, a ray of hazy sunshine warmed through the murk of the room. It lit the rich sheen of the birds - brown and amber shoulders gleamed as they turned their powerful heads this way and that, tugging, ripping into the rabbit flesh with big, hooked beaks. The light caught the napes of their angular necks as they pulled at the meat - hot gold glowing in the dark. Raw Umber, maybe.... Maybe, not quite... Burnt Sienna..... I dunno... I forget the paint numbers... I forget the numbers...

'Eagles,' I whispered.

'Aye, lad. Golden eagles. Did you ever see anything like em?'

The eagle pair tore into their bunny-burgers - sinew and muscle, gulleeted it down with twitches of their heads, and fixed us with wary penetrating stares between cuts and bites, as though we might be next.

Grandad whispered close beside me. 'They set my pulse racing every time I see em'. I got too cocky this morning, thought I could hand it to them, like feeding a pet. Rip! She got me in an instant, the big one, the mother. Serves me right, eh?'

I lost track of the time we stood there gaping at them, together. Slowly, they began to settle, preening, ruffling and shaking out their wings like we weren't even there - didn't even exist. Grandad picked up the lantern and motioned for me to follow him.

*

Outside, we were blinded by the sun streaming through a sizable break in the clouds. Grandad shut the juddering door and turned to me. He smiled a big, broad, proper smile, for the first time since I'd arrived. We both stood there grinning. It felt like he'd shown me some secret treasure mine and handed me a priceless chunk of gold ore.

'Where... why are they here?'

'I found em, up in the hills about six weeks back,' he said. 'A bit like I found you. Lost at the side of the path, soaked through, shivering... The mother - the big one - had some shot in her wing. Folks round here don't like em. Shoot em. Reckon they eat the lambs. The youngster was smaller then, weaker, starving. I've been feeding 'em though, building 'em up. I reckon it won't be long 'til they're ready to go.'

'Could I feed 'em?' I said.

'Maybe, in time. When they get to know yer.' He held up his hand. 'Can't take no chances with these wee fellas.'

The door stuck and he leaned his weight against it and clicked the padlock shut.

'Had a devil of a job keeping 'em supplied with rabbits, I can tell yer,' he said. He rubbed his left arm as though it hurt. 'Reckon it's time for a sit down, boy.'

Inside, by the fire, he slumped down in the old armchair and stretched out his long legs. I hadn't noticed how thin they were. For the first time, it struck me how old he was. Doctor Mackenzie had said to *keep an eye on him*.

'Would you like some more tea, Grandad?'

He looked surprised.

'Oh, aye. Thanks. Mind yer fingers on the stove.'

Soon, the kettle was whistling and the tea was steaming, but by the time I carried his mug over, he was hunched back in his chair and snoring gently. I put the mug down and stood over him, half scared that he'd wake and see me watching. He looked done in. His face sagged into the gentle rise and fall of his chest, and his forehead creased into an exhausted but defiant scowl. His eyes shifted, flickering beneath the lids. He looked fierce, even in his sleep, but he cradled his bandaged hand protectively across his belly. He looked tired and wounded. *Wounded Charlies*, he'd called us. Maybe Lorna was right and the frowns and growls were a bit of an act. Maybe he wasn't as bad as I thought he was. He'd trusted me with the driving, twice. And he'd shown me

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the eagles. I felt shocked at feeling worried about him, shocked at feeling something other than Mum, for the first time in months. I shook myself and quietly washed up the plates and pans from breakfast and lunch. He didn't wake. When I'd finished, I crept past him and got my Adidas bag. I put Doctor Mackenzie's Omega watch inside and took out the old one of Grandad's that I'd taken from the table, the previous night. Its big second hand ticked slowly underneath the scratched glass. I edged back into the kitchen. He was still dozing and beginning to snore gently. His big chest rose and fell with deep irregular breaths and his eyes flickered beneath the lids. I placed Grandad's watch back on the kitchen table where he'd left it, then I slipped back into the bedroom and lay down.

her body of words

As soon as I lay down my eyes closed. The sound of rain fluttering against the window mixed with the gentle purring of Grandad's snores floating in through the half open door. Splinters of images, sounds and words from the day flickered behind my lids - Grandad's bloody hand, the screaming eagles, Doctor Mackenzie blowing smoke in my face and inviting me to church. Lorna waving goodbye. The rain fluttered softer... softer...

*

I see Lorna with sand slipping through her fingers, grains drifting into the wind. She's framed by the cresting waves of the bay. The wind whips her dress up and I see she's wearing dark-green stockings. She's smiling, crinkling her freckles, her hair tousled by the wind. She speaks softly and presses her hands against my shoulders, pushes me down onto the sand. Her words mingle with the rush and crash of the waves. Her words sound new and strange, but I understand. She lies beside me and runs her hands under my t-shirt, her fingers smoothing, soothing across my skin. I lay silent and still. This feels really good. The dream is good, but it slips beyond my control and Lorna stops stroking me. She stands up. Her white dress is covered in black words. Written words I can't understand. She points them out - *Coit do'n buin sibh?* She says it over and over, but I can't understand. I concentrate harder. This is my dream and I'll decide what happens. I dream harder. The wind whips Lorna's word-dress around her as she stands on the sand. Her hair flies out behind her. I make the wind blow stronger and her dress frays. It begins to shred and tatter - strip by strip, word by word - it tears and flies away like ribbons of paper - pages like rags, words like birds that stream away across the dunes. Lorna speaks the words - mother, father, stupid, learn, burn, eagle, grandad... Pinhead. Each word that shreds reveals more of her, her shoulders, her arms, her thighs. I dream harder, harder. The words fall from her breasts, the gentle mound of her belly and a dark blur below. I want to see, feel more. I dream harder, harder. Focus. Focus. But then Grandad's gruff voice drifts like a black crow across the sand, cracking in, tearing it all up.

'Pick 'em up! You bastards! Pick 'em up!'

drum

I found myself awake, floundering, sweating, on his bed. Grandad was snoring and snuffling like a pig in the next room. He began to mumble. His voice was strained and anxious.

'Pick 'em up! Pick 'em up!'

My images of Lorna vanished. I lay there, shocked by the vivid dream images, surprised, scared - that somehow she'd know, that maybe she'd know what I'd seen, what I'd felt. A tiny damp patch on my jeans soaked through from under my pants.

'Pick 'em up! Get 'em up! Leave 'em be, yer bastards!'

Grandad's voice was getting louder, clearer.

'Keep yer heads down!'

Something clanged onto the floor of the kitchen. I struggled up and tied my jumper round my waist to hide the stain. I opened the door. Grandad was sitting up, panting, staring about him. His hair was all over the place and his face was pale.

'Are... are you all right, Grandad?'

'Uh... eh? Eh? Oh. Aye. Just a stupid dream.'

He got up, smoothed his hair down and stooped to pick up the kettle.

'Aye, just a dream. No sense in stupid dreams. Eh, boy?'

'No,' I said. 'No, you're right.' I tied my jumper tighter.

'Cup o' tea?' he said. 'I conked out before I drank the last one.'

He flipped the lid off the kettle, filled it with water and put it on the stove.

'Nah... no, thanks.' Images of Lorna returned. I tried to push them away. I slumped down at the table and sighed.

'Can I go and look at the eagles?'

'No, no more today. They need to get used to yer slowly.' He coughed and combed his grey brush of hair.

I sighed again and looked round the room. The radio sat bright and shiny and silent on the mantelpiece. No music since I'd got here - at the back of beyond. Tap-tap-tapped my fingers on the table until music started to return to the stereo in my head. I tapped the drum intro for Teenage Lobotomy. My fingertips beat on the warm wood. In my mind, the Ramones joined in on vocals, bass and guitar. I drummed louder.

'Pack that in, will yer?' snapped Grandad. 'Yer'll do my head in.'

I stopped. The music stopped.

'Bit boring for yer here, eh?' he said, more gently.

I just looked at him and nodded.

'Well, I expect yer dad'll be up for yer soon.'

'No, Grandad. I want to stay. I don't want to see him... or go back... there.'

He said nothing.

'Can't you let me stay?'

The kettle began to boil.

'Grandad?'

'I don't know, boy.'

'Why not? Ah, right. You don't want me either. Right.'

'It's not up to me.'

'Who's it up to then?'

'Yer dad.'

'He don't give a shit about me.'

'Mind yer language, boy.'

'But he don't.'

'Doesn't, not don't.'

'What the ffff!... Doesn't, don't.... he don't, does he?'

Grandad looked across at me, then filled the teapot.

'And, you don't either.'

'Look...' he said. 'It's not up to me. He's yer dad.'

I started tapping the table again - Ditdit duduhdit duduhdit ditdit. The music kicked into my head - Ditdit duduhdit duduhdit ditdit. Ditdit duduhdit duduhdit ditdit - *Lobotomy! Lobotomy!*

'Well, anyway, boy. Yer here for the time being, aren't yer?'

Lobotomy! Lobotomy!

'Look, yer here til the end of the week. We'll talk about it then.'

Lobotomy!

'Gah! Pack it in will yer? Why don't yer get out from under my feet for a while? Get some fresh air, boy. Rain's packed in for a while, I reckon.'

I stopped drumming - wedged in the chair. Grandad, was scribbling into the notebook. He stopped and sat frowning into the fire. Then he had another go.

'Why don't yer take a wander up to the Cairn?' he said, gently. 'It'll do yer good.'

'To the what?'

'Cairn. Big pile o' stones up the hillside. Better than sitting here, picking yer nose.'

He really wanted to get rid of me.

'OK. Yeah, right. I will.'

'Don't go too far though, eh? Sun goes down quick. Here, yer jackets dry.'

He held it out to me. I got up, snatched it from him, pulled on the black leather and opened the door.

'You got a watch?'

'Er, yeah... yeah, I have.'

'Supper's at six. Right?'

'Yeah. Bye, then.' I pulled the door and it blammed shut behind me.

teenage lobotomy

Grumpy old bastard! Stay to the end of the week? Thanks for nothing! Don't wanna be in this dump anyway. Nothing to do, no mates, no music - nothing - no Teenage Lobotomy, no Ramones, no Pistols, no anarchyyyyyyah! Piles of shit everywhere! And Lorna. Crikey! Can't believe I had a wet dream over Lorna. Only met her once. I must be desperate. Sumo, Fin, Alex, Shemmy - they'd piss 'emselves.

I stormed through the bleating sheep,
rocks and more bloody sheep.

I dodged the piles of shit, struggled up the hill.

Yeah. Give 'em a right laugh. Me fancying some square, lanky, farm girl in green tights. She'd never have made Sumo's top ten, that's for sure.

But, shit – she was all right, really.

Hah! Sumo's top ten. I was sick of hearing about his top ten birds - Sumo's Harem, he called it. At number one was Kate Bush, (Kate'd stormed in at number one despite her screechy voice), er..... at number two... Siouxsie Sioux (She'd have kicked his teeth in, and she was my number three), three... was sexy Pauline Murray from Penetration (She was my number seven), Polly Styrene (bit of a goer, we reckoned), Farah Fawcett Majors (Charlie's Angels - say no more), and er... Oh Yeah, Lulu. Hah! - he likes Lulu, he'd kept it quiet a long time, but had fessed up when he was pissed one night - must have been some childhood crush - too noisy for me, though, she had a right gob on her. Then came seven... seven... Faye Dunaway (Obvious King Kong connection - appealed to Sumo's apelike qualities), then, Sally James off TISWAS (We'd all get up early for Saturday morning Kids TV, just to ogle her perky nipples), ten... Leela, off Dr Who - (The only leather loincloth on the box), and finally Sarah Brightman and Hot Gossip (Not quite sure if this qualified as there was loads of crumpet in Hot Gossip, and this took his top ten way into the twenties).

Time for a breather. I looked back.

Green slopes fell away, steeply – down to the croft.

Grey blobs of sheep and rocks. I struggled on, up the hill.

I had two top ten lists. I had the one for the lads, and then the private one for me. My one for the lads was pretty much the same as theirs, but in a slightly better order. The one for me was a bit different. The girls in it were all dead. It wasn't really a list of dead girls – it was a list of pictures - paintings, sketches. The girls were Austrian models - painted by Klimt and Schiele. The pictures that'd got me into art, and that. Paintings - Sonja Knips in a dress like a waterfall, or Emile

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Floge in an ocean of blue - or the liquid tumbling cuddles of the unknown bundle of girls in *The Maiden*. Then, for Schiele, there was Moa, Valerie Neuzil (his girlfriend Wally), his wife Edith and his sister Gerti, or there was my number one, Adele Harms (*The Reclining Woman with Green Stockings*). But I couldn't choose between them, really. They were all amazing and I couldn't leave any out - like *The Daydreamer* or *Danae*. Mrs Altmann (My art teacher), she'd told me the German names of my other favourites - *Madchenkopf*, *Die Tanzerin*, *Sitzender Weiblicher Akt*. I didn't know what the names meant, but I could remember 'em. And of course there was *The Kiss*. I had prints of 'em all at home, but I hadn't shown 'em to Sumo or my other mates - they'd have just thought I was looking at porno. Not that I didn't have a few well-thumbed copies of Rustler that Sumo leant me. But, they'd have just seen tits or pubes, and they'd have taken the piss. My mum found 'em once. The art, not the porno - should have seen her face. But, she'd said they were beautiful. And 'though I nearly bloody died when she saw 'em, I knew she understood why I loved 'em. Dad laughed when she told him, but I reckoned he was just glad that I liked girls - that I wasn't a poof. Cos I hadn't ever brought any girls home. That Lorna, though, in those green tights, or stockings, she really reminded me of Schiele's picture - of the *Woman in the Green Stockings* and I couldn't stop thinking about what was underneath. She was all right, really. Talking to her was all right. I didn't have to bullshit about being OK, about everything being fine. After Mum died, my mates never asked me about it - her death - just kept to the usual stuff like football, or their top ten films or records, or Sumo's Harem. Or mostly they'd just kept away. I'd been relieved really. Anyway, I reckoned they'd laugh at me for fancying Lorna. I knew they wouldn't like her. But, they weren't here, and she was. Actually, she wasn't bad for a square bird - just a bit skinny. Still, better than being fat. I'd given her about a five out of ten, for looks. Nice face, nice arse, but small tits - skinny, like one of Schiele's birds. And her wearing green stockings. Were they stockings or tights? Yeah, if I did manage to stay here, maybe I might get to find out. Yeah, at least there was Lorna, and the eagles.

My breath was loud in my ears.

Beyond the croft, the sea glittered.

Blue grey mounds of hills and islands edged the horizon.

'Shit! I'm knackered. How far is this Cairn, this bloody pile of stones?'

Not much comfort sitting on this freezing rock.

'Ffff! I'm never gonna get this sheep-shit off me Martins!'

Keep moving.

Blimey, yeah, those golden eagles. Amazing. Really amazing. Funny enough, me dad tried to get me to do a bit of bird watching when I was a kid, on a trip up Hampstead Heath. Before we moved there. Before he tried to be posh. Yeah, he was all right, then. We got on all right, then. Come to think of it, we'd been up there a lot - used to sail a toy boat on the lake. Yeah. Little red

boat. We even played footy, and I remember sometimes, sometimes he'd tell me about living up here, on the Island. Actually, he said it was a dead end, up here - going nowhere. Dad never said much about Grandad, though. Funny that - he didn't talk to Grandad and I don't talk to him. Doesn't, not don't - as Grandad had said. Hah! Still, I ain't going back to Dad, back to London. I ain't gonna be factory fodder, or bored out of me brains on the dole, like all the other mugs. Maybe, I could be a roadie. Got to all the gigs, hang around the bands and get in with them - get to be their roadie. Maybe I could run off to Glasgow when the Rezillo's play there - ask to be their roadie. Or, I could go to Manchester? - look for the Buzzcocks. Yeah, I could get a job as a roadie, then work for the Ramones.

Rocks are steep.

A bit dodgy here –

bust me ankle if I don't watch it.

Don't wanna get stuck in a dead end. Like lonely Lorna - living up here - miles from anyone, just her and her Dad - he looks like a right nob. But, she's nice. I ain't going back. Maybe she'd talk to Grandad for me. She might. She might try. She's the nearest thing I got to a mate, up here. A friend. A girlfriend. Never had a proper girlfriend - not for more than a week, anyway. Haven't even had a proper fumble yet, just a quick flash of Clare Radford's fanny in the junior's, behind the bike sheds - Shit! I'm an X-ray-Spex cliché - *Ima Cliché! Ima Cliché!* Yeah - just a quick flash before Miss Tomlinson caught us. Wonder if Lorna ever went behind the bike sheds with anyone? Wonder if Lorna's already got a bloke? Some strapping great Jock in a kilt? Still, what's the difference - won't be here long enough to scratch my arse. Shit! *Lobotomy! Lobotomy! All the girls are in love wi me, I'm a teenage Lobotomy!* That hill was bloody steep. And this must be Grandad's Cairn. Great! – A stupid pile of rocks. What's the point of coming all the way up here? *Lobotomy! Loboto...*

'Fuck me!'

Look at that!

the ghosts of trees

It was weird. The music faded in my head, or maybe it just merged into something physical. Something I could feel and see. The clash of drums and guitars faded and mixed into a slow, low, constant note that was strumming beneath my anger - that had been playing so quietly in the background for so long, that I'd never noticed it before. But now, I felt it vibrating, singing, rumbling - below me in the rock and in the mud and the grass. Maybe it was a note, maybe it was a word - one I didn't know and in a voice not heard before. Maybe, the voice had always been there - speaking through the light and through the air, and talking inside me, too.

I sat down on a slab of granite at the base of the Cairn. To the North of me the hills rose and fell in waves of grey-green rock and grass - dark Terre Verte, Sap Green. I knew I was looking North because the sun was on my left and sinking fast - and everyone knows that happens in the West. Each cliff facing the sun was burning with a warm rosy-gold or shadowed in a monstery gloom, blocked by higher peaks that stole the sunlight. The rounded peaks ranged higher and further, some ringed with mist or cloud, and I stared further and further out, until beyond them stood a right big, proper mountain. The light shone all down its western slope, while its black back half stabbed like a knife-tip triangle cutting into the pale blue sky. All the air and cloud and rock, even the grass and the sea to the West had their own colours melted with this warm rosy-goldness into a Deep-Chrome-Orange-Rose-Madder-Scarlett-lake. I've forgotten the paint numbers now. I've forgotten the numbers. Below me, the voice vibrated, sang and rumbled in the rock. The light melted all down the arms of my biker jacket and jeans and all across my Ramones t-shirt - Gabba gabba hey! My clothes melted with the light. So did my hands - the gritty mud on my palms and fingers. I touched the skin on my face and knew it was melting too. The colours changed beyond my colour-numbers and beyond the names of colours I'd learnt so far. I leaned against the cold rumbling rocks, shivered, and watched the sun going down. Had my mum ever seen this? I knew my dad must have seen it. Grandad knew the sunset would be like this. That's why he'd sent me up here. Mums and dads and sons and daughters of MacLeods must have watched the sun set up here for hundreds of years. But what was that? I shivered again. The rumbling voice grew below me, singing in the rock and in the mud and the grass. I screwed my eyes up and strained to see the surface of the darkening slopes. Something weird was happening - or my eyes were really mucked up. As the sunlight shrank back from each hill the shadows lengthened and spread, but they weren't shadows of hills and rocks - it looked like they were shadows made of trees - fresh, tall pines and old gnarled yews, dense woods, growing all across the lower slopes and through the valleys in between. Trees were growing where there were no

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trees. A voice sounded back to me from a dream - *Watch for the ghosts of trees!* I stood up and rubbed my eyes. The shadow forest grew and spread its way towards me, rugged and uneven, covering all the land between me and the mountain. But, looking harder, focussing, I couldn't be sure if I was tired and dreaming or if I could really see this - was it trees? Or grass? Or shadows? I looked again. Towards the East, above the line of the approaching forest, a silhouetted figure of a man cut into the sky from the top of the nearest ridge. A brilliant light flashed from the head of the figure - a telescope or binoculars, I reckon.

Don't get lost, boy.

Grandad's warning voice sounded in my head. The rumbling grew below me, trembling in the rock – trembling into me. I felt the hair standing up on the back of my neck. Suddenly I felt scared. I turned away from the threatening tree shadows that seemed to be growing towards me. I quickly left the Cairn and walked quickly off down the hill, not daring to look back. I focused on the light glowing from Grandad's windows, and breaking into a trot I picked my way as fast as I could, back down through the rocks, towards the croft. And I never dared looked back.

fruit and nut

I shut the door behind me and made sure it was locked. For the second time that day, I was really glad to be back at the croft.

Grandad was sitting at the table spooning up some muddy brown broth and poring over a great big book. He finished scribbling something in his notebook, closed the big book and looked up at me. 'All right?' he said.

'Yeah... yeah,' I said, catching my breath.

'Help yerself.' He jabbed his spoon towards a saucepan steaming on the stove.

'Sorry, I'm late.'

'No matter, I guessed yer would be.'

I filled a bowl, sat down and took a chunk of bread from the breadboard. The fire was crackling warmly. In the flames glimpses of the sunlit cliffs flickered, the dark valleys and the shadowy trees advancing across the land towards me. Maybe they'd followed me down the hill, maybe they were outside, right now.

'Not hungry?'

'Eh? Er... yeah... yeah. Starving.'

'Eat up,' said Grandad.

This place was driving me nuts. I was starting to see things. I tried to shut the strange images out of my head and focused on stuffing lumps of meat and potato into my mouth. I dipped my bread into the steaming brown stew.

'Mutton again, then?' I mumbled.

'Leave it, if yer don't want it.'

'Nah, I'm starving. Don't you eat anything else, though? Is it all there is, here? Mutton and spuds?'

He laughed. 'Well, not much else, I reckon. It's always been fish or mutton, or lamb. This is Harris, boy.'

'Don't you get bored with it?'

He paused while I slurped. 'Never thought about it much, really. Food's just fuel. Haven't fished in a while either, though. So mutton it is... and spuds.'

'Never been fishing,' I said. 'Don't you ever fancy some proper chips and that? Or a hamburger? Like a Wimpy Burger or something?'

'Wimpy Hamburger, eh? Like in Popeye? Never had one. Heard about 'em though. Them G.I's were always beating their gums, clacking on about 'em. Ceptin the Jewish boys, them being

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Kosher. It was always chicken soup and matza balls with them. And the Yankee Itie's, you'd have thought they'd be fine, being almost on home soil, but there wasn't much local food about then, so they had rough lot. As for the Poles, the Canadians and us lot, it was bully beef most of the time.'

'Eh? What? Where?'

'Italy, boy. Italy, during the war - the second one.'

'Oh, right. Were you in the second world war, then?'

'Aye.' He stared into the fire. 'Both of 'em, actually. But... Cassino... I was thinking about Italy. Them poor boys, hamburgers and Hershey bars.'

'What's a Hershey bar?'

'Chocolate, some call it. Thick, dark, bitter. Orrible. Give me a bar of fruit and nut any day.'

'Mmm, yeah. Fruit and nut, or a chocolate orange.'

'Oh, aye, there's a thing. A chocolate orange. That Lorna got me one, last Christmas. Lovely, yer gotta suck 'em slow, one segment at a time. Aye, nice and slow, made it last till nearly February.'

'What? Over a month?' I nearly choked. 'Mine last about ten minutes.'

'Yer greedy bugger.' He looked off into space. 'Aye, I enjoyed that orange,' he said.

'Why don't yer get *yourself* one?'

He paused, looking into space and licking his lips.

'I dunno,' he said. 'Reckon I might, next I'm in town, if they've got one in. She's a nice girl, that Lorna.'

The fire flickered warmly, the mountains and shadowy trees were gone. I reckoned I must have been daydreaming. Trees - here, that was a laugh.

Grandad poured some tea. I settled back in my chair and looked deep into the flames.

'Mum liked Walnut Whips.'

'Did she?' said Grandad softly.

'Yeah, at Christmas. Used to lick the cream out, then nibble the outside off to get the nut. Dad used to say she was just like a squirrel. She liked Walnut whips and Terry's All Gold. Dad liked Quality Street.'

'And liquorice all-sorts, when he was a nipper.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Still does, I think.'

Grandad started clearing up, bashing the pots and pans about. 'Aye. She's a nice girl, that Lorna.' He looked at me pointedly.

'Yeah?'

'Yes. A *nice* girl,' he said again.

'Yeah... she's nice... what d'yer mean?'

He said nothing. But I felt like he'd been reading my thoughts. He looked out the window into the yard as water gushed noisily into the sink.

'Did yer find the Cairn?'

'Yeah, couldn't exactly miss it at the top of the hill.'

'Nice view, eh?'

'Yeah.'

As I stared into the hearth the images of mountains returned.

'Most folks have gone electric or stick with the stove, but yer gran wanted a cosy fire to watch.'

Shadowy trees began to glimmer in the flames.

'Grandad...'

'Aye?'

I paused. 'Nothing.'

'Bring us the bowls will yer?'

I took the soup bowls over to him at the sink and put them in the water. I looked past him, out of the window, into the dark. I couldn't see anything unusual, out in the yard.

'Thanks, boy. While yer up, could yer get us some driftwood in from the store?' Grandad said. 'Around the back.'

'What... outside?'

'Aye, unless it's moved in here with us, when I wasn't looking.'

I looked out through the window again. 'Can't I get it in the morning?'

'Eh?'

'I mean, do you need it... right now?'

'Aye,' he said. 'I do. Ready for the morning. The peat's a bit damp. Take the torch if yer scared.'

He handed me the big, club-like, rubber torch, but I carried on looking out the window.

'What's the matter with yer? Yer big Jessie,' he said. 'Scared o the monsters are yer? Hah!'

'No. No... it's just... OK, I'll get yer wood.'

I walked to the door and paused – turned the key. The door creaked open. I half expected a branch or something to push its way in. But there was nothing there. I switched the torch on and looked over at Grandad. He was still watching me, waiting for me to go. I stepped out into the chill of the yard and flashed the torch around - nothing. Nothing - except my steaming breath, the Land Rover, the shed, the barn - the barn I'd dreamt had a tree-stump in. I pulled the door shut behind me and took a few steps into the dark. Just then, one of the eagles let out a series of

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piercing scream-whistles. Oh, bollocks! I took a deep breath and clutched my thumping heart. I was absolutely bricking it. I scuttled round the back of the cottage and found the low wood-store built onto the side of the cottage. The darkness seemed to close in around me, almost like it was touching me. I wrestled with the door and slipped in the wet mud. Bloody thing was stuck. With shaking hands, I jerked and jerked and finally the bastard opened. I ducked in through the doorway and grabbed up an armful of driftwood - splintered planking and dead broken branches with finger-like twigs reaching at me from the ends. I struggled out, shoved the door shut with my shoulder and clutched the awkward bundle as tight as I could. The eagle cried out again.

'Ffffuck!!!!'

I nearly dropped the lot, but hung on fiercely and slipped and slid back towards the corner of the cottage. My torch flashed around like a crazy beacon, sweeping in arcs across looming monster-mounds of turf and jagged, rusting farm equipment. Then the bright beam jerked upwards - lost in a sky of brilliant stars, and I couldn't see where the hell I was going. Somehow, I got back round to the yard, dropping sticks and trailing longer branches behind me. I crashed through the front door, stumbled across the kitchen and dumped the wood into the box beside the fire. I quickly shut the door and locked it. Breathing hard, I looked up, expecting some sarcastic remark from Grandad.

'Thanks, boy,' he said. 'It's a life saver, that driftwood.'

I laughed. The smoky warmth of the room felt welcoming and safe. 'How d'ya mean?'

He turned and looked me directly in the eye. 'Well, the peat takes a lot o' work. And that driftwood's like a gift from the sea - a warm fire, hot food. So, yer see, there's not much wood around here, is there?' His razor-grey eyes opened wider. 'Yer don't see no trees growing round here, do yer? Do yer?'

'No.'

That's 'Cos there is none. Is there, boy? Is there, eh?'

'No,' I said. 'No trees round here.'

stewie
 stewie
 sleepy-crown-head
 I can't shake your stem-limb-fins
 you can't stir my death-bark-dust
 we
 can't draw the blue-green life-curtain
 back flailing with root-mist-fingers failing failing failing
 sometimes
 sometimes the I and the ARE the ALL and
 the
 WE are like inhaling a river-star-cone
 too much
 too bright every scintilla of
 my self is scatter-blown
 across the rock-face-clock
 don't hack yourself to stumps
 ivying for longer winding
 moon-watches stealing
 time hear the voice of
 golden feather spread
 your word-wings gently
 find the colours above
 the weald-wood ocean
 now now I am gone

gabba gabba hey!

The next morning, there was no time to hang around. After shovelling a bowlful of pinhead down my neck, I followed Grandad out into the yard. I leaned against the warm stones of the croft, swigging my tea and rubbing my eyes, shielding them from the sun. Grandad cleared his throat, handed me a broom and propped a shovel up against the pitted wall beside me.

‘Like I said, yer’ll earn yer keep while yer here.’ He waved his arms about in broad sweeps, pointing at piles of twigs, dirt and debris that lay across the rutted concrete yard. ‘Give it a good going over. It looks like a tip since the storm. And since yer dropped all that wood last night. Hah!’

I ignored his moaning and nodded, sipping from the steaming mug. Might be a good idea to make myself useful. Get in his good books. Maybe he’d back down, keep me on a bit longer. He stood watching me blow the scalding tea.

‘When yer ready,’ he said.

‘OK. Righto, Grandad.’

I put the mug down on the concrete, but knocked the broom against it, spilling most of it. We watched the brown puddle of tea slowly trickling its way around Grandad’s boots.

He looked up at me. ‘Gah! Yer cack-handed bugger, just like yer dad,’ he said, and stomped off towards the barn.

I flashed a two fingered salute at his back, but he turned round and narrowed his eyes.

‘And when yer finished, yer can give us some help in the barn. I can’t do much with this.’ He brandished his bandaged hand at me. I nearly reminded him of my wrist, but stopped. I prodded a large clump of grass with the broom.

‘Don’t just tickle it! Use the shovel. Then barrow it round the back,’ he shouted. He stood there shaking his head, with his hands on his hips. Then he disappeared into the barn.

‘Keep yer hair on, yer gobby old fart,’ I muttered, took a deep breath and got stuck in with the shovel. After a while, I got the knack of using it like a blade, and got into shifting the clumps of weeds and mud that must have been rooted there for centuries. When I’d swept them into piles, I rumbled the rusting wheelbarrow out from behind the wood-store, and used it to lug the sweepings round to a big pile of rubbish and old turfs. *Kerchunk! Kerchunk!* The wheel on the barrow buckled and lurched, and my arms and shoulders swelled with blood every time I heaved a load onto the pile. *Kerchunk! Kerchunk! Kerchunk!* I stripped off my t-shirt and wiped the sweat trickling into my eyes. The warm sun tingled on my chest as I looked around at the yard. It looked ten times better.

On the last trip back from the rubbish pile, I found Grandad waiting for me. He handed me

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a big bottle of water. 'That'll do, boy,' he said.

I swigged down the water so fast it splashed off my chin and sparkled in rivers down my chest.

'Yer a chip off the old block, maybe,' he said. 'Aye. Yer dad was always the pasty one, too.'

I pulled my t-shirt back on, while he stomped into the cottage. He returned brandishing a tray of tea and Gingernuts, which he set on the ground, then dragged a chair out from the house. I plonked myself down on an upturned bucket and we both sat there crunching biscuits and shielding our eyes from the sun.

'Aye... *crunch crunch*... Pale as a lily,' he laughed. 'At least til he come down with the rock n' roll, in his teens. *Crunch*... Wanted to be Elvis the *crunch*... pelvis... *crunch crunch*.... spending every last minute... *crunch*... trying to get a tan.'

'I wasn't trying to get a tan, I was hot,' I said.

'Aye, well, yer'll be cool enough mucking out the barn, it's nice and shady in there.'

I stood up, sighing.

'Finish yer tea first.'

The bucket creaked as I sat down. I munched on a Gingernut and nodded towards the barrow. 'That wheel needs fixing.'

'Aye,' he said. 'There's a lot that does.'

We sat in silence watching the sun glittering on the bay. I tried to imagine my dad straining to get brown, like Elvis Presley. Elvis. He was dead, now, too. One of the eagles whistled softly from the shed. I caught Grandad's eye.

'We'll feed 'em later on, together,' he said.

*

It was cooler in the barn, but after half an hour of wrestling with bales of hay and boxes of tools, I was bare-chested again, and covered in a sticky film of sweat and dust and little black flies. I was already knackered from clearing the yard, and slumped down into the straw. I laid my head back and gazed up at loads of little lights up in the barn roof – tiny scattered holes of sky.

'Erhem! I think there's someone here to see yer, Stew.' Grandad poked his head around the doorway and walked back out into the yard. 'And yer better behave yerself.'

'For me?' I called. 'Who?'

I leant the shovel against the wall and wiped my hands in the straw. Had Dad come up from London? No, couldn't be. Maybe it was the police. Maybe Dr Mackenzie had guessed about his watch and told them. What could I say? I'd deny it. Yeah, I'd deny it.

Out in the yard, I shielded my eyes from the sun and saw Lorna, wearing a big straw

sunhat, leaning her bike against the gate. I struggled to pull my t-shirt on and got my hand stuck through the neck-hole.

‘Hello, Mr MacLeod,’ she said.

‘Hello, Lorna. Stewie’s just clearing out the barn.’

‘Oh, is he. OK. But, I came to see how your hand was. Dad sent me.’

‘It’s mending just fine, thanks.’ Grandad raised his eyebrows at me, then frowned disapprovingly at me, so’s she didn’t see. ‘It’s Lorna, Stew. Erhem!’

He’d said to *behave myself*. What did he think I was going to try and do, fer Christ’s sake? Ravish her in the yard? She wouldn’t fancy me, anyway. I felt like launching a dollop of sheep shit at him as he stood there frowning at me.

Lorna smiled. ‘Hello, Stewie.’

‘Hello.’

‘Would you like to go for a walk along the shore?’ she said.

I looked at Grandad.

‘Aye, he’s made enough mess fer one day,’ he said. ‘Off yer go.’

‘Can you give us a minute, Lorna?’

‘Aye, I reckon.’ She smiled, warmly.

I could just see her through the window, talking to Grandad, as I frantically washed my body at the kitchen sink. Big lumps of mud had got stuck all over my face and chest. I stank of sweat and dirt and sheep-shit. Bloody great! I quickly pulled on clean pants, Ramones t-shirt and jeans. I dug the green bottle of Brut 33 out of my bag.

‘Splash it all over. Splash it all over, Arry,’ I mumbled, mimicking the Henry Cooper advert. I splashed a load of it all over - even down my pants, which really stung, then dashed to the door, stopped, and sauntered out.

‘All right, Lorna? See yer later,’ I called to Grandad and slung my jacket over my shoulder.

‘Bye, Mr MacLeod,’ said Lorna.

Grandad waved his hand, grunted something and walked towards the barn.

Lorna kept sniffing as she pushed her bike down the track towards the Loch, walking just in front of me. She had another flowery cotton dress on. No wellingtons today, no green stockings, just sandals. Sunlight flickered brightly through the wheel spokes onto her long, pale legs.

‘D’yer know how long you’ll be staying, then?’ she said.

‘Not long, by the looks of it. He can’t wait to get rid of me.’

‘No, I’m sure you’re wrong. Maybe you’ll be here longer than yer think, eh?’

I tried to smile back at her.

‘Lovely and warm, isn’t it? It’s a mini heatwave,’ she said, sniffing and turning round. Her

Pinhead

face was pink and speckly, like a hen's egg.

'It was flippin' hot work in that barn.'

'Been driving you hard, has he?' she laughed.

'Yeah. What did his last slave die of?'

She giggled and sniffed again.

'Have you got a cold?' I said.

'No. I haven't got a cold. It's just... what's that smell?' She stopped and leant towards me, across her bike, her nostrils flaring. 'Ugh, is that you. Is that... is that aftershave?'

I could feel my face flushing. 'Er, yeah. Brut 33.'

'Did you bath in it?' she giggled.

I said nothing. We carried on towards the beach.

'I expect he's glad of your help.'

'You wouldn't think so,' I said.

'Aww. He's sweet really, just grumbles a bit.'

'A bit? A lot, more like.'

'Must be a family trait,' she said.

'What? Me, you mean? Grumbling?'

'Never! Not you,' she laughed. 'Come on. Get yer boots off and get some sand between yer toes.'

She laid her bike in the dunes, threw her hat down and kicked her sandals off. I left my DM's on, but walked behind her as she ran down to the water's edge and skipped between the tiny wavelets. The sea was as calm as a pond today. The faint breath of air was cooler here than inland.

'Come on, have a paddle,' she said. 'It's so cool.'

I stood and watched her splashing about like a kid, wriggling her toes in the bleached white sand.

'Come on,' she said, dancing about.

The water reflected the blue sky. I remembered Mum smiling, watching the sea, how she'd splashed around on the red blow-up lilo and decorated sandcastles with shells and pebbles and bits of seaweed. Lorna kicked cold water into my face. The salt stung my lips. I wiped it from my eyes.

'Whoops. Sorry,' she said. She laughed, then stopped herself as I trudged off across the sand.

'Sorry, Stewie, sorry.' She ran and caught my arm. 'I'm really sorry, I thought it might make you laugh, break the ice a bit. Sorry. Look, come and sit in the dunes. I brought some cake.'

I didn't answer, but let her steer me into the dunes. Her hand tingled on my arm. She

pushed me down and spread a tatty red-striped cloth between us, took some food out of her bicycle basket and settled down.

‘Look, strawberries,’ she said, and put some small hard berries into my hand. They don’t grow very well here, but they taste nice.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. They were hard and bitter.

‘Nice, eh?’

‘Er... yeah, thanks,’ I said.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to wind you up.’ She poured some orange squash from a plastic bottle into a couple of old Tupperware beakers and put some big lumps of chocolate cake onto two paper serviettes. ‘We thought a picnic might cheer you up a bit.’

‘Was it yer dad’s idea, then?’

‘No, mine.’

‘Well, maybe I don’t want to be cheered up.’

‘Well, that’s fine too. But, just let a little bit o sunshine in though, eh?’

Her forehead was shining with sweat and she put her sunhat back on.

‘Don’t get to wear this too often,’ she said. ‘I burn easily at first. But I do go brown by the end of the summer. You’re quite red already, aren’t you?’

She pointed at my forearms, so I rubbed at the flecks of dirt and little blonde hairs shining in the sun.

‘Yeah, spose so.’

She tucked into a piece of cake and sipped some squash, looking out to sea. She followed a gull across the sky. She was talking again, something about politics - Margaret Thatcher Milk Snatcher, but I wasn’t listening - my head full of yesterday’s fantasies. Small waves of shame and confusion washed over me, as I tried to link the Lorna who’d been standing naked on the beach in my head, with the friendly, freckly girl stuffing her face with chocolate cake on the other side of the cloth. The two weren’t connected. I was disappointed. But, every now and then an image of the fantasy Lorna would beckon - naked and seductive behind my eyes. Thank God she couldn’t see what I was thinking. I pulled my jacket on. She turned to me.

‘What do you think, Stewie?’

‘I... I... I’m not sure.’

‘How can you not be sure? She stopped the milk, for goodness sake. When she was minister for education. How could you ever trust someone who’d take milk from children?’

‘What? Who?’

‘Thatcher! Mrs Thatcher! Milk Snatcher! Are yer not listening to me, Stewie?’

‘No. No of course not. I mean... Yes, I was. Sorry, I was dreaming a bit.’ At least she didn’t know what about.

Pinhead

'Am I boring you, Stewie?'

'No, really.'

'I know I might seem a bit simple and unc cosmopolitan to someone from London, but we're not so cut off up here, you know. I'm not a village idiot.'

'Uncosmo...'

'I still know what's going on in the world.'

'Yeah, yeah. Honestly, I was just thinking about something you said. Yeah. You're right.

Thatcher's a right old bag.'

The fantasy Lorna had disappeared. The real one was frowning and staring at the sand. I felt bad. She had made quite an effort, with the cake and everything.

'It's nice cake. Did you make it yourself?'

'Aye.'

'I s'pose you must have to do a lot of the cooking.'

'How d'yer mean?'

'For your dad.'

'Oh, aye. Woman's place is in the kitchen' She stared vacantly at the sand.

'Thanks for doing this picnic. You've cheered me up a bit.'

She looked up. 'Really?'

'Yeah, really. Thanks.'

'Well, that's good, then.'

She smiled and held her face up to the sun.

'You wouldn't have any fags would you, Lorna?'

She laughed. 'No, I haven't. But, I've got just the thing for you.'

She reached into the basket, pulled something red out and peeled off a cellophane wrapper.

'Would yer like a lollipop?'

'Er, no, thanks.'

'Your loss,' she said, and popped it into her mouth.

She smiled at me again and the fantasy Lorna began to reform behind my eyes. I wanted it to stay, but tried to push it away. Maybe talking would make it go.

'What's your favourite band, Lorna?'

She lay back on the sand, sucked thoughtfully on the lollipop and raised her eyebrow.

'Mmm. Raspberry. That's my favourite,' she said.

'No, really,' I said. 'Who's your favourite?'

'Why do I have to have a favourite?'

'You have to have. You just do. Everyone does.'

'Says who?' She flicked her hair from out of her eyes and looked at me seriously. 'I'm not just anyone,' she said.

I tried not to laugh at her. 'OK. Who d'yer listen to then? Who d'yer like, now, at the moment?'

'Well, William sent me...'

'Who's William?'

'Cousin, Aberdeen, fancies himself a punk-rrrrrocker, like you.' She shook her head.

'What is it with you lads?'

'Eh? What d'yer mean?'

'Why do yer always have to *be* something? A punk, a skin, a teddy boy, a... anything. Why can't yer just be you, Stewie?'

'Blimey! I only asked who your favourite band was.' I chucked a handful of sand into the light wind, then ducked as it flew back. 'I hate Ted's. Oh, shit!' I screwed up and my face was covered with stinging grains.

'Look, don't get a strop on,' she said. 'Here, hold still. Look at yer.'

I felt her lean over me and gently brush the sand from my cheeks with the backs of her cool hands. Then she blew it from my eyelids with her sugary, raspberry lollipop breath.

'All done.'

I carefully opened my eyes to see her grinning at me.

'My fave band? Maybe, The Slits,' she said, and ran her tongue across her lips. She licked the edge of the lollipop. The colouring had outlined her lips, bright and red and artificial. 'Dougie sent me the album on tape. It's good. D'yer want a lolly?'

'N...n...no. No thanks. Slits... yeah, sort of reggae, they're good.' I pictured the album cover - the band smeared with mud - the bared breasts of the girls. The dream Lorna and the real Lorna started growing together. I thought of the green stockings and looked at Lorna's little bony knees, peeping out from her dress.

'I like 'em,' she said. 'So you like the Slits, too... good.'

'I... I... d... don't spose yer get many bands playing here, on MacAlcatraz, eh?'

'Well, The Bothy Band and the Chieftains have been over a few times, but mostly it's local folky stuff, where we all join in, at the Ceilidh.'

'The what?'

'A Ceilidh. Our music. Our dance.'

'Folk bands? Pfff!'

She scowled at my reaction.

'Aye, what's wrong with that?'

'Aaagh! Kill the hippies! Kill the hippies! Blimey! Imagine all that hair.' I pretended to fend

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off killer hippy hair and rolled about on the sand.

'Oh, grow up! Can yer only repeat old Johnny Rotten quotes? Where d'yer think punk rock comes from? What d'yer think punk is?'

'Eh?'

'Here's a little timeline for yer, yer brain-dead toob!' she spat. 'American negro blues meets white folk. Then yer got, bluegrass, country, folk, rock'n'roll, r'n'b, rock, pub rock and then, then punk! It's all folk. It's music of the people. Ask Joe Strummer, ask The Clash. Ask Ian Dury. Yer dopey English.....' She started to get up.

'OK. OK. Keep yer hair on. Sorry. It's just all those fiddles and stuff, twiddling about. You need some noise. Electric guitars. Anger. Drums. Stuff to jump around to. Some energy. Not just sitting down and tapping yer toes and sticking yer finger in yer ear.'

She glared at me.

'OK. OK. Look, I'm sorry.'

Lorna sighed and settled back down on the sand.

'Anyway, how come you know all this stuff?'

'Mooner.'

'Eh?'

'Mooner. He's a musician in Tarbert. Really good. He can play anything. He knows about just about everything, too. He's even going to help the baby eagle to fly, when it's older.'

'Oh.'

'He's really old. Ancient. Says he used to be a roadie for the Rolling Stones.'

I kept my mouth shut. Lorna flashed her eyes at me.

'Yeah, I know what Johnny Rotten says about the Rolling Stones. But then, he doesn't like the Ramones, either. Actually, I don't think he likes anyone. Hah!'

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand.

Lorna sighed again. 'Don't you like the fiddle then?' She twiddled with the hole in her cardigan.

'No, not really.' I picked at the red laces of my DM's. 'So you like The Clash too, then?' I said.

'Aye, a bit. Dougie's seen 'em. So what about you, then?' she said.

'What about me?'

'Who's *your* favourite band?'

'Have a guess,' I said.

She leant forward, pulled my jacket open roughly and tugged at my chest. I felt her hand through my t-shirt.

'Let me think, er, er, er... Yes, could it possibly be... the Ramones?' she said.

'How did you ever know?' I could feel my cheeks firing up.

'Have you seen them?'

'Yeah.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, of course.'

'How many times?'

'Just once.'

I let a handful of sand trickle slowly through my fingers

'Well... tell me,' she said. 'What was it like?'

'What was it like?' I paused and stared into the blue sky, then closed my eyes and tried to remember the night I saw the Ramones. Images - lights, shadows, sounds swirled in my head. How could I ever begin to explain? What was it like? What was it like?

...It was like being love-mugged by four mop-top frowning clowns in ripped jeans and leather jackets, slamming me with clubbing drums, cartoon word-balloons and slabs of grind-guitar.

Gabba gabba! We accept you, we accept you! One of us!

Gabba gabba! We accept you, we accept you! One of us!

Joey Ramone leans back from his mike-stand and points down at me from the stage. *We accept you, we accept you! One of us!* It's official. I'm a Ramone now - it's tattooed on my brain. *I don't wanna be a Pinhead no more, I just met a nurse that I could go for.* Dee Dee slings his bass guitar low and flings back his hair, Tommy powers into the backbeat, Johnny fires fuzz guitar from the hip, and together The Ramones launch into *Pinhead* - my best song. The crowd-crush-wave surges up and carries me, lifts me up and sets me down, washes me in the pushing mash of sweat, spike-hair, leather and safety pins. I was scared-safe in the clutches of Fin, Sumo, Sharkey and a thousand other jumpingswirlingyellinglaughing Ramone punk-kids - the bruise-embrace of my trusted punk family. It was like being bash-cradled at the swirling whirlpool heart of a thousand dangerous mates - all members of one big gang. One big family. It felt like I belonged. Me - Stewie Ramone....

'Yeah,' I said. 'It wasn't bad... they were all right. Good laugh.'

'Just... all right? A good laugh?'

'Yeah. It was good. They were... good.'

'Yeah, go on.' Lorna raised her eyebrows.

'There were balloons.'

'Balloons?'

'Falling from the ceiling? Yeah. It was a right laugh.'

'A laugh?'

'Yeah.'

'And...' Lorna sat up and stared at me, waiting. 'What else?'

'What? They... it... it was... a good laugh... you just had to be there.'

She sighed. 'Where was it?'

'The Rainbow. Finsbury. New Year's eve.'

'What songs did they play?'

I looked into her eyes. 'Everything. They played everything, you know.'

'What songs were good?'

'Well... all of 'em.'

She sighed and looked at her Minnie Mouse watch. 'Wasted on yer,' she muttered.

A trio of gulls drifted above us and landed at the edge of the loch.

'Have yer seen yer grandad's eagles, then?'

'Yeah. You know about them too?'

'Oh, aye. Dad's been helping with the rabbits. They're beautiful, eh?'

'Yeah... yeah.'

'Had you seen any before?'

'No... no.'

'What did yer think of them?'

'Yeah, they're really... good.'

'Aye,' she said. 'Really good.' She laughed, muttering to herself. 'Wasted... wasted.'

Her watch glinted in the sun as she flashed another look at it. She jumped up and brushed sand off her dress, picked up her bike.

'Well, I better get back and make Dad's lunch, he'll be back soon.'

'You going now, then?'

'Yeah. Better get back.'

'Oh. OK.'

'See yer then.' She pushed her bike back through the dunes.

'See yer.'

I watched her tramp through the sand until she reached the grass. I laid my head back on my palms and looked up into the sky, then jumped up and called out - 'Thanks for the picnic, Lorna.' But she was already riding away, bombing along the track towards her house - a pale little blur at the foot of the massive green hills. Either she didn't hear me, or if she did, she didn't let me know.

wot's up doc?

There it was again - a blinding flash of sunlight reflected from a lens - a dazzling glint from somewhere high in the hills above the croft. I shielded my eyes until the beam changed direction. Then, I saw the same black figure I'd seen from the Cairn the day before, silhouetted on the ridge, right near to where the Cairn stood. Looked like he was holding a long stick. Whoever it was, though, he'd changed his focus to something else. To my right Lorna was riding away on her bike, her dress billowing up around her thighs as she peddled along the shore path. The lens flashed again. It must be some bloke with binoculars, bird-watching, who'd obviously got more interested in Lorna. I couldn't blame him for ogling her, but as the lens changed direction again, I wondered if he was watching me, and shuddered.

*

Back at the croft, I found Grandad snoozing, snoring in his chair with the leather notebook open on his lap and his fountain pen in his hand, purring like a big cat. I trod quietly into the cool bedroom, creaked the bedside window open and picked up the little pile of unopened letters. The springs of the bed groaned as I leaned back against the cool wooden headboard.

'To my Stewie,' I whispered. The envelopes were smooth under my fingertips as I traced the words in Mum's spidery handwriting. Words I knew by heart. 'To my Stewie.'

Across the room the photo-frames called me over - shining like new, not like everything else in this miserable looking room. The faces looked out at me from the past - the man in uniform, the smiling mother, and the bored teenager. I knew how that kid felt. This island was a dead end.

'Happier days, then,' said Grandad, close behind me.

'Ugh! Shit, Grandad! You nearly give me heart attack.'

'Mind yer language, boy. But, sorry, if I startled yer.' He looked at the photographs from over my shoulder. His breathing sounded laboured and air whistled softly in his nose as he shifted from one foot to the other.

'Huh, will yer look at us all,' he said. 'I thought we had a good life, here, back then. But yer dad... no. Not him. Reckoned he needed some excitement, some city lights. A bit o rock n' roll, no doubt.'

The clock ticked loudly in the dusty stillness of the room.

'Grandad?'

Pinhead

'Aye?'

'Er... nothing.'

Grandad took a deep breath. 'We were as thick as thieves when he was a nipper. Yer gran was always telling us off fer coming in late fer supper. Hah! After I'd finished with the sheep and the weaving, we'd go rowing or swimming, or fishing in the bay, or walking, tramping about in the hills. He was as light as a packed lunch in a rucksack, sat up there on my shoulders, twizzling at me ears. Light as air. I was stronger then, mind.'

'Grandad?'

'Aye?'

'Why... why did you and Dad... what happened?'

'Yer mean, why haven't we spoken a word in twenty years?'

'Yeah, why? What happened?'

He polished the photo of Gran on the sleeve of his woolly and held it against his chest. 'He never said anything about it, then?'

'Nah, nothing. We don't exactly talk much, either.'

He set the photo back on the chest of drawers and turned his back on me. I followed him into the kitchen.

'Well, what?' I said.

'I dunno if it's fer me to say, boy.'

'C'mon.'

'It's, it's hard... to explain. I've only my story, no doubt he's got his own. It's hard.'

'Well, have a go, I want to know.'

He faced me, but met my eye only briefly. His gaze searched around the room. 'Cup o' tea?'

'Just tell me, Grandad.'

'Well, we fell out.'

'Yeah... Well, I reckon I'd sussed that much out... and...?'

The chair grated on the floor as he slumped down at the table. I sat too, and faced him across a half-eaten cheese sandwich.

'I spose, I never forgave him... for changing... leaving the island... yer nan... and me. Leaving as though all of this.....' He spread his arms wide. 'All this... us, the Croft, the island, the Lochs, the sky and sea, meant nothing. Nothing.' He paused and ran his bony hand over his face. 'Yer gran took it hard after he left. It knocked the stuffing right out of her, and... me being me. Well, I didn't exactly welcome him back with open arms when he did come to visit. I reckoned he thought we were beneath him... Him and his new job, down South... in the city.'

'But how did you lose touch?'

'Well, I was getting to that.' He prodded the stale sandwich with his fingertip. 'She... yer gran... she'd been poorly fer some while. And she missed him bad. It was like she just seemed to fade away when he left.' He looked up at me briefly, and his eyes were a bit misted up. 'She was the same age as yer mum, near enough, when she went. And when he come back it was too late... got here the day after she died.... I suppose I just couldn't forgive him. We hardly spoke at the funeral. Nothing to say, then. Nothing to say since.' He smoothed the thick veins on the rounded backs of his liver-spot mottled hands. His eyes wandered vacantly around the kitchen. 'Then... then he was gone again, back down South, and no phones nearby, back then.' He leaned back, rubbed his neck and grimaced. 'I wasn't one fer writing letters... the longer the time went on, the harder it got to... well yer know... say anything. D'yer know what I mean?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I reckon.'

'Do yer?' He stared across the table at me. 'Aye, I reckon yer do... Jesus wept, boy. Chips off the same block. Same thing happening all over... him and me... you and him.' He looked at me sternly - right into my eyes, the same colour as his own. 'That's why yer got to go back, Stew.'

'No!'

'Don't yer see?'

'No! You see.' I slapped the table with my hand. 'I don't wanna go back.'

I glared at him fiercely across the cheese sandwich and he glared back. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch...* The lips on my wrist began to whisper again. *Scratch-scratch...* I pictured myself taking a knife, slamming out of the croft, lying cold on the rocks by the Cairn - taking my revenge on them - cutting it out on my wrist, *Scratch-scratch...* punishing. Punishing someone. Punishing me and them for what they were doing... what they were all doing to me. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch...*

'Gah! We'll leave it fer the time being,' he said.

I stayed rooted to my chair, glaring at him. He got up and filled the kettle, the gush of water filling the silence.

'Nice cup o' tea,' he said.

'That's about all you do, drink tea,' I mumbled.

'I'll ignore that,' he said, blowing out through his mouth like a steam valve. 'Have an oojamaflip... a Gingernut.'" He plonked a plateful down in front of me.

'They're stale,' I said.

'Please yerself.'

'I haven't had any proper lunch, yet.'

'What about Lorna's picnic?'

'Just a bit of cake and a few measly strawberries.'

'Well, make yerself a watchamacallit... a cheese sandwich, then. Yer know where the food

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is.'

I pushed roughly past him to get the cheese and bread. He staggered a bit.

'Hey! Careful, boy! You'll have me over.'

'Sorry,' I mumbled and plonked back to the table. 'This cheese stinks!'

'That's Strathdon Blue,' he said. 'Finest cheese in Scotland.'

I forced myself to eat his manky old bread and cheese, while he fussed around the kitchen.

'So, Lorna made some cake, eh?' he said after what seemed like ages.

'Yeah.'

'What kind?' He sat down and took a bite out of a Gingernut, grimaced a bit, swallowed, then slid the rest of it back onto the plate.

'Chocolate cake,' I said, watching him flush the stale biscuit down with water.

'Chocolate, mmm. Nice, eh?'

'Wasn't bad.'

'I, er... I hope you behaved yerself?'

'What?'

'You know what I mean. I don't want you starting something with Lorna, she's a nice girl... and too old fer yer.'

'Oh, leave it out, Grandad! What d'yer mean, too old? I'm not starting anything. Anyway, I think she's got the hump with me.'

'Why? What did you do?'

'Jesus! Nothing! Get off my back will yer? I don't know what I done wrong. Everyone's got the hump with me round here, anyway, so why should she be any different?'

He laughed at me. 'Gah! Yer not wrong there.'

I finished the sandwich in silence and filled a mug with water from the tap.

'Right, then. We better get them eagles fed,' he said.

'Really? What? Can I...?'

'Aye, I said so, didn't I? Yer can help me get some rabbits... if yer haven't got too big a hump. We got to check the snares.' He got up, plonked out and shouted back through the door.

'Are yer coming, or what?'

I followed him down towards the loch, while he described how to snare rabbits. Make the wire loop about seven and a half inches, to fit the rabbit's neck. Set it on the peg, with the bottom of the loop six inches from the ground. I nodded and said 'Yeah,' at the right times, but I couldn't be arsed to take his words in. I was thinking about the eagles. I'd forgotten about the eagles.

'See,' said Grandad, pointing at a small hole under a grassy rise, 'Rabbits.'

'What, in there?'

'Aye, the flying ones live in nests, and the water-rabbits are in the sea.'

'Har, har!' I said. Sarcastic old bastard.

After checking a few more snares, holes and thickets, I was getting a bit bored and lagged behind. I held my face up to the sun. Might as well get a tan, while I'm waiting. Grandad waved.

'Hey! Stew!' He stood up stiffly, brandishing a long brown, limp body... a rabbit. 'Got one,' he said.

I sauntered over and he handed it to me. Though its fur was warm from the sun, through the soft pelt, I could feel its colder core. Its death.

'Why do I have to hold it?'

'Cos yer do. Yer shouldn't have come if yer didn't fancy it. The eagles don't feed 'emselves, yet.' He plodded off.

I followed him, trying to hold the rabbit as far from my body as I could.

'This is disgusting.'

'Nnyah nnyah nnyah,' he mimicked. 'Bout time yer had a wake up call. Where d'yer think yer food comes from?'

'Sainsbury's,' I said.

'Gah! It's not born weighed and ready-wrapped in plastic, boy. It comes with fur and life and blood. Where d'yer think yer hamburger comes from, eh? Some bugger had to kill it for yer. What about yer sausages, yer bangers n mash and yer fish n chips, eh? Eh?'

'Who kills the chips then?' I laughed. 'How d'yer kill a sausage? With a forty-four Magnum?' I did my best Dirty Harry impression. 'Are yer feeling lucky, chip? Are yer? Are yer? Blam! Blam! Blam! Die, sausage, die!'

'Ha! Clever dick! Wait here and keep the rabbit. Ha!' He growled and stomped off along the shore, but I could see he was trying not to laugh.

I plonked down and lay the rabbit between a flat rock and a clump of grass. He was right. Someone, somewhere had to kill all the food we ate, kill the animals - unless we all went veggie, like the bloody hippies. The eagles would die without the rabbits, so Grandad had to kill some. I leaned across and brushed a bluebottle from the dead animal's fur. What was more important - eagle or rabbit? Who should decide? Eagle or rabbit, human or cow, human or sheep? Everything eating something else. Just the way it was, maybe. Could I kill animals to live? Doubt it. Maybe I'd end up eating vegetables and bread and lentils and stuff - Oh shit! - My hair might get longer and I'd end up a hippy.

The rabbit's fur was soft. Its legs were stretched out, like it was still trying to run... run away... from death. Its ears were stiff and alert and its glazed eyes were open, staring, surprised.

'What's up, doc?' I laughed at the dead rabbit. But, my voice fell weak against the stones, muffled in the warmth of the late afternoon air. 'Sorry, mate.' I smoothed the ruffled fur. 'I bet

Pinhead

you were happily running around this morning. Then, Shhcick! Yer got yer neck stretched.'

Grandad was bobbing around in and out of the grassy dips and holes, by the edge of the beach.

The sunlight glittered on the sea. I stroked the rabbit's pelt. 'You won't be wasted, you'll help the eagles grow strong again,' I said. 'You won't be wasted, rest in rabbit heaven, eh?'

I started to laugh at my own words, and found tears running down my cheeks.

'Say hello to Mum, for me. Eh, doc?'

Through a haze of tears the dead body of the rabbit seemed to move. Again, I felt the slow, low, constant vibration that I'd felt by the Cairn at sunset - a timeless pulse that throbbed beneath my pain. I tasted the salt-trickle of tears. The rabbit swam and murmured behind the water in my eyes. *Coit do'n buin sibh? Coit do'n buin sibh?*

Wave after wave of acid sobs bubbled up from my gut and into my chest, choking in my throat. I gasped for air and gagged and sobbed. Grandad, was heading back towards me, up the hill, he waved another carcass at me.

'Oh, fucking hell! We're all just meat for something else.' I frantically wiped my eyes on my forearm and stood up, trying to control my sobs. 'Fuck it! Fuck! C'mon, Stew, c'mon. Pull yerself together.' I picked up the rabbit, held it close, stroked its fur - staggered up the hill away from Grandad, buying myself some time to hide my tears and stop myself imagining voices of dead rabbits.

'Hold up! Hold up, Stew!' I could hear him calling, but didn't turn round. I just headed back to the croft, snivelling, peering at rocks and hills through a blur of tears.

open your lights

By the time Grandad caught up with me I was at the croft. I got my sobbing under control, rinsed my eyes with icy cold water at the sink, then back out into the yard. He frowned at me as he laid another two dead rabbits on the bonnet of the Land Rover. They weren't moving.

'Sorry, Grandad. I needed the bog... I mean the loo, a bit sharp-ish. I reckon it was those dodgy Gingernuts.'

'Oh,' he said. 'OK.'

'You found some more, then?' I pointed at the dead bodies on the bonnet.

'Aye, couple o beauties. You ready, then?'

I nodded and followed him towards the shed.

After the bright light of the sun, the darkness of the shed fell like blindness. As we fumbled our way through the painful maze of odds and ends, Grandad's lamp cast weird stretched shadows onto the old motorbike. He waved the rabbits at it.

'James Captain Two-fifty. Used to be yer dad's.'

The old bike shifted at the edge of my sight as we crept forward and I was sure I saw the three mannequins twitch their limbs and turn their blank faces to stare at me. I followed Grandad. As we neared the back of the shed my heart was beating faster against my ribs. My chest was still sore from sobbing. There was a rustle of feathers from the gloom ahead and knew we were getting nearer, getting nearer to the eagles.

'Mind that watchamacallit, it's sharp,' said Grandad, as I stumbled against him, and clutched at his damp shirt. He held the lamp up and gestured, waving the rabbits at some sort of steel tool.

'Sorry.'

'No matter,' he said.

We crept forward in the dark, breathing shallow. Then suddenly, there they were, shrieking at us from behind the wire, fanning their wings and glaring.

'Looks like they're hungry,' said Grandad.

We held back 'til they'd settled down a bit, then we both approached the wire. Their black eyes blazed back and forth between me and Grandad, then fixed on the rabbits. They piped and whistled and beat their wings against the hot clammy air. Grandad quickly entered the cage and slung the bodies onto the trays. Then he hopped out. He grinned again, then came and stood close beside me. We watched silently together, as the eagles ripped into the flesh. There was no sound, except for the whistling of Grandad's nose and the tearing and swallowing of the birds as

Pinhead

they gulped back red strips of raw rabbit.

Open your lights, boy! Air a' mhullach - on the summit. Sheer are We! Shred flanks and shanks, gullet fresh flesh. No swooped running, gored still breathing - but flesh. Unswopped - stilled by wood and wire, stilled by slack air. Swoop endless rivers of air, glide oceans of clouds, brights. An gog mòr an t-ugh beag! Loud cackle little egg! Watch what slack arms have lost, slack hearts can't taste, clawless feet can't tear. You - slack-worn from treading flat slabs, black paths. You dare sling us slack meat, young chicken-heart, old stale plodder! Snap more than a flap of thumb, will We - want fresh.

Open your lights boy! Whose lights fell on ghosts of trees? Suck our ore, we'll take that old plodder yet!

Watch us rise - make this wire-wood small.

We'll tiny you - crest tor, sail-shoot bluff.

I could hear *them*. It was *them* I could hear - the eagles - the eagles were the voice I'd heard, the... the Sheer! I saw golden, bronzed necks arching - straining at rabbit legs and sinews. Theirs was the voice I'd heard in the night, on the night I'd arrived. Their black eyes darted at us, their feathers glowed like hot coal, and I knew it was them speaking... inside me - *Watch us, boy. Watch us*. I looked at Grandad, gawping at them in the gloom. He didn't look like he could hear them.

'Beautiful, eh, boy?' he said.

Somehow, their voices were passing him by, or was he hiding it from me? Was it me that was imagining their voices? Like with the rabbit. Was I going mad? Then, I felt the eagles fix me with their eyes and knew I wasn't imagining it. I shuddered - *Whose lights fell on the ghosts of trees?* Did they mean me? - *My lights* - My eyes? They spoke inside me. I could feel it. I gaped and shivered - scared and thrilled. They were beautiful, and wild, or something. They were themselves, completely, and they only recognised us because we brought the meat.

*

Out in the yard, we blinked at each other in the sun. Grandad grinned and clapped me hard on the shoulder.

'Did yer see 'em? Eh? Beautiful, eh? I reckon they're on the mend. I swear the little bugger's bigger every time we feed 'em.'

'How long before you set 'em free?'

'Not long, not long, now. Two months at most. I reckon they're brassed off being stuck in there though. Eh, up! Here's McKenzie.'

Lorna's dad pulled into the yard in the white Land Rover. Oh, shit! Maybe he'd come to ask about his watch. My heart began to pound again.

'All right, Doug? Stewart?' The doctor frowned at the sky as he leant out of the window. His pipe wiggled up and down as he spoke out the side of his mouth - a ventriloquist. 'Scorcher, eh? I'm just off to see old Mooner,' he said. 'Had word he's a bit... a bit...'

'Under the weather?'

'Aye, that's it.'

'Gah! Poor old bugger. Bad? Do yer know?'

'About the usual,' said Doctor Mackenzie.

'Pity.' Grandad nodded. 'So, what can we do yer for?'

'Your son rang again this morning, Doug. He wants you to call him back.' The doctor puffed a lungful of smoke in my direction, and Grandad looked at me thoughtfully.

'And it's Thursday, as well.' Doctor Mackenzie raised his eyebrows.

'Eh? Oh, aye. I forgot.' Grandad rubbed his jaw.

'So we're still on for a drink tonight, then?'

Grandad said nothing.

'And er... er... Stewart.' The Doctor jabbed his pipe at me with his hand, but still spoke through gritted teeth, like it was still in his gob. 'Lorna invites you for a game of chess,' he said. 'She needs some competition. Doug, maybe you can still manage a pint mug with your left hand?'

I looked back at Grandad, who was now scratching his head and his jaw.

'Yer sure yer'll be all right?' he said to me.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I'm not very good, though.'

The Doctor smirked smoke out the side of his mouth. 'No matter, Stewart. It doesn't hurt to lose... ask your Grandad.'

'Hah!'

Still, Grandad hesitated.

The pipe moved up and down. 'I can pick you up on the way back from seeing Mooner, drop Stewie off, then you and I can go on from there, Doug. Darts team could use some support.'

'Aye, OK,' said Grandad. 'I could do with a pint.'

'Good, that's settled, then. See you both around seven o'clock.' He reversed back and sped out through the gate.

Grandad looked at me. I listened to the scratch-scratch of him rubbing his chin. 'Yer dad called, eh?' he said.

'I *don't* wanna go back.'

'Aye, I know.' He looked away from me, over to the loch. 'You'll be all right over there, with Lorna?'

Pinhead

'Yeah,' I said.

'Look, tonight, yer better... yer better...' He stopped himself and walked towards the barn. I followed him into the shade.

'Blimey, Grandad. I'll behave meself, I'm not gonna show you up,' I said.

'Aye, good. OK, then.'

'Who's Mooner?'

'Eh? Who's Mooner? Now that's something we'd all like to know. He's a disgrace, that's what he is.' Grandad sighed. 'But keeps us entertained.'

He raised his eyebrows, flumped down onto a bale of straw and puffed out his cheeks. He blew a lungful of air out through his teeth. 'Phew! Them birds,' he said. 'They wear me out. Never thought I'd see eagles here again, although they've had some on the mainland for a while, now. I reckon these're first or second generation. That's all.'

'How d'yer mean?' I tugged out a long straw and wound it slowly around my fingers, one at a time.'

'Well, they've kind of returned home,' he said. 'Been reintroduced from Scandinavia. Golden eagles were gone extinct here, decades back.'

'How come?'

He patted his chest. 'Some of us lot, islanders, killed 'em all off. Shot 'em, poisoned 'em, stole their eggs. Then, couple o years back they brought some eagle pairs over to the mainland. I never knew we had 'em here, though. Must be spreading across. That's good.'

'Why did people kill 'em?'

'Lambs, mainly. They take lambs.'

'Really?'

'Aye, but not many. People see birds of prey as a pest. It still goes on. Then there's professional egg collectors, or those that'll steal a bird from its parent's nest and sell it for profit, to private zoos, that sort of thing. But eagles are not pests, and a few sickly lambs are small price to pay for a bit o wildness back on the islands, I say. We've done enough damage to this place over time.'

'How d'yer mean? What's been done?'

'Trees.'

'Eh?'

'Trees, boy. Since folk first settled on these rocks we've stripped the land of trees. What there was of 'em, as the weather batters 'em here in the West. Stripped all the wooded areas that were part of the ancient Caledonian forest. It spread right the way across Scotland, right from the days when the islands were part of the mainland. It reached even to here. Now it's gone to grass, grass to feed the sheep. Sheep that displaced people. In the clearances.'

'Forests, here? Trees, here?'

'Aye, boy,' he looked me in the eye. 'Don't see so many trees here now, do yer?'

'No,' I said. 'No, I don't.' I remembered the dark shadow of forest on the sunset hillside. I remembered the words I'd heard in my head - words I thought came from the eagles - about *Ghosts of trees*. I wound and unwound the straw around my fingers and stared into the ground. Was I cracking up again?

'What's up, boy?'

'How... how could anyone kill an eagle?'

'I know,' he said. 'I suppose killing's the way of the world. Needs must fer some. Ignorance and fear fer others. Yer can get used to killing.' We held each other's gaze. 'That goes fer killing other folk, too. Some folk hold other folk's lives as cheap. I seen it. I seen my share of that too, boy.' He stared out through the doorway at the blue, blue sky. 'Aye, I seen some killing in my time.'

'In the war?'

'Aye. And there's other ways of killing folk off, too.' He coughed and stood up. 'Maybe, I'll tell yer about it sometime, eh? C'mon. Let's get ourselves ship-shape, cleaned up and fed. Better get ourselves presentable if we're gonna be out sociamolising.'

Pinhead

a game o chess

Lorna's dad's watch was digging into my thigh.

'Come in,' she said. She opened the door wide and waved the Land Rover off as it headed for the pub. Its headlights shone down along the track and the fading sun glowed from beyond the hills. The sky was a mad turmoil of pink and violet, lit with pinpricks of stars.

'Lovely night,' she said, and her hair drifted across my face.

'Yeah.'

I squeezed past her into the dimly lit hallway. Our elbows clashed.

'Oops! Sorry.'

'No damage done.' She closed the door, with a heavy clunk. 'After you,' she said. I walked down the corridor towards the waiting room. The strange artwork loomed down on me from both sides.

'Not down there.' Lorna opened the door to the east side of the house and I walked back towards her. I stopped beside the antique table and the portrait of the woman with the intense eyes, trying to work out how to put her dad's watch back without her seeing.

'Who is that?' I said.

'That's Mum.'

'Your mum?'

'Aye, did yer think me dad produced me out of a test tube?'

'No, no... I...'

'Glad to hear it.'

'It's just...'

'Just what?'

'When... when did she die?'

'Don't worry. She's not dead, yer nit.' She laughed. 'It's much worse than that.' She stopped laughing. 'Are yer gonna come in and play, or what? Look, I'll tell you about her later.'

I followed her into the front room. It stank of pipe smoke. There was a small fire glowing in the grate and a large reading lamp lit up a big wooden desk. There were books everywhere, everywhere - on shelves, on the mantelpiece, on top of the upright piano, the dining table and chairs, even on the top of a tall grandfather clock that dominated the corner by the back window. Books, bloody books - everywhere. And in the spaces on the walls between the books was more of the strange vivid artwork.

'Blimey!' I said.

Pinhead

'Yeah, I know,' said Lorna, gently running her fingers over a pile that looked ready to topple at any moment.

'Blimey!' I said. 'Hasn't anyone got a television out here?'

She laughed. 'Oh, I thought you were impressed by Dad's book collection.'

I said nothing.

'Sit down, then.'

Lorna plumped down into one of two throne-like armchairs and peeped at me around a wing.

'Dad got these chairs from an auction at a castle on the mainland,' she said.

'Oh.'

I sat opposite her in the other chair. Between us, a game of chess was already in progress on a low table - big carved stone pieces on an elaborately decorated wooden board.

'You're already playing a game,' I said.

'With Dougie.' She started setting up a new game.

'Dougie? Is he here, then?'

'No. We play by post...' She laughed at my surprise. 'Don't worry, I've recorded my moves, I won't forget them. I'll have him in check-mate in three, anyway.' She looked at her wrist - checked the time. 'We've got two to three hours before they get back.'

Three hours alone with Lorna.

She looked across the chessboard.

'I... I like yer watch.'

'Do yer?' She looked at me intently. Took it off. Leant across the table. Took my uninjured wrist in her hand. Gently strapped it on. 'Yer can borrow it, if yer like.'

'Th... thanks.' I could feel my face glowing.

I peered around me. The piles of books seemed to be closing in.

'You OK, Stewie?' she said.

'Aye. I mean, yeah.'

'Ha!' She said. 'Yer sounding like an islander.'

'Never! I'm London, me, through and through.'

'Gor blimey, guvna!' she said, mimicking me.

'I'm not stupid,' I said.

'OK. Never said you were. Just doing yer accent,' she said. 'It's nice.'

'Nice?'

'Different... to everyone around here... different is nice.'

'Oh. OK, then.'

She brushed her hair back from her face. 'I'm sorry if I went off a bit sudden, earlier on, at

the beach. It's just... I had to get back.'

'OK,' I said. 'I thought maybe I'd put my foot in it... said something wrong.'

'Not really,' she said. 'Would yer like a drink?'

'What kind of drink?'

'Tea, coffee, cola? We have all those modern beverages here yer know.'

'No, thanks. Sorry, I thought you meant you had some booze.'

'No, I didn't mean that,' she said, with a disapproving glance. 'Well, let's begin the battle, then.' She grinned and leaned forward over the board. 'White starts.'

I picked up my king's pawn, snapped it down confidently and our game began. The small fire threw our shadows around the glowing room. The loud ticking of the grandfather clock made me drowsy. At every turn, Lorna sat and stared at the board for ages before moving. Her chest rose and fell slowly and deeply. She seemed to wind down a bit as we played and she slid her chess pieces precisely and calmly across the polished wood. After each move she leaned back in her throne and crossed her hands in her lap, staring at the board as though I wasn't there, like I didn't exist. I couldn't get into the game. I took my turns quickly and peered around me at the huge piles and shelves of books. It felt like they were edging in closer. I tried my best to concentrate, but Lorna's dress had ridden up a little way past her knees. She was wearing the green tights, or maybe they *were* stockings. I fidgeted in the hard unyielding armchair, trying to sneak a better view without her catching me out. She looked up at me.

'You OK, Stewie?'

'Yeah... yeah. Brain's a bit rusty, haven't played in a while.'

'Yer not making excuses already, are yer?' She grinned.

'Nah. C'mon. Your go.'

She took my pawn with her knight.

'Check,' she said.

'Oh.'

I desperately tried to remember some of the moves Mum'd taught me - how to set up a skewer, or a fork. But the only thing I could think about was the narrow space between Lorna's knees. The clock ticked. The fire crackled. I lost several more pieces.

'So, where's yer mum, Lorna?'

'Huh?'

'You said you'd explain.'

'Oh, right.' She woke from her chess-trance and looked at me as though she'd forgotten I was there.

'You don't have to tell me,' I said.

'No, no. It's best I tell yer... before someone else does.'

Pinhead

'What do you mean?'

'Mum, doesn't live with us.'

'You mean your parents are divorced?'

'No... no... she just lives on her own. On Raasay.'

'Where's that?'

'An island... off Skye.'

'How come? How come she's there?'

I followed Lorna's gaze as she looked around the room. The bright artwork shone out from between the masses of gloomy books.

'These, pictures,' she said. 'They're hers... I mean she paints them... she's an artist.' Lorna took her slippers off, drew her legs up and perched on the armchair.

'Right...' I said.

'Well, she's kind of... like them.'

The pictures were like mad explosions of colour and there were dark brooding shapes, animals twisting within moving landscapes; dolphins leaping clear of living waves, and black cityscapes, dark, taunting human shapes. Some showed trees ripped down, lying like broken bodies - under the boots of men with chainsaws and axes. Others showed huge ancient trees with warped, twisted limbs of branches and gnarled fingers of twigs. Then, there was the rich red heather on the hills, and the unmistakable rugged silhouette of An Cliseam.

'She's a bit different,' she said.

'Her pictures are pretty good, really. Weird. Scary. Sort of intense.'

'Yer got to understand that in a place like this... people... people get scared of people that are a bit... a bit different.'

'I get that everywhere,' I said.

'Yes, yes,' said Lorna. 'You know what I mean, then.' She smiled. 'Mum's very different, very artistic. People don't get her.'

'So...?'

'So... she moved out when I was fourteen, but I stayed here with Dad... and it's not like she's far away.' She stared at another haunting portrait.

'Do... do they still get on?'

'Yeah, sort of.' She clenched and unclenched her toes on the cushion of the armchair. 'Sort of...' She chewed her thumb nail and shifted in the armchair. 'We go for dinner... I go and stay a lot... tidy the place up a bit.' She looked me in the eye. 'I cook for her and do her washing... that sort of thing.'

The clock ticked loudly. Lorna sighed.

'Would yer like a drink now, Stewie?'

I nodded.

'Tea, OK? Not got any of yer booze.'

'Och, aye. Lorna.'

She giggled and poked her tongue out at me. 'Cheeky sod. Now yer taking the mickey out of *my* accent.' She hopped lightly over the side of the chair and crossed the room to the door at the back, her hips moving beneath the thin cotton dress.

'Won't be a tick.' She smiled back over her shoulder. 'I'll be in the kitchen.'

I sat back, dwarfed in the huge armchair and peered around the room. The pendulum of the towering grandfather clock swung back and forth behind its glass door. The gaps between each tick seemed longer than a second. Each slow click of the clock felt like it might be its last. I rose and trod cautiously round the room, trying not to bump into anything and trigger an avalanche of books. I softly fingered the piano keys, the sound drifted across the room - slightly out of tune. The Minnie Mouse watch was a bit tight on my wrist so I loosened the worn leather strap. She must have had it for ages, since she was a kid. Shit! I nearly forgot - her dad's Omega! Time to put it back. I stepped quickly around the piles of books, but a cover caught my eye. I turned my head to one side and looked at the purple figure almost hidden behind a tangle of barbed wire. The scratchy title blurred - it blurred into the picture, into a black-purple-blob. Along the side, on its spine - the words became waves - *O... n... e...*

'Ww... wwu... wwunn.'

One... d... a... y...

'One duh... ah... yer... One day!'

One day i... n... The words swam along the spine of the book - *One day in... the... life... of..... of... l... lv... Ivan... D... e... De..... n... Den...* Black-Purple-Blob. The words swam off into the room, like sharks. I gave up and turned away, only to be confronted by another wobbly pile of books with big scratchy gold words snaking along the spine. I grabbed the top one - the pile of books wobbled, rocked and steadied. I opened it - fanned through the pages of jagged black lines - angles and curves, meaningless shapes that everyone, everyone, studied - went on about, stared at for hours, laughed at, gawped at. Kids at school had gawped and pointed at me and laughed too - like they'd got the key to some bloody magic room that I couldn't get into. Bloody kids and bloody teachers going on at me - *This means this and this means that*. Bloody four-eyed teachers taunting me, breathing so bloody patiently - sighing. Shaking their heads, *Tutt-tutting*, locking me out. Who gave a shit? They dangled their bloody book-keys and locked me out. I slammed the stupid book back down on the pile - and it rocked. I grabbed out - reached out and tried to steady it - too late. The whole lot slipped through my hands and crashed down across the floor. I scrambled to pick them up off the carpet and stack them tidily. Then all the books, all the piles, began to close in around me, snakes and sharks of jagged black words - hissing, shouting, calling,

Pinhead

roaring - from the shelves, the walls, the tables, everywhere. I knelt down and scrabbled at the books, desperately trying to build the stack back up - but knocked into another pile and down it went.

Breath hard -

breath fast - heart

hammering,

head tingling with sweat.

'What are yer doing, Stewie?'

I looked up at Lorna, who stood over me with a tea-tray in her hands, and tried to re-stack the books.

'Sorry. Sorry. I was just looking at them and they just went over. Stupid. Stupid.'

'No yer not.' She laughed. 'Doesn't matter, we're always knocking 'em over.'

'Stupid. Bloody clumsy.'

'It's just books, silly. Hey, yer getting all in a state.' She put the tray down and laid her hand on my shoulder. 'C'mon, come and sit down. Look at yer, all worried. Who cares about the stupid books?'

I got up and she steered me into an armchair. I slumped down, mumbling.

'Yeah, stupid books. They are, aren't they? Stupid.'

'Well, really. It's me and dad who's stupid, not stacking 'em properly.'

'No, it's the bloody books. Bloody-bastard-snaky words.'

She pressed me back into the chair, frowning with concern.

'You really are upset, aren't you? Is this just about the books, Stewie?'

I tugged at my hair. I was getting hotter and hotter, gasping for air.

'Fff...'

'It's ok, you can swear if you like,' she said.

'Fff...'

I punched the wing of the armchair and she backed away a little.

'Sorry,' I said. 'You're... you're right. It's... it's not just... just about the fffucking stupid... fffucking stupid books.' There was no air left, in the room of books.

'Is it... is it about yer Mum, Stewie?'

'Fff...' No air.

'Look, stop hitting the chair. Calm down. Tell me.'

'Me... me mum... she... she was teaching me to read.'

Lorna said nothing.

'Look. I can't bloody read, right.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, bloody really! I'm bloody stupid. It's official. D'yer know what they called me at school?'

'What, Stewie?'

'Pinhead! Bloody stupid - Pinhead. Thick, retarded - Pinhead!'

'Why?'

'Cos' of the song, the Ramones song. It used to be my favourite bloody song an all.'

'D.U.M.B. Everyone's accusing me.' Lorna spoke Joey Ramone's words softly.

'You know it, then? Yeah, fucking funny, eh? Bastards! I got this bloody nickname, Pinhead, and have to pretend it don't matter and I don't care.'

Lorna put her hand on my forearm. 'Try and calm down.'

'Guess how they found out. Go on, guess.'

'I don't know, Stewie,' she said.

'Cos my Mum was actually teaching me how to read and write, and I wanted to write the lyrics of Ramones songs, and I finally managed to write Pinhead on my bloody art folder. I was getting somewhere, learning to read, getting somewhere, and... and then she dies, and I'm back to bloody square one. Now all the words are just like bloody snaky scratches again. It's gone worse than before. And I'm stuck with this bloody nickname - in my head.'

I'm not gonna cry I'm not gonna cry I'm not. Then I am. Sobbing like a bloody kid... I pull at my stupid orange bloody hair and I pull my bandage down and dig my nails into the scar on my wrist..... She's saying *Don't, Stewie. Don't.* Then, suddenly she's holding my arm - soft, gentle. She's wiping the tears off my cheek and I'm just staring at her - she's just eyes and lips and I want to kiss her so much - will she kiss me back... fall onto my lap? I've got wild sickness in my gut and granite tightness in my groin. Her lips glisten so soft - her hot lips - her hot breath - her breathing on my cheek... she's... she's pulling away...

'Lorna...'

'Stewie, please...'

She gets up and backs into the table. The board tips - pawns, bishops, kings and queens scatter across the dusty carpet.

'I think I heard Dad pulling up,' she says.

'Lorna... I...'

She picks up the chess board and puts it back on the table. She nearly drops it as the front door slams.

'Who's winning, then?' Calls Dr Mackenzie.

'Er... Stewie,' yells Lorna. We both jump up and scramble to put the pieces back on the board. But I still haven't put her dad's watch back.

Pinhead

don't put your spoon into kail that is not your own

I kept my mouth shut on the bumpy ride back to the croft. I clung to my seat and stared out of the black, blank windows as Grandad and Dr Mackenzie droned on about some stupid darts match. I couldn't work out what had happened - me blurting out all that stuff to Lorna, about me mum and books and Pinhead. She must think I'm a complete nutter, now - crying like a baby. She must have seen I wanted to kiss her. That's why she backed off. But, maybe if I'd just done it, she'd have kissed me back. I dunno. I couldn't be sure. The doctor's watch dug into my thigh. Fuck! She's gonna think I'm a bloody retard and a bloody thief and a bloody baby. She's gonna think I'm some sort of a retarded-thief-baby! I stared into the black night outside the window, wishing it would suck me out into it and that I could disappear forever. We came to halt. *Disappear forever, forever.*

'Are yer coming, or what?' said Grandad.

'Eh? Oh, right.' I clattered out into the yard and swung the door of the new Land Rover shut - *Chung!*

'Goodnight, Doug... Stewart.' The Doctor nodded at me.

'G'night, Mackenzie,' said Grandad.

Oh, God. I'd showed her my bloody wrist.

'Say g'night, Stewie.'

'Eh? Sorry. Goodnight, Dr Mackenzie,' I said.

'Thanks for having me,' Grandad whispered, for me to repeat.

'And, thanks for having me,' I called out, but the Land Rover was heading off.

Grandad opened the front door, turned on the light, and I followed him into the kitchen. He stood behind the table, shifting his weight from one Wellington to another, not saying anything. He coughed, heavily.

'Shut the door, boy. And sit down.' He coughed again, leaning from one foot to another, frowning at the floor.

'What?' I said.

'Take a seat.'

'What is it?' I said.

'I... I spoke to yer dad. On the phone, at the pub.'

'Really? You spoke to him? After all these years?'

'Aye.'

Oh, right, yeah? And?'

Pinhead

'Yer got to go back. He wants yer back home.'

'I told you, Grandad, I don't want...'

'Yer haven't got a choice,' he said. 'He's yer dad and he wants yer back. There's an appointment with the psychiatrist, apparently.'

'Well, let *them* come and get me, then. Dad never wanted me when I was there, anyway.'

'Yer haven't got a choice,' he said again. 'I'm putting yer on the ferry tomorrow morning. Yer dad's gonna get yer a job as a junior at his place... Beecham's, isn't it?'

'But...'

'Tomorrow morning,' he said.

'It's not fair!' My voice sounded pathetic - like I was ten years old. 'It's not fucking fair! Grandad! Grandad! Fucking look at me! You can't even look at me can you?'

'Don't yer talk to me like that,' he said, coldly. He looked up and stared into my eyes.

'What do yer know about Doctor Mackenzie's watch?'

'Nothing.'

'A lie has but one leg, boy!'

I said nothing.

'He thinks he's lost it, but I know better. Borrowing my watch is one thing. But taking someone else's valuable property is another matter. Jesus wept, boy! What is it with you and watches? Yer dad says his is missing too. It's a bit too much of a coincidence, for me. And that's not including the money.' His grey eyes bored into me. 'Have yer got anything to say for yerself?'

I just stared back at him.

'Well, then. Yer better get to bed. Yer've got an early start. We'll sort this money and this watch business out before yer go.'

I booted the chair out of my way. 'You never wanted me here, did yer? Did yer? Nah! Thanks, Grandad! Bloody thanks for nuthin!' I yelled at him and slammed the bedroom door behind me. I slammed it as hard as I could. I tried to slam it so hard that the walls fell down, so the roof fell in, so that both our bloody hearts would stop.

the rock-face clock

I staggered up the hill towards the Cairn, breathing hard. Hot air came out of my mouth like steam out of an old train funnel - dissolved into the chilly night air. It was like the steam from the Bluebell Railway engine I saw when I was a kid, when Mum and Dad took me out, one spring bank holiday.

Bollocks!

Phew!

That was far enough for now.

I sank down onto a freezing rock and looked back down the hill towards the bay. The moon was so big and full and heavy, it looked like it was going drop out of the sky and straight into the water. Yeah, cause a tidal wave and swamp this fucking dump. Swamp the lot. Hah! Grandad was gonna get a nice shock in the morning, when he tried to wake me up and found me gone. I was better off without them all - Grandad, Lorna, the bloody eagles, and this weird moon-landscape where I kept imagining voices and shadowy forests of trees. I'd be better off getting back to a city - back to pavements and streetlights and cars, and decent food, and the telly and football.

'Hah! I'm not fucking there, am I? You miserable old bastard!' I yelled at him as loud as I could, up into the night, towards the stars. My voice sounded small again, younger than it should be, as it echoed off the pale moonlit slabs of rock that dotted the hillside. The rocks looked like broken bones or the tops of skulls, pushing up out of the earth. Others looked like they'd dropped, fallen out of the sky, like big hard lumps of moon. I wished one would fall on me.

'I'm not going back! D'yer fucking hear me? I never stole their fucking watches!'

No one heard me. No one answered. There was no sound, except, there - a tiny whisper - *Scratch-scratch...* and growing louder - *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...* and louder *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch!*

I rolled back my sleeve and there beneath the bandage, I could hear them clearly - the jagged lips - *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...* When I peeled back the cotton, I saw what Lorna had seen. The gash was starting to heal, the flaps of skin were knitting together. But, not for long. *Scratch-scratch...* Maybe, I'd open the gash back up. Maybe, I'd open it right up - do it properly this time - *Scratch-scratch...* let the blood flow and lay down for one last sleep - so they'd find me here, in the morning, lying on the rocks - and then they'd be sorry. Then, they'd be fucking sorry! *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...* I unzipped my Adidas bag. I reached in and took out Grandad's watch and put it on the rock. I'd picked it up from the table when I'd sneaked out

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past him and through the kitchen door. People shouldn't leave things lying around. I'd picked up the cheese knife too. The short steel blade glinted under the moonlit.

'I'll show you all, you bastards!' I could feel warm tears running down my cold cheeks.

Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...

I knelt down and laid my arm across a rock, using it as a table. Salt tears ran into my mouth and snot dripped from my nose onto the knife. I teased the scar with the edge of the blade - *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...* I ran the icy steel against my skin - *Scratch-scratch...* I glimpsed my pale body lying dead and empty of blood in the morning sun. Grandad would regret sending me back. Dad would wish he'd tried harder with me - *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch..... Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...*

'You'll be sorry!' I sobbed.

But something else glinted at me in the moonlight. I let the knife fall - *Flump!* Down, into the soft grass. I put my good wrist to my ear - *Tick-tick... Tick-tick... Tick-tick...* - Lorna's watch. The stainless steel back chinked, as I laid it on the rock-table next to Grandad's. I switched the torch on and touched the childish Minnie Mouse watch with its stupid Disney cartoon face. I laid my head against the cold rock and listened to its tiny flickering heart. She'd leant it to me. She'd strapped it on, herself. I remembered the look of horror on her face, when she'd seen my wrist - her wide surprised eyes. And I'd wanted to kiss her... but she didn't look like she wanted to kiss me. Then again, she'd said she heard her dad coming. Maybe she would've kissed me. I twisted round and leant back against the rock. I rolled the bandage up and covered my wrist again. What if I was right - what if she would have kissed me back? Bollocks! What was I gonna do? Couldn't face going back to London. Didn't wanna job at fucking Beecham's. Didn't wanna see the psychiatrist. Didn't wanna slash my wrist. Suddenly, I just knew I had to give Lorna's watch back and... talk to her. Maybe she could help me. Maybe I could hide out and sneak down to see her. She could keep me hidden, keep me fed - like Robert the Bruce or Bonnie Prince Charlie, or... or... I don't know - someone like that. Keep me hidden and safe and fed, in a secret cavesomewhere. And she could join me every now and then, and... kiss me... and... and - yeah! And more... our bodies crushed together on cosy sheepskin rugs, or out in the sunshine, in the heather. Or just maybe, she'd run off to Glasgow or somewhere with me - she said she'd do almost anything to get away from here. Maybe she would. I shivered, rubbed my hands together and blew on them. Shit, it was bloody freezing. Images of Lorna made my head swim. Again - wild sickness in my gut - tightness in my groin. I had no chance. But, it didn't hurt to dream. Right now I'd settle for a quick glimpse of her green stockings. Or just one kiss.

I opened the Adidas bag wide and shone the torch into it. One by one I took all the watches out and laid them on the table of rock. I organised them into the shape of a clock and put the scuffed face of Grandad's old watch dead in the middle. Then, I gently placed the others at the

points where the numbers of a clock would be. The torch light glinted on the metal and glass.

'One o' clock,' I whispered.

James Radcliffe's watch. He was a cruel, clever bastard. Nice watch though - digital, a birthday present from his gran. I'd taken it from his sports bag, hidden in the steaming shower changing rooms.

'Two o' clock.'

Watch number two - some stainless steel tat from down the market, off the stall next to the badges and bootlegs - I'd tucked it under my mohair jumper and down my jeans, one busy Saturday lunchtime.

'Three o'clock.'

The lucky lost Timex, grabbed shimmering from the bottom of the deep end of the swimming pool. It took me three dives to get it, my lungs bursting as I grabbed it and kicked for the top - back to the hot chlorine air and the echoey racket of the screaming Saturday kids.

'Four.'

A rusty old fob-watch, dug from the clay of Mum's rose bed, back home in the old garden.

An owl hooted and I paused, aware again, of being stuck up here on my own. A thin cloud drifted across the moon. At least I wasn't imagining voices or forests that moved about. I hadn't lost it completely, yet.

'Five.'

Dr Mackenzie's twenty four carat, twelve jewelled Swiss Omega. Nice leather strap. I'd meant to give this back. Really. I'd have to explain to Lorna.

'Six o' clock.' Grandad's watch. I'd lifted it from the kitchen table as I left.

'Seven'. Lorna's Minnie Mouse watch. She'd put it on me. I hadn't stolen it. I polished its face and laid it carefully back down on the cold rock. I was building quite a collection. *What is it with you and watches?* I wasn't sure. They just seemed to call to me, or find me.

'Nine o' clock.'

I lifted Mum's dainty silver dress watch and stroked the glass with my fingertip.

'My favourite. You can be nine o'clock.'

The glass was clouded from all it had seen - washing up, gardening, her dodgy efforts at D.I.Y. I kissed its face and set it down on the rock.

'Midnight, hah!'

I took Dad's chunky digital out and placed it at the top of the clock, twelve o' clock. I leaned down over it.

'No style. Eh, Dad? And no time for me, have yer? But, I've wasted some of your precious time now, though haven't I, Dad? Haven't I? Eh?'

I pressed the display button and the bright purple seconds flickered away beneath the

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glass cover.

‘Yer never did have time fer me, did yer? Did yer?’

The seconds flickered away. I grabbed the watch and flung it. It flashed briefly in the moonlight, then fell out of sight.

‘I don’t need you, or your stupid watch! You bastard!’ I yelled as loud as I could, but my voice sounded thin in the darkness. Maybe I shouldn’t have chucked it. I placed pebbles where the other numbers should be, and made clock hands out of twigs of heather. I placed them at ten to six - the time she died. *The approximate time of death*. That’s what it said on the certificate. I rubbed the dust and pieces of heather off my hands, onto my jeans. The watch faces shone in the moonlight, and I shivered again. Was Grandad asleep, or wondering where I was? I clambered up and over towards where Dad’s watch had landed. I shouldn’t have chucked it. I shone the torch. It wasn’t there! The heather scratched through the holes in my jeans and into my knees as I scrabbled around. I desperately felt around for it. Heather, rocks, more heather. Nothing smooth or metallic - No watch!

‘Oh, shit!’ I stood up. Why did I chuck it? ‘Stupid, bloody idiot!’

The moon went in again. It was even darker. I gave up, turned off my torch. But then, just as I turned to go, something caught my eye. I dropped to my knees and peered down into the blackness of the heather and sighed. I put my face down close and breathed in the sweet, fresh smell, so glad to see the bright purple seconds flicking away on the big ugly watch-face. I reached in and gripped it tight in my fist.

At the rock-clock-face, I placed Dad’s watch back down at twelve o’ clock midnight. I stood there, shivering, looking at them glinting in the moonlight. *What is it with you and watches? What is it with you and watches?* Maybe I did need to see the psychiatrist. I stood there looking at them all for a while, then gathered them up one by one and tucked them safely back among the pants and socks at the bottom of my bag. Safe, with the big roll of notes. Five hundred quid could take me a long way - anywhere. Dad wouldn’t miss it, he had plenty more where that come from. From what Grandad had said, he hadn’t told the police yet. I patted the cold rock surface with the flat of my hand and looked up at the giant moon. I peered around me through the pale light - not a tree in sight. All that tree- ghost crap was just my own stupid imagination.

‘Speaking Eagles? Ghosts of Trees? Black-Binocular-Men? Ha-bloody-ha! I reckon Grandad’s putting LSD in my porridge.’ I strapped Lorna’s watch back on. I made my way back through the moonlit rocks and the spooked-out sheep and headed back down the hillside - back towards Lorna - wearing her Minnie Mouse watch. Praying for a kiss.

seeds
sstewie
ssseeedsss
don't fall far don't fall
far from the trees
flailing
failing
sometimes dancing I'm waving
vein-sun-pads through a lower sky breathing shifting
zephyrrr-rhythms fffoliole wraiths of sssapient-secrets in a mist
towards
your eyes your ears your ssoma-pssyche
As you
reason can you sip-listen across
treelysia
taste the rain-pansssophy press the
sap-prescience of all being
Open flight-lashes
sniff-lascivious-purple
heather-head-strewn
blood-root-mud-lust
Now you are adrift
in an ocean of me

Pinhead

Lorna's midnight circus

The moon shone down on Dr Mackenzie's house. Nearly bright as day. The Land-rover wasn't there, so he must have been called out. I couldn't knock on the front door and risk waking the neighbours up, so I swung my bag over my shoulder and crept round the far side of the house to avoid the bird-pen. In the field behind the house, small pale blobs of sheep bleated, scattered about, glowing under the moonlight. The window at the back-side of the house, where I'd first seen Lorna drying her hair, was unlit. Had it been her room, or a bathroom? The hens clucked softly from the bird-pen as I looked around for something soft to chuck. Something to wake her without smashing the glass. I pulled up a tufty lump of mud and grass, lobbed it upwards and - shit! Missed! The brown dollop stuck on the pebble-dash for a second before it plopped back down, leaving a dark smudge on the pale wall. I lobbed another bit. This time the mud smacked the window and stuck. Yes! Waited... held my breath... Nothing. The bloody hens clucked a bit louder. Again... missed. Then, hit again. Nothing. Fuck it! Maybe she wasn't even in. I turned towards the field, stumbled over my bag and fell. My palms slapped into the cold mud as I nearly landed on my nose. The hens started clucking, loudly. Then, the bloody geese joined in, making a right old honking racket. So much for not waking the neighbours. A light appeared in the window next to the target. A silhouette moved behind the curtains. Maybe someone else was staying there. The window swung open and a torch beam dazzled me.

'Stewie?' It was Lorna's voice. 'What do yer want? It's way past midnight.'

'Can I... can I talk to you?' I said. 'I'm... running away.' I sounded like a right pratt.

'Running away?' she laughed. 'Again? You've only just got here. Have yer got a bundle tied on the end of a stick?'

'Do... do you want to come with me?'

Silence. She must have thought I was a complete tit.

'What? Me?'

'Er... yeah.'

More silence. 'I think I better come down,' she said. 'For goodness sake keep quiet.'

The torch beam disappeared. My breath steamed in the moonlight as I blew onto my fingers and the geese went honking bonkers, glaring angrily at me from behind the wire. After a couple of minutes the back door opened and Lorna stuck her head out.

She hissed at the geese to be quiet, and then at me. 'Stewie! Come in, then. Stewie, come on.'

I climbed up the steps and followed her into a bright clean kitchen. The cupboards and

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sink, and that, were old, but everything was spotless and tidy. Bit like Mum's kitchen back home.

'What d'yer want?' she hissed.

'Is your dad in? His car's not there.' I whispered back.

'No. He's out.'

'Why are we whispering, then?'

She sat down at the white wooden table and rubbed her eyes on the backs of her hands. She was dressed in a pink nylon dressing gown and a pair of pink cotton pyjama's that gaped open at the neck, just a little. I snatched a glance at the top of her breast and heard Sumo's voice in my head - *Cor! Phwoah!* - words he'd use when Fay Fife was on TV, or when he passed me one of his new porno mags.

'Why *are* yer here?'

'I told you, I'm...'

'Running away?' she said.

'Well... yeah.'

'Why?'

'Grandad wants to send me back... on the ferry.'

'Why not just go, then?'

'I, er... I wanted to see you before I went.'

She pushed her hair back and blinked at me.

'I... er... I thought you might come with me.'

She shook her head. 'Why would I want to run away? Anyway, I'm a bit old for that, don't yer think.'

'Well, you said you'd like to see the mainland.' I sat opposite her. 'Why don't you come with me?'

'You're mad,' she laughed. 'I can't, Stewie.'

'You can. I've got five hundred quid.' I showed her the roll of notes.

She gasped. 'Where did yer get that?'

'It's me dad's. I borrowed it.'

'You stole it.'

'Look. He owed me. Please come.'

'I don't want to. There's people who need me, here.'

'What? Your dad?'

'Aye, me dad, me mum... Danny.'

'Who's Danny?'

'Little brother.'

'Oh. I didn't know you had a brother.'

'Aye, I do. There's a whole lot more yer don't know, Stewie.' She frowned at me. 'Besides, why would I run off when I hardly know yer?'

I tried to meet her eyes.

'Did yer take my dad's watch?'

I unzipped my bag, reached in and put the Omega on the table.

'I brought it back.'

'And, well... what about mine?'

I unstrapped the Minnie Mouse watch and put it beside the gold Omega.

'I brought them both back,' I said.

'Yer stole Dad's watch, Stewie. And yer dad's money. *Why?*'

'I *didn't* steal 'em.'

'You did!' She gathered the watches to her, like I was going to take them again.

'I didn't. I just *took* 'em.'

'Same thing,' she said. 'What is it with you and watches, anyhow?'

I zipped my bag up.

'What's wrong with you? Taking other people's things.'

'There's nothing wrong with me!' I said. 'Bloody brought 'em back, didn't I? Look, I came here to give 'em back. I've given 'em back, now I'm off. I'll see yer later, Lorna.' I gripped my bag, stood up and opened the door.

'I... I thought you wanted me to go with you?' she started up.

'I don't give a fuck about you!'

She shuddered like I'd thrown a stone and hit her. 'That's... that's not very nice, Stewie.'

The empty darkness of the backyard lay beyond the door. The geese had shut their racket. The moon was shining across the still waters of the bay. I forced myself to look at Lorna. Her eyes were glistening. Her dressing gown was gaping open - I could just see the outline of a dark nipple under her thin pyjama top.

'Stop staring at me. Sit down.' she said. 'Why did yer want me to go with you?'

I shut the door and plonked down - tried to laze against the chair. She eased down and faced me. Back straight. Pale knuckles clasped across the table.

'Why, Stewie?'

'I thought you... I wanted you to come with me... to Glasgow.'

'You wanted me to run away with you,' she giggled. 'Like in a story, eh? Were we going to join the circus, or something? Or go and live with the gypsies?' She spread her fingers wide - like stars, and leaned back, biting her lip.

'Don't laugh at me,' I said.

She put her hand over her mouth, but spluttered out through her nose.

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'Don't! Everyone bloody laughs at me!'

'Sorry,' she said. Her shoulders shook and tears ran down her cheeks. 'Sorry, I can't help it. Yer got to admit, it sounds a bit daft, eh?'

I tried to clamp my lips shut. 'Yeah, I reckon.' My lips tweaked apart. 'We'd make a right couple of clowns.' I laughed with her, then forced myself to frown. 'Everybody laughs at me.'

'Aww, poor Stewie,' she said. 'Stewie the clown, with his big red nose and his great big feet. Oh, goodness.' She went off again, into a fit, spluttering between laughs. 'Look... really... it's nice that you asked me... it's nice... but I can't.'

Eventually, she stopped giggling. Salt stung my eyes. I was stuck halfway between laughing and crying.

'Oh, dear. Look at yer, yer big nit. What are we gonna do with yer, Stewie?' She stood up and ruffled my hair from across the table. A split second glimpse of the top of her breast.

'Let's give yer a cup o tea, eh? D'yer want some cake?'

'Yeah... Yes, please.'

She clicked an electric kettle, popped a shiny red tin-lid and cut a large slab from a chocolate cake. She slid it across the table on a white china plate and cut some for herself.

It was sweet and good. I took a big bite and scoffed it down. 'I don't wanna go back to London.' A few crumbs blew across the table. My hair felt soft in my hands as I ran them back through my spikes. My fingers smelt really bad. Must have been from the mud I'd been chucking - from the yard - mixed in with chicken, goose and sheep muck. Yuk! I'd just wiped it through my hair.

'Yer don't wanna see yer dad?' she mumbled through a mouthful of cake and leaned back against the sink.

'No. I don't. Has Grandad told you anything?'

'He's told Dad, a bit,' she said. 'I know... a bit.'

I stuffed more cake into my mouth, trying not to sniff my fingers.

'Hungry, eh?'

'Yeah, thanks. It was freezing out there,' I mumbled. More crumbs flew across the table top. 'Sorry.'

Lorna got up and pulled her dressing gown around her as the kettle boiled. 'It's nippy in here, too.' She rattled around in a cupboard.

I scooped the crumbs into my hand and let them drop beneath the table.

She pushed a striped mug of tea across the table. 'I think yer should go back to yer grandad.' She sat down.

'But, he's sending me home.'

'Well, unless he takes yer all the way back himself, yer can still make yer own way to...

wherever yer want. Who knows? He might change his mind. Yer not on the ferry yet.' She paused. 'Actually, me dad said yer grandad wasn't too happy about being ordered to send yer home.'

'Really?'

'Aye.'

'Maybe, if I give Grandad his watch back, too, he might change his mind.'

'You've got his watch, too?' She sighed. 'Oh, Stewie. What's with yer? Yer just can't keep taking people's stuff.'

'It's just watches,' I said.

'Oh, that's OK then. Just watches!' she laughed. 'I bet that bag's full of 'em.'

I shifted in my chair.

She stopped laughing. 'Oh, Stewie. No! How many?'

'Just a few.'

'But why?'

'I dunno.' I stared down at the bag and tapped it with my boot. 'It started when Mum was ill.'

Lorna stared at me.

'I'll give 'em all back.'

She sat there blinking at me, pulling her dressing gown around her. 'D'yer want some more cake?' she said.

'No, thanks. I... I better get off, before your dad gets back.'

'Aye, yer better had. Yer'll go straight home, then?' She raised her neat, dark eyebrows. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes still puffy from sleep.

'Yeah. Aye.' I said.

'Yer promise?'

'Aye, Lorna.'

'Finally. A smile.' She waited until I was halfway out of the kitchen door before she came over.

I hoped she couldn't smell my hands, or my hair. 'So, I won't see you again,'

'Maybe yer will, boy.'

We both started as the sound of a Land Rover engine growled from round the front of the house.

'Shit! That'll be Dad,' she whispered. 'Off yer go. Wait 'til he's come in. Don't let him see yer.' She pushed me through the door and I nearly fell down the steps.

'Bye, Lorna. Sorry for...'

The door was nearly shut.

'For waking you up,' I said.

Pinhead

'Shhhh! Bye,' she whispered from inside.

'And, sorry for nicking your dad's watch.'

She opened the door again. 'Shhh! OK. OK. No harm done. Bye.'

'Goodnight, Lorna.'

'Jesus, Stewie! Just shut up and go,' she said, and shut the door.

The kitchen light went out.

That was it, then.

Last time I'd see her.

Fucking great - "Just shut up and go."

I stumbled back round the side of the house and listened for the engine to stop. It stopped. Some welly-booted footsteps slopped closer. Then, the front door clicked shut. Stooping below window level, I crept past the neighbour's houses and groped my way back along the moonlit track, slipping in the wheel grooves, shivering and lugging my bag towards Grandad's.

*

An hour later, clutching my DM's, I crept into the dim kitchen firelight of the croft and laid the old man's watch beside him on the wooden table. He muttered and shifted in his chair. I quickly slipped into my room and pulled the blankets over me, with my jacket still on - shuddering, staring into space, waiting for dawn to come.

standard army issue

Light burned. Opened my cracks of eyes. Rolled over. Groaned. The collar of my biker jacket had dug a groove into my neck, just below my ear. The front door slammed and a bell jangled outside my window - *Ting! Ting!* - Lorna's bike. I sat up and drew the manky curtain, just in time to see her blurry shape peddling out through the gate. What was she doing here? I swung my legs round, sat on the edge of the bed and tried to focus my eyes. Grandad was bashing around in the kitchen, clanging pans and running the tap. Groaned again. Time to face the music. Straightened myself up. Pulled the door open. Wobbled into the kitchen. I reeled and leaned against the door, still half asleep. He was facing away from me, across the kitchen.

'I'm sorry, Grandad. About yesterday... and everything.'

The wooden spoon knocked dully inside the saucepan he was stirring. He stayed facing the stove. His faded blue overalls stared back at me.

'I said, I'm sorry.'

He turned from the stove and faced me. 'Pinhead?' he said.

'What? Eh?'

'Porridge, all right for yer?'

'Yes, thanks.' I swayed and hung onto the wall. 'Did you hear me? I'm sorry.'

'Aye, I heard yer. Better sit down. Yer as pale as a seasick ghost. Get some breakfast inside yer.'

I leaned on the table and sat down. He slid a white china cup and saucer, and a dinky little sugar bowl in front of me. Dark black coffee swirled inside. It smelt strong. Two sugars. Stirred. Blew. Sipped.

'Was that Lorna?' I said.

'Aye.'

'What she want?'

'She came to say goodbye, before yer left. She'd heard yer were catching the ferry... from someone.' He caught my eye. 'I told her yer were still in yer bed.'

'Oh.'

'Yer had a late night, then?'

'Er. Yeah.'

He sipped at his own mug and sat down.'

'Yer've been a mighty big fool, boy.'

I nodded. Yeah, yeah, yeah - get on with it. I braced myself for the impending moaning-

Pinhead

blitz. He wouldn't be able to grouch at me for much longer.

He took an extra deep breath for extra supersonic old-git moaning power. 'Well... yer've been a fool, Stewie. But... but... well, I reckon yer've tried to make up fer it,' he said. Just for a second his eyebrows escaped from their fixed frowning grooves. 'Rob... yer dad. He'll have to do without yer for a bit longer.'

'Eh?' I said, spilling half my coffee onto the table.

Grandad leaned across and wiped it up. 'Yer can stay here a while longer. I'll not send yer back yet, Stew. I'll ring him and tell him so.'

'I can stay?'

'Aye. Stop sloshing yer coffee around.'

'Really?'

'Aye. Yer can stay. On condition that yer help me out around the place.' He stared into my eyes. 'And keep yer hands off other people's watches.'

My coffee span from stirring. 'I... I'm...'

'Except this one,' he said, 'Here...'. He unstrapped his watch and put it on the table. 'Yer like it so much, yer might as well have it. It's seen a lot of service this one. Standard army issue. With me all through North Africa, Italy... France... and... Na Hearadh... ticked a lot of hours away on my old wrist. Seems to keep going missing lately, though. So here... take it. It's yours.' He pushed it halfway towards me.

I reached towards it, my face glowing. 'Are you sure, Grandad?' I felt the strap, still warm from his wrist.

'Aye. I am.' He clamped his big rough fingers down on my outstretched hand and held it. 'Make good use of your time, eh?'

'Er... yeah.'

He let me go.

I wrapped the worn leather strap around my wrist, below my bandage. It adjusted to fit – narrower than Grandad had worn it. 'Thanks.' Its little heart ticked bravely away inside, it's second hand flicked neatly beneath the scratched glass.

'Aah! Bugger!' Grandad leapt up and grabbed a smoking saucepan from the stove. He held it under the running tap. 'Gah! Open the door, will yer?' He spluttered and whisked a tea-towel round his head.

I let the smoke out of the door and sat back down, sipping what was left of my coffee.

Grandad opened the windows. 'Looks like porridge's off the menu, Stew,' he said. 'Wash yer face and grab yer coat. I've a mind for someone else's cooking. Bacon and eggs.'

'Where? Who?'

'Tarbert,' he said. 'I fancy a trip to Mrs MacDougall, in town.'

Mooner

'Yer were famished. Weren't yer, Stewie? What's he been feeding yer up there? Air?' Mrs MacDougall, the chubby owner of the Ca Dore Cafe, smiled and poured me another cup of coffee.

'Gah!' Grandad spluttered.

She seemed fascinated by my hair. 'Orange is such a lovely colour. Isn't it Donny?'

Her withered husband stopped and stared at me for a second, then carried on wiping the counter, like he was trying to rub the paint off. He mumbled something I didn't catch.

I wiped marmalade off my chin, smiled and looked out the window at the harbour, crunching toast.

'Well. I don't care what anyone says. I think it's very... very... unusual. So. Have yer premium bonds come in then, Dougie?' She wiped her hands on a flowery apron.

'Huh?' said Grandad, spitting crumb-grenades at me.

'Not like you, splashing out like this.'

'Gah!' he said. 'I'll have some more toast, when yer've finished with yer jokes.'

She shook her head at him and Donny clicked some white sliced-bread into an electric toaster behind the counter.

It wasn't long before we were stuffing ourselves with piles of bacon, eggs and mushrooms. Grandad washed his down with a mug of tea and I had more black coffee. My head was buzzing. When we'd finished, Grandad paid up and opened the door.

Mrs MacDougall winked at me. 'Nice to meet yer, Stewie. Drag him here again if he starves yer, eh?'

Grandad flung his hand in her direction and I followed him out into Harbour Street, waving behind me at Mrs MacDougall... Bam!

'Will yer watch yersel? Dammit!' A voice snapped.

I reeled back to see a short gingery man in a wax-cotton jacket picking himself up off the pavement. Potatoes, onions and oranges rolled freely into the dirty curb-side.

'Sss... sorry.' I said. I bent down and started collecting the wandering vegetables, now caked in black grime.

'Yer a mindless, thug! I'll have the law on yer.' The man snatched a mucky onion off me and shoved it in a plastic sack.

'Gah! He meant nothing by it. Yer fool!' said Grandad.

'That's fer me ter say. MacLeod! Gimme those, yer orange haired baboon!' The man grabbed the rest of the potatoes from me and stormed off down the road. Mrs MacDougall

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peered out of her door.

‘Taigh na Galla ort!’ Grandad. Yelled after him.

‘Dougie!’ Mrs MacDougall put her hands over her ears. ‘I’ve never heard such language.’

‘Oh. Och! Sorry, Sarah. I dinnae see yer, there.’

The man retraced his steps and brandished a potato in Grandad’s face. ‘I won’t forget this. Yer foul mouthed heathen!’ He waved the potato under my nose for a few seconds, then stomped off down the hill.

Mrs MacDougall shook her head at Grandad and closed the door. A few fishermen at the quayside exchanged glances, also shook their heads and carried on piling strange looking wire cages into their boats.

‘Crikey, Grandad. What did yer say?’

He looked a bit shaken. ‘Er, nothing. Nothing.’ He waved his hand dismissively. ‘Look. I want to look in on a friend of mine. Yer welcome to come, or I can meet yer back at Seonaidh.’

‘I’ll come along.’

‘Fine. Well, look where yer bloody going, then. And mind now, Mooner’s prone to be a little grumpy in the mornings.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m used to that. Who was that man?’

‘Hah! Cheeky bugger! That, Stewie, was our neighbour. Fraser MacDonald. The fella I reckon shot the eagle.’

‘Bastard!’

‘Sush!’ Grandad frowned. ‘Now, mind yer mouth and watch where yer going.’ He strode off up the hill and into a shop marked ‘General Store’. I waited outside until he came out carrying a bottle shape, wrapped in a brown paper bag. We walked up a small road lined with grubby little terraced houses. About halfway along he stopped outside a pale blue front door and stooped to pick up a bottle of milk from the doorstep. Paint flaked off as he rapped on the wooden door with his knuckles. We waited. Grandad rapped and waited again. Nothing. He raised his eyebrows, set the milk-bottle back down and we headed back down the road.

‘Either, he’s gone out, or having a lay-in,’ Grandad growled.

When we were about twenty yards down the road, I heard a voice.

‘Hoi!’ A little black bloke was leaning out of the doorway, clutching a tartan dressing gown around himself with one hand, and waving with the other.

‘Looks like he was having a lay-in,’ muttered Grandad.

As we reached the door the man bent down and picked up the milk. ‘Doug, how are yer?’ he said, with a broad smile.

‘Not so bad, thanks. This is Stewie, my grandson. Stewie, this is Mooner.’

‘Ar-right. Pleased ta meet ya, Stewie MacLeod. Lorna’s told me all about ya.’ Mooner

shook my hand vigorously. 'Can I offer ya both some tea and toast and marmalade?'

'No, thanks. We've just come from Mrs MacDougall. Just wanted to stop and say good morning.'

'Right, ya are, boy. Well, ya don't mind if I have some?'

'No. Go ahead,' said Grandad. He handed him the brown paper bag. Mooner nodded, said nothing and headed down the gloomy passageway to a smoky kitchen, where he took a long drag from a roll-up. Grandad ushered me into a room and followed Mooner into the kitchen. The room had a strange balmy, herby smoke-tang - but it wasn't peat. A high-pitched scream of laughter rang out from the kitchen.

'Ya said what? Oh, Man!'

Grandad returned and jerked the tatty curtains back, and revealed a dingy front room packed with different musical instruments sitting around like guests on a manky threadbare grey three-piece, in between Rizla packs and scattered tobacco. Patches of worn, patterned carpet peeped out from under piles of records, magazines, old newspapers and empty beer-bottles - a bit like my bedroom - Fucking ace! Grandad took a battered acoustic guitar from the armchair and sat down. He motioned for me to sit down on the sofa, so I squeezed in between a big piano accordion and some sort of wide flat drum that had a kind of a beater-thing hooked on it. I tapped the skin of the drum with my finger-nails, and it made a little ringing boom. Grandad kept tutting and raising his eyebrows as he looked around the room. Mooner was clattering around in the kitchen, singing softly in an unrecognizable language and swearing every now and then, in English. After a few minutes he reappeared carrying a big tray loaded with a teapot, plates, cups, knives and spoons, a tub of marge, a pot of marmalade, and a massive pile of toast.

'So yer still want me to help with the eagles, then, Dougie?'

'Aye, if yer would.'

'Of course I will. When the young one's strong enough, we'll get it flying.' He put the tray down.

'Sorry bout the mess, boys,' he said.

'I should say so,' growled Grandad.

'They're a right cheerful bunch, these islanders, eh, Stew?' laughed Mooner.

I laughed, tentatively.

Grandad scowled. 'Why d'yer stay here, then?'

'Haven't got the fare home, Doug.'

'I'd lend it yer,' said Grandad.

'No. I'd miss ya cheery mug, too much, boy.' Mooner clapped him on the knee and they both laughed. 'Whoops!' he said, as he just managed to avoid squashing a banjo. It plunked in complaint, so he leant it against his armchair. He grinned at us both in turn as he spread a load of

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marge on his toast, then slopped a dollop of marmalade on top.

It was hard to tell how old he was. His hair was bushing into a grey afro, but his light brown speckled skin seemed clear and young - taugt across his round face. His eyes had dark rings round them and crinkled into a mass of crow's feet when he smiled, which was about every twenty seconds.

'Ah'll be up ta see them birds a yours, when they're ready, Doug.'

'Aye, I'll be grateful to yer. If yer can.'

'Sorry bout the mess, Stewie-boy,' Mooner said. 'Had a late night, working on a tune, and er... one thing led to another.'

'One bottle led to another, more like,' said Grandad.

'At a certain point in the proceedings, I estimated a need for some liquid inspiration,' said Mooner. 'And ah was not inaccurate in my assessment. The results were duly satisfying. Just hope ah can remember the bloody ting. If not... aah, well... plenty more'll roll along...' He sighed, crunched his toast and brushed crumbs from his dressing gown onto the floor. The leg that stuck out from under the dressing gown was paler-skinned, smooth, corded with purple veins, and very thin.

Grandad caught my eye. 'Aye. Don't worry, Mooner,' he said. 'Yer right. If yer forget that tune, another just as good will soon come along.'

'That's very kind of ya, Dougie-boy. Are ya sure I can't tempt ya both with a cup o tea, and some of this toast and marmalade?'

'Yer've talked me into it,' said Grandad.

'Yes, please,' I said.

'Would ya do the honours, then, Stewie-boy?'

I poured the tea while Grandad spread some marmalade and crunched a small corner off a piece of toast. They talked quickly, sometimes in Gaelic, sometimes in another language.

Mooner's accent wasn't quite like the other islander's. It sounded a bit like a mix between Bob Marley and Georgie Best. Other times it was more like Manuel - in Fawlty Towers. After about five slices of toast and a couple of cups of tea, he poured something from a hip-flask into his cup and knocked it back, straight down his throat. I could see his hand shaking. Grandad caught my eye and shook his head. The flask appeared again and Mooner chucked another cupful down his throat. He sat back in his armchair with a satisfied 'Aaah!' and smiled at us both for a sec. Then, he picked up the banjo, checked the tuning, and actually strummed a verse and a chorus of *Get up, Stand up*, by the Wailers. He winked at me and began plucking away at an astonishing speed. He played a sort of repetitive riff that wove in and out of the tune - high, then low, then higher. He hummed without singing words and was getting right into it - his eyelids half-closed, as he lost himself in the music. Every now and then, he'd open his eyes and look at us as he played, then

he'd smile and we'd follow him back into the world of his tune, again. We must have sat there with him for about twenty minutes before he slowed. Then, he stopped and slumped back in his chair.

'Thank you,' said Grandad.

Mooney nodded, but he settled back into the armchair, closed his eyes and cradled the banjo. Grandad got up quietly, took the banjo from him and rested it against the armchair. He pulled the worn looking tartan blanket from the sofa, laid it over him and motioned for me to head for the door.

Out in the street, Grandad gently pulled the door shut, ran his hand over his face, and sighed.

'Well, Stew,' he said. 'That's Mooney for yer.'

*

I sat on the quayside next to Seonaidh and stared out into the sifted unfocused greys of Tarbert bay, while Grandad picked up a few supplies at the general store. This island was gonna be my base for... days? Weeks? Months? I had no idea, but it was better than going home. The seagulls wheeled through the ever-blurry sky and I put Grandad's army watch to my ear - ticking solid and unstoppable. Bacon and eggs glowed comfotingly in my belly. The barely hidden secrets under Lorna's pyjama's drifted dreamily through my mind. Suddenly, it seemed warmer here - more friendly.

'Cmon, boy. Shift yer lazy arse. You've peat to cut.'

I groaned and jumped in the cab next to the miserable old git! 'Did you know? You're such a crotchety mis...'

'Here,' he said. And slapped something hard and round into my lap. 'Pirate treasure.'

I opened the brown paper bag. A Terry's chocolate orange.

We grinned at each other.

Headed for the Croft.

stumped

Grandad reversed Seonaidh around the back of the barn to a rusty trailer. He showed me how to hitch it up onto the tow-bar and connect the brake and indicator plug, but he wouldn't let me drive 'cos of reversing with the trailer on.

We turned out of the yard and onto the shore track towards Lorna's house. I stared out of the dirty window, trying not to bang my head against it as we lurched along. Thick grey cloud had blown in and drained all the bright colours from the bay, the grass and hills. We didn't go far before Grandad turned left and climbed away from the sea onto an even rougher track. Drab slopes of grey, green and brown loomed around us as we clunked over a steep rocky rise and down into a shallow valley. On a hill above us the track wound up to a group of modern buildings. I could just about see a figure of a man standing there.'

Grandad jabbed at it with his thumb. 'That's MacDonald's croft,' he growled. 'Me and him don't get on, so good.'

'How come?'

'Well. Amongst other things... I don't like guns. I reckon it was MacDonald who shot the eagle!'

'Bast...!'

'Mind yer language, boy. But yer not wrong. The bad blood goes way back between the MacLeod's and the MacDonald's. Back to Coire na Creiche.'

'Back to what?'

'Coire na Creiche... The Battle of Benquhillan, an old feud over a handfast. But it's not that that bothers me. He has no respect for the wild things. It's all about money, money, money, and no thought for the future.'

We pulled alongside a flat patch of grassy ground where a long line of black mud slabs were laid along a deep step cut into the earth. Some were stacked on wooden pallets.

Grandad got out and slammed the door. 'Got some cut, already,' he said. 'I'll show yer how to clear some turf, then we'll load some of these, if they're ready.' He handed me a strange looking right-angled tool fixed on the end of a long wooden handle. 'A *tarasgeir*,' he said.

'A what?'

'A peat iron.'

'Oh.'

'When I was a lad, we'd all cut the peat together. Me mam, me dad, yer great-uncle Ross, and me. Kind of a tradition,' Grandad said. 'Whole villages would come out together. There's not

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so many do it, now.'

I looked at the long ridge of heavy black mud he was expecting me to shift. 'I wonder why?' I mumbled.

'Eh?'

'Nothing.'

'I'll just take a few swings. Don't want to open Lorna's embroidery on my thumb up.'

I followed him to the end of the line of mud slabs, and yawned as he showed me how the peat was cut, grimacing as he swung the peat iron. The air in the blank valley hung still around us, as he took the turf off and cut into the mud.

'C'mon, then,' he said and handed me the tool.

I struggled with the stupid, awkward thing. My slabs were either cut too thin and broke into bits, or came out in bloody great chunks that were too heavy.

'Useless,' he said. 'Perhaps yer'd do better if yer paid more attention, boy. Here, gimme that. I'll do it mesel.' He bound a cloth around his hand and snatched the *tarasgeir*. 'Now, listen. The iron wielder, that's me, cuts. Then the peat falls into the arms of the thrower, that's you, who lobs it onto the bank in the best available space.' He shot me a grumpy look. 'By that I mean, don't lob it on me feet, or the iron. Now, c'mon, buck yer ideas up. We'll do it the way it's meant to be done, as a team. Get yerself down there. Now, when I cut it, catch it as it falls away. Then, sling it up here on the bank. Right?'

'Yeah, all right.'

He glowered at me and climbed up onto the step. He cut the peat and it fell away from the bank in neat slices, into my waiting arms. I threw it up towards him.

'Not there, boy! Don't chuck it *at* me!'

'Where d'ya want me to sling the bloody mud, then?'

'Here! Here!' He prodded with the tool to the space beside him. 'And it's peat! Not mud!'

'Peat, mud. It's all the same.'

'Hah! Try burning mud, boy.'

He dug in with the iron and shuffled along, while I slodged around in the bottom of the ditch and tried to lob the warm, black stuff into the right spot up on the bank. Every now and then, one would land on his boot and he'd mutter at me under his breath. I took the duffle-coat off, wiped the sweat from my eyes and carried on heaving. My arms ached, but after a while, we fell into a steady rhythm together - cut and throw, cut and throw. Grandad set the pace with the *thunk* of the iron into the soft, moist peat. Our breath huffed loud, and the wind hushed in the tufty clumps of grass. My back glowed warm as the sun peeped out and shone down on us. Eventually, Grandad stopped and leaned on the handle of the iron. A big dew-drop of snot glistened as it hung from the end of his nose and dripped onto the peat. He blew a trumpeting

blast into a crusty looking handkerchief and stuffed it back in his trouser pocket.

‘Not bad work, boy.’ He pointed. ‘Yer’ve got some mud on yer face.’ A smile flickered in his eyes for a second.

‘It’s not mud. It’s peat,’ I said, and wiped my cheek on my sleeve. My hands were stained black with the stuff.

An arm of thick cloud covered the sun. My sweat chilled on my skin as a fine drizzle began to fall. There was a distant rumble of thunder. We walked back towards Seonaidh - Grandad along the top of the bank and me below him. Just before we reached the trailer, in the deepest, wettest part of the ditch, something caught on my wellington, tripped me, and I sprawled onto the grass.

‘Steady, boy,’ said Grandad. He looked down into the bottom of the ditch and pointed at something sticking up from the boggy black sludge. ‘What’s that?’

I reached down, touched it, and gasped. ‘Buried treasure, I reckon.’ I squinted up at him through a cold wet veil, as the drizzle turned to rain. The thunder rumbled a bit nearer.

‘Gah!’ He climbed stiffly down beside me and tapped at it with the *tarasgeir*. ‘Get the spade from the cab.’

‘I thought we’d finished.’ I put my hood up.

‘Go on. Won’t take a moment.’ He started digging into the peat.

By the time I handed him the spade he’d cleared the jagged top of a round cone about two feet across.

‘Crikey! It is a treasure chest,’ I said.

‘It’s nearly big enough.’ He dug down alongside the edge of it. ‘Nearly as rare, too.’

‘Why? What is it?’

‘Old tree trunk.’

‘What’s so special about that?’

He gestured around us at the barren hills. ‘Well, have yer noticed the lack of woodland in these parts?’

‘Yeah. What of it?’

He dug down and around the trunk. ‘It’s been that way for centuries. But sometimes yer find these old stumps in the peat bogs. Preserved.’

The thunder rumbled overhead.

‘Oh. OK. Can we go home, now, then?’ I pulled the coat around me. I’d have liked to preserve him in a bog.

He leaned on the spade handle. ‘It’s maybe been in there for thousands of years.’

‘You’re telling me that thing’s really old, then?’

He handed me the spade. ‘Aye. Get digging.’

I glared at him through the rain. ‘Why can’t we leave it there a bit longer?’

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He sniffed and wiped another droplet from his nose. 'Because I've a use for it. C'mon, I've done the hard bit. Sooner it's out, the sooner we go home.' He stood frowning, with his hands on his hips.

'Not my home,' I muttered. The peat was slippery, digging down and around the stump, but I got down about two feet. 'This is gonna take, bloody ages.'

Grandad glowered at me, took the spade and carried on for another foot. Then, he stopped and stuck his hand down into the black water that was filling the hole. He straightened up. 'Phew! I reckon that's the end of it. Pull me out.'

The boggy peat sucked noisily at Grandad's wellies, as I tried to heave him out.

'Pull, boy!'

'I am!' I gripped his wrist and leaned back. He came free with a jerk and I fell back on my arse, into the bog puddles.

'Hah! Hah!'

I tried to struggle up, but slipped back on my arse, again. Grandad doubled up - shaking with laughter, unable to speak. After a minute he reached out his hand and dragged me out of the mud.

'Oh, sherbert!' he said. 'That's the best laugh I've had in years.'

'Glad you enjoyed it.'

'Oh. I did. I did.'

He stomped off, took a long chain from the back of Seonaidh, attached one end to a bar at the front of the cab, and looped the other end round the stump. He started up the engine and tried to reverse. After much straining and revving and cursing, the stump was dragged free and then up onto the trailer. There was a massive bang of thunder and the grey sky lit up. We loaded up some old slabs of peat and stood looking at the black stump, as the rain washed it clean. Lightning sparked up the valley, again, making a silhouette of the stump. Flipping heck! It was... it was just like that one I'd see in a dream. Bloody hell! It *was* like the stump in my dream. It was about three feet tall, but its roots clawed out about six feet across - like a bunch of twisted muscled fingers, or talons that still wanted to grip the ground. It stank musty. I poked it - soft but solid. It was really chucking it down and the wind was getting up.

Grandad patted it. 'Didn't want to come out.'

'Should have left it there, then.'

'Gah! Philistine. The things it must have seen.'

'What? Worms, mud, more worms... Oh... and more mud and worms. Can't we put it back?'

'After all that effort? Yer must be joking! You've no imagination, boy!' He rested his bandaged hand on the dark wood. The clouds were shutting out the light.

'You're bleeding.'

A little trickle of blood ran from his red bandage, down onto the stump.

'Aye, it's a bit sore. You better drive. There's no need to reverse, now.'

As the thunder rolled above, we hitched the trailer back on.

Climbed in, clanked up and out - of the bleak little valley.

Back to the deep storm-blue of the bay.

Grandad reversed the trailer.

Chained the stump to the beams of the barn.

Dragged it off.

Shoved it back into the dark.

art-I-ficial

Grandad hovered in the doorway. Half in, half out. 'So, I'll leave yer to it, then.'

'Bye, Mr MacLeod,' said Lorna. 'Thanks for the lovely cakes and everything.'

'See you later, Grandad.'

'Gah!' He waved his hand in our direction and shut the door behind him.

'He's sweet,' said Lorna.

'Sweet? Yeah, right? Sweet, like an old shriveled-up onion.'

Lorna giggled. 'Oh, Stewie! He is sweet. Look at the trouble he's gone to.' She waved her hand at his best flowery tea service and the remaining cakes. He'd cleared away all his books and notebooks and tools from the table.

'Spose so,' I mumbled.

Lorna sat down and faced me. 'Stewie. I've been thinking about what yer told me... about how yer mum helped with yer reading.'

'Oh, yeah... ?'

'Well, I think she was onto something... with the song lyrics and that. I think somehow that yer familiarity with the songs, and singing along, somehow helped you to relax and just absorb the words. It's like your brain matches the written lyrics to the sounds you know... and you accept them, somehow.'

'So, I'm not just stupid, then?'

'Phwah!' She play-cuffed me round the ear. 'I'll give yer a right whack if yer say that again.'

'OK, OK! I'm *not* stupid.' I covered and covered my head to defend myself.

She lowered her hand.

'Thanks, Lorna,' I said.

'Fer what?'

'I dunno... well... you know.'

'Yer welcome.' She smiled and her hair fell across her face. 'Now c'mon. Let's concentrate.' She moved round and sat close beside me. Our shoulders pressed close and I breathed in the fresh apple-shampoo smell of her hair. She opened a big note-pad. The paper was covered with bold black letters, shapeless words. They twitched a little against the white page.

'I'm not so sure I want to do this.'

'Aww. C'mon, Stewie. Give it a try, eh?' Lorna raised her eyebrows.

I wanted to run from the twitching words, but I tingled at the warmth of her, breathed in

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her apple-smell. I wanted to kiss her.

‘All right, then. I’ll have a go.’

‘That’s it.’ She smiled. ‘Well, we know that you’ve learned your letter sounds, so instead of trying to break the words down, we should sing along and point to each word in turn.’

‘Sing? In front of you? You’re having a laugh, aren’t you?’

‘Not at first. Look. I’ll sing, and you read. Maybe, you can join in when you’re ready, OK? OK?’ She prodded me in the ribs.

I nodded. ‘OK. What song, then?’

‘Do you know Art-I-Ficial?’

‘Yeah. X-Ray-Spex? You like ‘em, then?’

‘Yeah. Poly-Styrene’s really switched on. She’s not some bimbo like Lyndsay de Paul or Pan’s People. Why are yer surprised? We’re not so off the track up here, yer know.’

‘OK. Smashin. How d’yer get into ‘em?’

‘My cousin William sends me old copies of NME and Melody Maker, and I listen to John Peel, of course.’

‘Big Peel fan, aren’t you? In fact, I reckon you’re a closet punk, really. Eh?’ I grinned at her. ‘You’ll be chopping yer hair off and sticking safety pins through yer nose, next.’

‘Actually, Stewie. If you’d paid attention to your Mr Johnny Rotten, you’d have realised that Punk was over before it had begun. I simply like good music, regardless of any marketing or sociological labels.’

‘Crikey. There’s some big words. I don’t have to learn how to spell ‘em, do I?’ I started to laugh, but she was frowning. ‘Yeah, I know. You’re right.’ I said. ‘And there’s a load of poser’s around now, who are just cashing in.’

‘There’s loads of good new music too, though,’ she said. Her green eyes opened wider. ‘Do yer think I should cut my hair off, then? Don’t you like it long? Like this?’ She drew her hair back and let it slip through her fingers.

‘Yeah, yeah. It’s nice.’

‘Not like all those London punkette’s yer know, then?’

I shook my head.

‘Maybe I should dye it green,’ she said.

‘Nah, it’s nice as it is,’ I said.

‘Yer just saying that.’

‘I’m not.’

Her cheeks tinged with pink. ‘Thanks.’

The sound of our breathing filled the space between us. The tap dripped loudly. She looked right into me with her green eyes. I could feel our faces moving closer. She was going to

kiss me, she was! She was going to kiss me! She moved closer.

She took a...

Slow...

deep...

breath...

moved closer.

She yelled 'ART – I – FICIAL!' right in my face. Really loud, just like Poly-Styrene. She carried on into the guitar intro - De de der-ing, bobbing her head to emphasise the rhythm.

I cracked up. 'You're nuts!'

'Yeah. So what? Should have seen you flinch. Hah!' She carried on with the tune. 'Follow my finger, on the words,' she yelled.

I shuddered with laughter as she sang and pointed at the words.

I know I'm artificial, but don't put the blame on me.

I was reared by appliances in a consumer society.

liiin a consumer society.

liiin a consumer society.

Her voice didn't fit her - it was all weathered and smoky, like she'd been drinking whiskey and puffing loads of fags for fifty years. She was blushing a bit and her eyes were shining. I really wanted to kiss her.

'Look at the words, Stewie.'

I did what she said. She sang the verse again, pointing to each word. The words still flickered, but not so badly. I kept on laughing, but watched her finger.

'Now, sing along,' she said.

I croaked and giggled - tracing the words. We did the same verse over and over, then did the next two.

When I put on my make-up, the pretty little mask not me,

that's the way a girl should be, in a consumer society.

I wanna be instamatic. I wanna be a frozen pea.

I wanna be dehydrated in a consumer society.

liiin a consumer society.

liiin a consumer society.

She stopped singing and slowly pointed at each word in the first verse, and I sang-spoke the whole thing out without stumbling, changing *girl* to boy, though. But, halfway through the second verse, the words seemed to shiver. Suddenly, I felt dizzy.

'Can we stop for a bit?'

'Aye. Of course. Yer doing brilliant, Stewie. I reckon we've earned a rest.'

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I leaned back and put my hands behind my head. She poured some tea. We chewed some cake without speaking. I closed my eyes for a bit while Lorna went out to the loo - images of her sitting on the splintery seat. Maybe she was looking at the spider, like I did. Maybe she was looking at the dirt, and the holes in the toilet door. It wasn't long til she came back.

'Ready, then?' she smiled.

We carried on singing for about twenty minutes longer. The same song over and over. Then, the word-flickering started again. This time I felt a bit sick.

'That's it. No more, Lorna,' I said.

She shut the book. 'Well done, Stewie,' she said. 'Great lyrics, eh? Poly-Styrene's a real feminist.'

'Hmm,' I said. I slumped back in the chair.

'Don't you like feminists then?'

'It's all burning yer bra and having hairy legs and armpits, innit?'

She looked like she was really going to hit me.

'Christ, Lorna! I'm just pulling your hairy leg. You should see your face.' I laughed weakly.

'I haven't got hairy legs! But anyway, you shouldn't joke about it,' she said.

I rubbed my eyes and leant forward onto the table. Dizzy. Sick.

She leaned close to me and looked into my face. 'Have I pushed you too hard?'

I breathed in her apple-shampoo. 'Be OK in a minute.' The sickness passed and the urge to kiss her flowed over me again. She was so close. The tap dripped... dripped... dripped...

'D'yer fancy a walk up to the Cairn?' she said.

'Yeah. That'd be good.'

She walked to the sink and turned the tap. 'I better wash yer grandad's best china up before we go, then.'

*

I followed her up the hill towards the Cairn. About halfway up, we stopped for the grubby sheep as they waddled lazily out of our way. It was different to my last walk up here, under the moon - the rock-face clock and the *Scratch-Scratch* threat of the kitchen knife. A darker memory of London and cold steel in my wrist made me shiver for a moment, even though it was sunny.

'Tired? Yer big softie.' Lorna said.

'Nah. Just having a look round. It's quite nice up here, innit?'

She led the way up the hill, her hips dipping from side to side with each long stride. Her calves were beginning to tan up a bit. The folds of her green cotton dress clung rhythmically to the contours of her lower back and gathered around the shape of her bottom - the outline of her

knickers was just visible beneath her dress - *Cor! Phwoah!* - Sumo's words sounded in my head, bugging me. Lorna wasn't some tart in a porno mag. I wiped my forehead and took off my jacket. Lorna stopped and waited for me, again. Her face was flushed and rosy.

'She must have been pretty special, yer mum.'

'Eh? How d'ya mean?'

'Well, taking the time and thought to help with yer reading. That's what mums should be like. Mine's never bothered with me, like that.'

'Really?'

'When I was little, maybe. But, I can't remember it.'

'Bit like my dad, then.'

'Could be,' she said. She shielded her eyes from the sun and looked past me towards the loch.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I mean, he was all right when I was a kid. Used to do loads together. But, then he got these big ideas, got this stupid job. Everything changed after that.'

'What kind of job?'

'Printing. Management stuff. Big one for discipline. He used to be in the army.'

'The army?'

'Yeah. Tried to make me go in the cadets. I only went once. Same with the scouts. Bloody telling me what to do. Hah!'

Lorna strode out again, turning her head every now and then to emphasise her points. 'It's not right, is it? People shouldn't have kids if they're not gonna spend time with 'em. With my mum, I always felt I was in the way. Still do. Was it that way fer you? With yer dad, I mean?'

'Yeah. Once he saw I wasn't gonna be a squaddie, he lost interest.'

'Did he fight in the army?'

'Nah. Missed his chance, I reckon. Too young for Hitler. Did national service and chose to stay in... so he said. I couldn't stand getting up early or people shouting at me. Must be like scouts with guns.'

'Imagine choosing to be in the army. What did he do... in the army?'

'Signals. Whatever that is.'

'With my mum, it was always "Not now, Lorna. Maybe tomorrow, Lorna." And then when tomorrow came, she'd say the same thing.'

'Know what you mean. Just like my dad. Felt like I was under his feet. He working all the time. Dunno why Mum put up with him. She kept saying he was "doing it for us". To give me a good start, at college and stuff. Hah! Must have been a bit of a shock for him, when I turned out a dope.'

Lorna spun round and frowned fiercely at me. 'Don't say that, Stewie. It's not true.'

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'OK. OK.'

She carried on climbing. Her bottom hypnotised me.

'College, eh?' she said.

'Er... Yeah.'

'That's what I want, University somewhere. Get away from here. Off the island. See some of the world. Small chance of that, though.'

'How come?'

She stared down at the croft. 'Danny.'

'Your brother?'

'Aye. I'm all he's got, really. Dad's so busy.'

'Doesn't he live with your mum, then?'

'Oh, no. She can't... wouldn't, have him... never wanted him, anyway. And...'

Lorna paused mid-stride. She looked back down towards the bay.

'What, Lorna?'

She sat down on a grizzled rock. I knelt down on a clumpy bit of grass below her. The pale green blades twitched and flickered under the passing touch of the breeze.

'Mum moved out, just after Danny was born. I was only nine. Mum wasn't... she wasn't... quite right, so she couldn't have him with her. Dad had to work, so... well. It was up to me most of the time.'

'To look after Danny?'

'Aye.'

'So, where is he now?'

'Special school.'

'Really? How come?'

'He comes home at weekends.' Lorna frowned at me. 'He can't... doesn't speak, or won't. Not a word. Doctors aren't sure why. Difficult birth.' She paused. 'Brain damage, maybe. They're not sure.'

'So, is he a...'

In my mind I heard the stinging playground names - Spaz. Cretin. Moron.

Thlyd.

'Is he a retard? Is that what you mean?' Lorna's eyes flashed and glistened.

'No. Is he... you know... normal?'

'So, what's normal? Eh? *He* can read.' Her nose wrinkled up and her eyes were green and fiery.

'He can read?'

'Aye. Not out loud. But in his head. He understands.' She pouted and wrinkled her nose.

'He's just a little boy who won't speak. He's not retarded. Anyway, I'm not sure what that's

supposed to mean, anyway.'

'He can read? Sorry. I didn't mean...'

She glared down at me and sat on a rock. 'What *did* you mean?' Her eyes bored holes in me until the breeze blew a thin curtain of hair across her face.

'I dunno... sorry...' The blades of grass twitched. They felt cool and fresh between my fingers. 'I spose not being able to talk... it's a bit like me not being able to read.' I looked up at her, glowering at me through her black veil of hair. 'Isn't it, eh?'

She said nothing, looked out towards the bay.

'Eh, Lorna?'

'Aye,' she said. 'OK, then.' She got up and headed on up towards the Cairn. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm a little touchy about him. I mean... even my Dad's ashamed of him.'

'Bit like mine, of me, then.'

'Is he? Really?'

'Yeah. Not exactly college material, am I? Don't look like the kids on University Challenge, do I?'

'Well, that doesn't matter.'

'Does to him, I reckon. Never said so, but... well, anyway. He's not an art fan, either.'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Only thing I'm any good at.'

'Oh, so you're a budding artist are yer?' She turned and smiled at me.

I looked at the grass.

'Do yer like any particular artists?' she said.

'Yeah.'

'Who d'yer like, then?'

'Well...' Visions of the girl in green stockings flitted between us. I hoped Lorna couldn't see what I was thinking. 'Do you know Schiele?'

'Oh, yes! Mum likes him. Do yer like his landscapes?'

'Er... I like his portraits.'

'Why's that?'

I tried to ignore her penetrating green stare. 'The... the people, their faces. They're so... alive. So... real... to me. They're real people.'

'Have yer ever drawn from life modelling, then?'

'Er... yeah. There was this lady came in, once.'

'Was she young?'

'Nah. She was middle aged. Quite... big... and chunky.'

I looked down at the shining loch, away from Lorna's eyes.

Pinhead

'How did yer find it?' she said.

'Find what?'

'Drawing from life.'

'Well. It was hard. But, I did all right.'

Lorna laughed at me. 'Hah! Yer've gone all red, Stewie! Did yer fancy the chunky lady, then?'

'No. It was art!'

'Stewie likes the chunky ladies, eh?' She prodded me with her finger. 'Just teasing, yer.' She grinned. 'So, yer've got hidden talents, eh? Maybe we should swap yer dad fer my mum. I'll go to college and you can live with her and be an artist. Hah! Maybe not, though...'

'Why's that?'

Lorna walked on. 'Mum's a bit...'

'A bit what?'

She shouted back over her shoulder. 'She's... well... maybe a little bit too... artistic. C'mon,' she said. She broke into a run. 'Last one to the Cairn's a fat hairy pudden!'

I took a deep breath and raced after her. Chased her streaming hair, her driving arms, and her long fast legs - the backs of pale knees and thighs that flashed at me from under her dress. Visions of Schiele's models and Sumo's porn flashed behind my eyes.

When I caught up with her, I was gasping. She grinned at me and sat down against the weather-bleached stones of the Cairn.

'Yer a big fat hairy pudden,' she said.

'Cheers! I love you, too,' I gasped back.

'Ooooh! Do yer, Stewie? Do yer love me?' She leaned her head to one side, fluttered her long lashes at me.

My face glowed. I looked out at An Cliseam, across the hazy valleys. Over in the West, the sea shone milky blue. The light was so different from my sunset and moonlit visits here, it was almost like I'd come to another place.

'I was up here the other day,' I said. 'And it was real spooky. Really weird. When the sun started going down behind the mountains, it was like there was a load of trees growing in the shadows. Looked like a whole forest.'

'Aah, yer've seen 'em, then.' She cackled with a witch's voice. 'Yer've seen the ghosts of trees.'

'The what?'

'Aww... local myth. Been going around a few hundred years, or so. Ask yer grandad. He'll know more.'

'The ghosts of trees?'

'Aye.'

'I think I've heard of that... before.' The echo of an eagle voice rolled around inside my head - *Whose lights fell on the ghosts of trees?* I shielded my eyes and stared out across the land towards the mountain. There was nothing there, but heather, grass and rocks. I felt stupid for telling Lorna about my manic imagination, but that voice kept rolling round inside me - *ghosts of trees, ghosts of trees.*

'Are yer all right, Stewie?'

'Yeah... yeah.' Just a bit knackered from trying to read the songs, you know.'

'Aye, yer did well.' She looked at me, still breathing hard from the run. 'Yer not very fit though, are yer, boy?'

I straightened up. 'I am. I'm just a bit out of practice. I play loads of football, me and the lads.'

'Who's that, then, Stewie? What are yer friends like?'

'Oh, they're OK. Sumo an that. Bunch of punks I used to go to gigs with.'

'Sumo? Is that his real name?'

'Hah! Should be. Sumo wrestler, you know.'

'So he's a big lad, then? Chunky?'

'Yeah. He's a bit on the beefy side. Good to hang on to, though. Down in front of the stage, when everyone's jumping around and all that. Stops yer falling over. He's sort of like... an anchor.'

'Is he nice?'

'Er... no not really.'

'Why?'

I wondered what Lorna would make of Sumo, his harem, *Cor!* and *Phwoar!* and his porn mags.

She laughed. 'Who else is there?'

'Fin, Shemmy, a few others.'

'Who's ya best mate, then, mate?'

I laughed at her attempted mockney London accent. 'None of 'em really. Shem's OK, I spose. What about you, Lorna?'

'My friends?'

'Yeah.'

'Lost touch a bit since school. Susan's settled down... and Heather. They've got married. Got babies. I only see Sarah when she's back from University.'

'Crikey! Babies? Bit young, innit?'

'Aye. Aye... it is. Not unusual though.'

Pinhead

'Yeah. There's been a few girls from school up the duff.'

Lorna frowned at me. She hopped up and brushed flecks of grass and mud-dust off her skirt. 'Oh, well. Better be getting back.'

'We just got here.'

'You stay here, then, Stewie.' She started walking down the hill.

'Thanks, for the help, Lorna.'

She carried on walking and called without turning. 'OK.'

I scrambled off the rocks and caught up with her. 'No. Really. Thanks.'

She stopped and swept the hair out of her eyes.

'Thanks for taking the time,' I said. 'With the teaching and that. I reckon you'd make a good teacher.'

'D'yer really think so?'

'Yeah. Certain. Or a singer.' I grinned.

'Hah! Thanks,' she said. 'I'd love to be a proper teacher. Got to get to Uni first though.'

She set off down the hill again, then stopped and waited for me. 'C'mon, then Johnny Rotten.'

I walked back down the hill beside her, through the rocks and sheep, scared she'd hear my heart pounding for her.

*

At the foot of the hill we met Grandad, who was limping back from the direction of the bay. He was carrying a couple of freshly dead rabbits.

'How did he get on?' he asked Lorna, ignoring me.

'He did fine, Mr MacLeod. We made some good progress.' She looked at me and smiled. 'But, yer can't rush this sort of thing.'

He looked at me. 'Er... well done, lad.'

'Why don't you give him my report card, Lorna?' I said. 'I'm not a kid.'

'Calm down, Stew. I was just asking.' Grandad shrugged and the rabbits' bodies bobbed against his leg.

'He was just asking, Stewie,' said Lorna. She squeezed my arm and raised her eyebrows, then let go of my arm and unwedged her bike from against the wall. 'Better get back for Dad's dinner. I'll see yer tomorrow, Stewie, fer some more reading, eh?'

I nodded.

'Bye, Mr MacLeod.' 'Bye, lass,' said Grandad.

I waved as she free-wheeled out of the gate.

'Went all right then, did it?' said Grandad.

'Yeah. All right,' I said.

'It's nothing to be ashamed of, boy.'

I booted a lump of mud across the yard. 'I feel like an idiot.'

He patted me soundly on the shoulder. 'Lorna doesn't think so, eh? And... and neither do I. Take yer time, now. Like she said, eh?' He lifted the rabbits up. 'Let's go and see how our feathered friends are getting on, eh?'

I hung back, remembering the voices in the shed. The sun was bright, but the air was starting to get a bit nippy. Shivered. Pulled my jacket on. Those birds were stirring something up inside me. Fear. Something mad. It was time to toughen up and stop my imagination running wild.

*

The air inside the shed was cool and damp. I sneezed as Grandad lit the lamp.

'Guzentheidt!'

'Sorry. D'yer think I spooked 'em.'

'Soon find out.'

We stumbled through the dark. I patted the old motorbike and brushed dust from its dusty saddle and cold, steel fuel-tank. It felt solid and real. Understandable. Not weird or imaginary.

'Grandad,' I said.

'Aye,' he whispered.

'This bike.'

'Aye.'

'Does it still work?'

'No idea, boy.' He held the light up, his face a whiskery mass of crags and shadows.

'I reckon I could fix it up. I've done motor mechanics at school.'

'Have yer, now.'

Spiders ran across the handles. 'Yeah. I was quite good at it.'

'Hmmm. I get the point. We'll see,' he said. 'Better feed these birds first, eh?'

They were fidgeting and whistling at the back of the shed. Grandad moved ahead, towards the sounds.

'OK,' I whispered, and followed him into the dark.

As we approached the wire, both birds reared up and spread their wings. Their ear piercing whistles stopped me dead.

'Would yer like to try feeding 'em, Stew? Eh?' Grandad dangled a rabbit at me, and the shrieks got louder.

'No thanks,' I said. 'I'll watch. Thanks.'

Pinhead

'All right, boy.' Grandad seemed surprised.

Feathers ruffled as the eagles ripped and fed - bird-hook-machines tearing into the soft flesh. The rabbit had been alive not so long ago, now it was meat - food for the eagles. I'd imagined that other dead rabbit had spoken. Had rabbits, had all creatures got voices? Shit! Was I cracking up, or what? I shuddered, waiting for the eagle-voices to start up in my head again. Weakness... faintness. Grip the bench.

'You all right, Stew?' said Grandad.

I flinched at the sound of his voice. 'Er. Yeah. Bit tired.'

'Hungry. Like them, eh?' he grinned.

The eagles ripped the rabbit meat apart. 'Nah. Not hungry, not now. Not yet.'

'Well, that's a first. Go and get yerself a drink of water. I'll finish up here. Then we can have some tea.'

'Thanks.' I made my way back through the dark expecting an eagle voice to rasp in my ear, or inside my head. Tried not to rush - I'd end up going arse-over-tit. With each step, the eagle presence grew behind me. I neared the door - gritted my teeth, waiting for the voice.

Birds shrieked - burst into sunlight. Slam the door shut.

Just an animal voice.

An animal sound - a shriek - not a word.

Eagles were just birds, rabbits were just rabbits - only animals.

Just animals.

she-tree-bark

I close my eyes. The sounds around me grow fainter. I see Lorna standing on a beach, on white sand. Her dress of words is gone, blown away. She is naked - buffeted by the wind - staring at me. She waves me forward with a long slow sweep of her arm, and I begin to drift towards her. My feet are cold on the powder-sand - my boots are gone. The sand is dry and cold - then wet, as a wave sweeps in. Lorna beckons - her fingers curling me towards her. As I get closer I can hear her breathing. It is all I can hear. Slow and peaceful - like the lungs of the bay on a calm day. As I pour my eyes across her body, she shivers. Her body trembles into different living textures of the earth - light and shade - ocean, rock and fur and tree and cloud. At first touch, across her skin, my fingers feel feathered softness, tanned and combed. Then, her shoulders shift from animal flesh to a body of liquid - cool fresh ocean, brook and byrne. From the sea of her face, pebble-cheeks surface - smooth and pale; they dapple into egg-shell freckles and tree-blossom through cherried hues above her pouting lips, before she twitches her nose through a tawny rabbit-pelt. Her long ears curl into shells, a mane of seaweed falls across her sticky auburn breasts; anemone-nipples sprout rippling fronds. Below her mammal belly-mound, fish-scales glisten, her legs join and ripple in moray-coils, a tail splices her ankles, which shudder into fins, then toes. When she breathes - it's a breeze of heather, rain-fed grass, salt-aired gale blasts, sun-warmed stones. I lean forward to kiss her, but she backs away, turns and slithers, springs, swoops, bounds and runs. She cries *Toh-tschill!* and thunders away in timber-cracking wave-washes. She barks, roars an ice-shattering avalanche of world-words, and runs. I chase her - losing ground. Each footprint she casts falls from a different foot or paw, hoof or scrape, fin or claw. I run as quickly as I can, but she's faster - up to her knees in foam, up to her beech-bark waist. She's waving long-tree limbs - goodbye. Then, she dives - arcing through the spray - shape-shifting, changing - smooth, scaled, finned - slipping beneath the crashing-surf wall. I wade out, trying to follow her - deeper, up to my chest, my shoulders, my neck. The rip-tide drags me out and under, and I cry to her - croak and bark, shriek, snap and whistle.

The current drags me deeper - I gag, carp, writhed and stricken.

I opened my eyes.

In the kitchen Grandad banged the door shut. 'Time for tea, Stew,' he said.

feannagan

'I've let it go, now, but we used to grow much of our food, here.' Grandad shouted into the wind and waved his hand across a big flat area of grass below us, at the back of the shed. The sea was a deep blue - full of small raging white horses. Grandad's duffle coat billowed out behind him.

'Feannagan, or lazy beds, we called 'em. I'd feed 'em with seaweed and manure. Aye. We'd get lovely spuds. Fine vegetables. Many folk still work 'em, but I packed it in a while back.' He rubbed his back and carried on up the hill. 'Course, it's mostly just sheep, now. I rarely weave or fish. The few sheep bring in a bit and I get some boys in to shear, these days. So I just keep an eye on them bleaters that's near and give a share in those that's not. Yer need a dog, really. No dogs since Bella died and no cats either, since old Nog. Aye. Yer need a dog and I like a walk, but can't be out as much as I used. Not much use to the other fellas, now.' He sighed. 'I'll show yer the boundaries.'

I followed him up over the crest. His long, skinny legs seemed to eat up the ground. Down in the lee of the hill, the wind lessened. Grandad set quite a pace, heading South-East to a place where a long line of new fencing ran like a bright scar across the valley. 'Bloody MacDonald,' he said. 'A finger in every pie. Lord knows who or what he thinks he's keeping off his land.' We walked along the fence line until it turned away South. The heather scrunched beneath our boots. 'Hah! Will yer look at that?' Grandad pointed to a distant white blob hard up against the fence, on MacDonald's land. 'That's why I don't like the wire.'

'What? Why?'

'I'll show yer.' Grandad strode off towards the blob.

When we got nearer, I could see it was a sheep. Somehow it had got its foreleg twisted up in the fence. It bleated wildly and struggled against the wire, as we approached, but couldn't get up.

'Got itself caught, see?' Grandad stepped over the fence and grabbed the sheep firmly. It stopped struggling. 'Come here, Stew. Hop over. Right. Now. I'll get yer to hang on to this dopey creature while I pull it free.'

I gripped the sheep around the neck and shoulder. Its mud-caked wool felt warm against my cheek. It seemed quite happy for me to hold it. Grandad pulled some wire cutters from his pocket, snipped the wire and unwound it from the sheep's leg. 'It was too slack,' he said. 'Right. Let her go.' The sheep bounded up and trotted off in the direction of some of its mates. 'Here, grab gold.' Grandad motioned for me to pull the wire tight, while he meshed and twisted it back together.

'How come you're repairing his fence, when you don't like him?'

Pinhead

‘Do as yer would be done by, boy. He’d do the same fer me. Gotta stand together, eh?’ He patted me on the shoulder. ‘There. Good lad.’

We re-joined the path to the East, then tracked North. Grandad told me some of the history of Crofting, how, time and time again, people had been cleared from whole areas of the island, by greedy landlords. How many folk had been forced to emigrate across the Atlantic, to Canada. How many had learnt how to scratch a living on tiny plots of land on some of the worst rocky ground, growing skilful - growing food where none had grown, fishing and weaving. We circled the land that Grandad included in his croft. Small birds flew from cover and disappeared into patches of heather, or thickets of twisted dwarf-trees that clung to sheltered hollows between low cliffs and outcrops of rock.

Grandad was beginning to stoop a bit by the time we got back to the Blackhouse. I was knackered. He brewed up some tea and produced a Dundee cake from a cupboard. ‘Having yer here, yer getting me into bad habits.’ He cut off two big slabs of cake and handed me one. ‘Here. Get outside o that.’

We ate and drank in silence. Then, he went into the bedroom and returned with a little wooden cigar box. ‘Here,’ he said.

I lifted the lid. Inside were other smaller boxes with different crests on. One contained a dirty brassy medal with a wreath and crossed swords on it. The other little boxes had more medals in. Some dirty and tarnished, others bright and shining. All with bright rainbows of ribbon.

‘They’re for you, boy. I dunno why I kept ‘em all these years, but I couldn’t throw ‘em away, somehow. ‘Yer might as well have ‘em, if yer want. I mean. Maybe... one day... not now... I’ll... I’ll tell yer about... it all. Maybe.’

‘Thanks. Grandad.’ I ran my fingers over the cold metal. ‘Were you...?’ I looked over at him. He was slumped back in his armchair snoring, quietly. I took the box into the bedroom and laid my head on the pillow, hoping I’d dream of Lorna, again.

1-2-3-4 i-don't-mind-i-don't-care

Lorna stuck to her word. She came round the next day and we went through the singing, reading lesson, again. She came nearly every afternoon for a week. Brilliant and boring - boring looking at the flickering words when my heart wasn't really in it. But brilliant - worth the hassle just to sit beside her - feel her leg press against mine under the kitchen table. Worth it - to smell her apple-shampoo hair as she roared her way through a song. Fucking priceless - the glow at every little squeeze of encouragement she gave my forearm and to see her look so pleased when I got something right. Had to try my best. Just had to. After an hour or so, if it wasn't raining, I'd follow her up the hill while she ranted on about politics and feminism - my eyes glued to her bottom, imagining her naked body moving underneath her clothes - fuelling my night-time fantasies and scared she'd catch me out. One afternoon, when I'd finished sweeping out the barn, Grandad said he was "Glad I'd found a friend in Lorna", but then he went on for ages about me "behaving like a gentleman", whatever that meant. I told him to "Leave it out", but he stomped off on a mission somewhere and I knew he'd got me sussed. But I didn't just fancy her, I really liked her.

She arrived just as I'd finished spiking my hair with sugar-water and dabbing a few stinging drops of Brut 33 into strategic places - armpits, back of my neck, just below my belly button. We spent a good hour going over some lyrics. The words hadn't flickered quite so much.

'That's really good, Stewie.' Lorna leaned away from the kitchen table and flicked her hair back from her face. 'Goodness. Your face is as red as a beetroot,' she said.

'Yours is red as a... a cherry... no... a tomato.' I rubbed my jaw. My face ached from laughing.

'Maybe, a cherritomato?' she said.

'Yeah. One of those. A real serious one. You really frown when you're singing, don't you.'

'Hah! Not as bad as you. When you're reading, your face looks like this...' She scowled and crossed her eyes, then burst out laughing, again.

'Thanks a lot,' I said. 'It's bloody hard work. Slave-driver.' I stuck out my bottom lip in a mock-sulk.

'Aww. Sorry, Stewie. I'm just kidding. You're doing so well. Really, you are.'

Lorna squeezed my arm and sent an electric thrill through my body. The room seemed empty of everything but us. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly.

'Do yer like the lyrics?' she said.

'Yeah. The Buzzcocks are really good.'

Pinhead

'I chose this song specially.'

'How do you mean?'

Lorna traced the lyrics with her finger, whisper-singing.

'Sometimes when we go out, I wish we'd stayed at home

And when I'm dreaming, or just lying in my bed

I think you've got it in for me

Is it all in my head? Is it in my head?'

As I read in time with her voice I understood each word as she pointed to it. A lurch of fear or hope turned over in my stomach. Her finger stopped moving.

'Is it all in my head, Stewie?'

'Eh? What do you mean?'

She was looking at me, but I kept my eyes fixed on the page. She traced and spoke the next verse.

'I used to bet that you didn't care

But gambling never got me anywhere

Each time I used to be so sure

Something about you made me doubt you more.'

The words began to flicker, the letters began to twitch.

'Do you care, Stewie?'

'About... what?' I stared at the page.

'Me... about me?'

My throat tightened up and the words rasped out. 'Yeah, course I do.'

'Look at me, Stewie.'

I glanced at her - her eyes were bright and shining, her cheeks were flushed. I looked back at the words swimming on the page.

'Do you... *like* me?' she said. 'Yer know... *like* me?'

The swimming words were making me feel ill. I tried to focus on the plastic radio above the fireplace. 'Yeah, you've been a real mate,' I said.

'A mate?'

I felt dizzy and panicky. All the fantasies I'd had about her were just unreal and distant. She was here, now. Right up close and asking questions. This wasn't safe, like day-dreams or fantasies. It was real. She wanted an answer. She wanted me to tell her stuff I could never say - things that had nothing to do with words. As I thought about what I felt, my guts got more knotted, more tangled.

'No. Not just a mate... more... more. It's hard to say. It's all twisted up...'

'It's OK, if yer don't.' she said. 'I just thought yer might like me, that's all.'

She took my hand and ran my finger across the page. She whispered the Buzzcock's words. They juddered and shook into jagged jerking ink-spiders.

'This pathetic clown'll keep hanging around

That's if you don't mind

I don't mind.'

My knee shook and knocked painfully against the hard wooden table-leg. 'Lorna... I... I...'

I tried to meet her bright eyes, again. They glistened green, searching my face. She was so close, I could feel her hand trembling. She bit her dry, pouting upper lip, and a little blood seeped through - deep Cadmium Red on rich pink. She ran her tongue across her lips.

'Do you, then?' My voice croaked.

'What?'

'Like me?'

'Aye. I do,' she said. Her eyes glittered.

'You do?'

She nodded and smiled, licked her lips. 'Yeah.

Well... I do, then. I like you, too,' I said.

She laughed softly. Our heads drew together, slowly, slowly. Then - fast. Too fast. We closed, clashed. Our noses collided. Mouths pressed, squashed tight, tighter. Hard, harder - til they hurt. A surge of heat shuddered up from my toes, buckled and coiled through my legs, groin, guts, chest and head. We glowed into a hot jammed rush of -

lips breath cheeks necks arms palms fingers and
pain.

The girl in green stockings drifted into my mind. Memories of Sumo's centrefolds - *Cor! Phwoar!* I shoved them to the back of my mind. We crushed. Her hair draped across my face. I tasted her lip-blood. For a second, her warmth spread through me and I actually felt something - I felt good. Only then, I really knew how numb I'd been. And why. And When. Since the *Whummm whummm whummm* of the hospital generator and the feel of my mum's hand - a hand as cold as stone. That touch of dead stone, that loss, spread over me -

choked me - froze - black and hard in my chest.

I gasped for escape - into panic. My pulse spiralled up and up - my heart beating a manic rhythm. A smothering blanket of concrete started to set itself around me - I had to get it off me - get her - off - me. I pushed my hands against her shoulders, but she held on. I shoved her roughly away, jumped up and knocked the chair backwards. It clattered into the bedroom door.

'What's up? Stewie?'

'I... sorry... I...'

She reached out, gently took my arm, but I pulled away. I backed away from her, towards

Pinhead

the fire.

‘Stewie?’

‘No!’ I gasped.

‘No... what?’

‘I can’t!’

‘Can’t what?’

‘I don’t know. This... it’s... too... too much.’

She stepped towards me. ‘Stewie...’

I stepped back. ‘N-n-no! G-g-g-go!’ I shouted and slammed my fist onto the table.

She looked like I’d hit *her*. Her face screwed up into a freckled ball. She made a choking sound, pushed past the fallen chair, dragged the door open and ran out. I forced my legs to move - followed her, shuddering, out into the yard. I watched her frantically peddling off - dipping, diving like a gull along the shoreline track. Moving further away.

Getting distant

small

smaller

tiny

gone

Sss...

Sssc...

Ssscra...

Scratch...

Scratch-scratch...

Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...

Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch,

Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.

The blur of the yard the gate the field the hills *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.*

A dark shape in the barn - the stump.

‘Stewie!’

I heard Grandad’s voice behind me. Tripped. Fell. Staggered up. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.*

‘Stewie!’

I bombed up the hill - stumbled over and over. Careered through rocks and scattered sheep.

‘What have I done? What have I fucking done!’

I want her. Want her. What have I done? I hurt her! Hurt her!

Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch. I floundered my way up the hill. Running, falling, gasping. Then, running, falling again. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.* The hills and sheep and rocks around me blurred and span into a hazy jagged mess. Then, I got to the top. Staggered to the Cairn, slammed down against the stones. My head glanced, bumped, grazed off the loose-packed, hard mound. My head was aching, spinning, pounding. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.*

Tore the bandage from my wrist and flung it into the breeze. It fluttered down into the heather. Dug at my wrist with my fingernails - the wound was healing into a scar. Scrabbled around and grabbed a thin, flat, blade of rock. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch. Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.* Its cold edge ripped along the pink seam of new skin that had begun to knit together. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.* The wrist opened and a little blood trickled out. The edge of my rock-blade was coated with crimson. Deep Cadmium on granite-grey. The colours were beautiful. *Scratch-scratch, Scratch-scratch.* My blood was beautiful – a bright, slow, little trickle. I lay my hand across my knee and teased the wound until my wrist was numb. Until my chest was numb. Until my head was numb. The loss of feeling spread across me like relief, like warm water. It washed away the leaden ache – for Mum, for Dad, for Lorna.

‘I don’t wanna be here. I don’t wanna be anywhere.’

World... let me go.

Let me sink into the stones.

I let go of my body and half-closed my eyes, until all I could feel was the hard coldness of the stones, stones, stones. Fingers of wind stroked gently over my bare arms, my face and through my hair. *Shhhh* - it whispered into my ear. Hills, clouds and mountains hazed behind my eyelashes. I sank into the stones.

*

‘Stewie!’

I clung to the stones. Someone was calling me back, but I clung to the stones, their weight dragged at my eyelids. The voice got louder.

‘Stewie!’

It got closer.

‘Stewie! Are yer all right, boy?’

Automatic, against my will, my eyes opened. Grandad was leaning forward, his hands on his knees, staring at me.

I groaned and turned away. ‘Leave me alone.’

I heard the sound of his breath as he blew out through his teeth. I heard him groan and

Pinhead

shuffle closer. He shifted about as he slumped down beside me. He was breathing hard.

‘Leave me alone.’

‘Can’t do that, boy,’ he said. ‘Can’t leave yer, up here. Can I, now?’

I didn’t move. Wanted to get up and fly, but there was no strength in me. I lay on the hard rocks. The wind tussled at my hair. Gradually, Grandad’s breathing slowed and began to whistle through his nose. I shifted against the Cairn. After a while I tried to sit up, but could only slump my head against his shoulder. I stayed there – feeling him breathing in and out. The rough musty wool of his jumper tickled my cheek.

‘Give us yer arm, eh?’ he said.

I held out my wrist and he wound his crusty handkerchief around it.

‘Better put this on,’ said Grandad.

He helped me lean forward and draped my biker jacket over my shoulders.

‘I know it hurts... losing yer Mum. But, we can’t bring her back, Stew. Eh?’

I nodded, weakly and leaned my head against his shoulder. A clump of plump clouds drifted across the sky, riding a higher, faster wind. A group of small birds flitted across in front of us, landed, and darted in and out of a patch of heather. Cloud covered sun and cool evening light filtered into grey, until the wind drove it on. Sun glowed hazily, sinking slowly beyond the undulating horizon. The birds flew off. The breeze picked up, gently ruffling my hair. Shivered.

‘I want to go back down, now,’ I said.

‘All right, boy. Lean on me.’

I pushed down on his shoulder and wobbled upright.

Grandad tried to stand but sat back down. ‘Phew! I reckon that climb nearly did me in, boy.’

I held out my good arm for him to grip, and braced myself as he pulled himself up. He groaned.

‘Right couple o wounded Charlies. Aren’t we, Grandad?’

‘Hah! Aye,’ he said. ‘What happened with Lorna?’

I said nothing.

‘I told yer to behave like a gentleman.’

‘Oh. Leave it out, Grandad!’

He gripped my arm harder. ‘OK, boy,’ he said.

The sun dipped below An Cliseam as we tottered side by side, into the shadows, and down towards the Croft.

‘Time for some tea, eh?’

I nodded, and we picked our way through the rocks and sheep, reaching out for each other whenever we stumbled.

stewie
 stewie
 sink-not
 into striped-Gneiss shelved by ice
 marbled-slabs
 suck scold hope lies cold
 flailing
 failing
 sometimes lean upon old whiskered
 feather-man
 hold old-ruined quill-weavers
 still-strong talon-fingers
 rest in regret in loss
 across new shoulder-wing arm-spans
 as you
 hatch-grow can you sip blood
 flow sap
 rise from earth-streams of younger
 hunger Now you surge to sky
 now you live-dive-deep
 in flight swim-linger in
 swell soar ripe in her
 speckled under-tow
 Now break adrift
 from an ocean of grief

the art of...

Next morning, I dragged my way back from a swamp of sleep and hauled myself up against the headboard and the old pillows. Bangs and clangs rang out in the yard. Grandad working. Didn't he ever have a lay-in? I dozed on and off for a while, trying to ignore the plodgy lumps and jaggy springs of the mattress digging in my back. I shifted and fidgeted as images of yesterday's clinch with Lorna filtered back. It all seemed distant and impossible. Trying to think about the panic, and my collapse at the Cairn, it all felt like a dream. It was unreal, like when I'd got pissed and flipped out, back in London. What the fuck was going on?

The night before, Grandad and me hadn't spoken much before turning in, but he'd lent me his radio so I could listen to John Peel. He'd rigged himself a rickety put-you-up bed in the loft above, and told me to stay downstairs in the bedroom. Snuggled down with my ear pressed close to the speaker, Peely's familiar warm mumbling had drifted over me like a comforting blanket. I'd been careful not to have the music too loud, but when Grandad's snores had been rumbling overhead for a good while I turned the volume up a notch and listened properly. It wasn't a classic night. Peel played a lot of new stuff by bands I didn't know, but then he re-played the first Buzzcocks session. It made me think of kissing with Lorna - the warm crush of her body, her raspberry lollipop lips, then my swarming black panic and the pain on her face as she legged it out of the kitchen. As it got closer to midnight my eyelids had started drooping. Peel had rounded off the night with some mellow dub reggae - I'd clicked the radio off, fallen asleep.

I clambered up and peered through the ragged curtains. A grey morning. Grandad was carrying some tools into the barn. Yesterday's warm sunshine had gone. Today was full of bleak, dark clouds. I tried to nestle back down in the porridge-bed, and dozed off and on. When my stomach began rumbling I pulled on my jeans and ambled round to the toilet. My head felt muzzy and empty from yesterday's panic - but there was something else. A sort of calm - sort of clean. A bit like when you've had a rotten dose of flu - a really hot fever, for ages and ages, then you wake up one day and it's gone. You're all claggy from sweating it out - weak and drained, but inside you're well again, full of a kind of shining stillness. New and clean.

I sat with the loo door open, peering through the fine drizzle, as pale little dots of sheep grazed lazily across the hills. The wind picked up and began to gust in on me, so I shut the door, shifted on the seat so the splinters wouldn't spike me so much. Blinking in the dingy air, I watched the spider come out of its crack. It got busy repairing the complex web system it had built in the sheltered corner of the loo. I nearly nodded off as it rhythmically dropped down and scaled back up again, over and over - fingering its way along fine, almost invisible, sticky rope-threads. Up and

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down, back and forth. Up and down again. I sat there 'til my stomach started to rumble again. The spider scuttled into its crack the second I pulled my jeans up.

Back in the kitchen Grandad had made some breakfast. 'All right, Stew?' he said.

'Not so bad, thanks.'

'Time for yer bowl of ready-mix concrete ballast.' He smiled, and shoved a bowl of pinhead in front of me.

'Thanks.' I spooned at the dollop of porridge unenthusiastically, but each mouthful warmed my empty belly. A big mug of tea arrived.

'Looks like a wet day, so I've got an inside job for yer, in the barn.'

I nodded and tried to smile. Great! Another day lugging rusty metal tools and sweeping sheep-shit around. I lounged back and sipped carefully at the sweet, dark steaming brew, but Grandad was fidgeting around with some clothes by the half-open door. He coughed. 'Yer gonna be long?'

'Blimey! You want your pound of flesh, don't ya?' I groaned and got up. Bloody slave-driver.

'Devil makes work for idle hands, boy,' he said. 'Here, better put these on, it's going to be a mucky job.' He held out a discoloured cream woolly and a faded blue oil-stained boiler suit.

'Oh, no! I'm gonna look just like you,' I groaned.

'Height of Harris fashion, boy. Get it on and stop bleating.'

I pulled on his fusty old clobber and followed him across to the barn.

'What kind of shit am I clearing today, then? Sheep? Duck. Goose? Or is it something more exotic? Has something rare flown in and crapped in our barn?'

'Hah! A comedian.' Grandad trudged past the great tree-stump to the back of the barn, lit a lamp and hung it on a beam-hook. The lamp cast weird stump-shadows across the walls. A big tarpaulin was spread over a large shape leaning against the back wall. I sighed. It wasn't some new exotic kind of shit. I was gonna be shifting another huge pile of antique machinery. Scrubbing rust off countless old lumps of tractor, or some-such.

He jabbed his thumb at the tarpaulin. 'Pull it off, then,' he said.

I pulled it back and let it crumple onto the floor. 'Wow!'

The lamp light shone across what looked like the old motorbike from the shed. But this bike wasn't covered in dust and cobwebs, the light flickered off its petrol tank and cylinders. It looked like it had been cleaned up a bit.

I looked at Grandad. 'It's Dad's bike.'

'James Captain Two-fifty,' he said. 'If we can get it going, it's yours.'

'You're kidding? Won't he mind?'

'Hah! Who cares? No use to man or beast as it is. And yer dad don't need it.'

'Will it go?'

'Don't see why not. I'll give yer a hand, eh?'

I knelt down and ran my hands over the Crimson tank and the leather saddle. He'd definitely cleaned it up already. I pressed alongside the bike, squeezed the handle bars and twisted the accelerator grip. 'Vrmm! Vrmmm! Vrmmmm!'

'Hah! Hah!' The light flickered across Grandad's face. He looked strange. He was grinning at me.

'Thanks... thanks,' I said.

'Don't mention it,' he said. 'Let's get to work, eh?'

*

I'd done a bit of work on cars in motor-mechanics classes at school, but this was a whole new game. Grandad seemed to know what he was doing though. He talked me through each part of the process, explaining what everything did and how it worked. After stripping the motorbike down for a couple of hours, wrestling with seized nuts and bolts and brakes, we stood back and surveyed what looked like wreckage from an accident. The dismembered machine was now dismembered – a wheel-less, tank-less frame with its body and legs cut off from its headlight. Decapitated. A dead torso and limbs that once used to be a fast, roaring metal animal that my dad had ridden across the hills.

Somehow, I hadn't noticed, but it was absolutely *chucking* it down. Hail drummed onto the roof as though countless tins of marbles had been tipped and scattered high up in the sky. The marbles bounced onto the surface of the yard and smashed into millions of tiny splinters - split-second ice-flashes - crystal sparks. We stood and watched through steaming breath until it eased up a bit. Grandad braved the rain and lolloped off to make some sandwiches. The lamp cast its tree stump shadows. It felt like the bloody thing was watching me. I chucked the tarpaulin over it and sat down in the straw. Big drops of water beat and bounced across the roofs, walls and gates - splatting into the muddy ground. I settled back and wiped my face and oily hands on a rag. I looked closer. Ugh! The rag was actually a giant gusset section of moth-eaten underpants. I dumped it down and smeared my hands across the blue overalls. Grandad would have had a right laugh if he'd seen me do that. The rain fell. The constant drum and hiss of splashing water filled my ears. My mind slumped empty and still, except for the sound.

*

Grandad reappeared across the yard and hurried through the puddles, shielding a big tray of

Pinhead

sandwiches, teapot and cups, under an old bent-framed umbrella.

‘Nice day fer ducks,’ he said, and set the tray down on an upturned wooden box. We munched our sandwiches and stared into the rain.

‘Oh, no,’ I said. ‘I don’t believe it.’

‘What?’

‘I’m actually getting to like this horrible cheese.’

‘Hah! Strathdon blue. Best cheese in Scotland.’

‘Yeah. I know. You told me. Patriotic cheese. Really impressive. Give me some London fish and chips any day.’

‘Cheeky bugger! Don’t forget yer roots, boy.’

‘I’m not,’ I said, and sang in my best cockney accent. ‘Maybe it’s because I’m a Londoner.’

‘Gah!’

*

After lunch we sat by the doorway and looked around at the barn, at the dismembered James Captain. It didn’t look like a motorbike any more.

‘Will we ever get it all back together?’ I said. ‘Do you reckon we’ll ever get it to go?’

‘Well, putting it back together’s one thing. Whether it’ll run or not is another.’ Grandad winked at me. ‘We’ll give it a good shot though, eh?’

At the end of the afternoon it was still chucking it down. The bike was completely broken down into bits and pieces, spread on canvas sheets across the floor of the barn. We began the long process of separating the parts and spreading them into carefully sorted piles. Grubby tanks and gauges, rust-flecked side covers, carbs and sprockets, oil-smattered handlebars, chains and headlights. Wheel, by spring, by cylinder, we began cleaning it all up. We sprayed it with WD40 and scrubbed it with metal wire brushes, wire wool, and an endless supply of Grandad’s pre-historic toothbrushes. We wiped it down with countless pairs of old underpants.

‘It’s gonna take forever.’

‘Well, ye’re not going off anywhere soon, are yer?’ he said.

‘Nah. Don’t look like it.’ I grinned at him.

Long after it was dark, Grandad took the tarpaulin off the stump and covered the bits of bike. We headed back through the rain and built the fire up, in the kitchen. We took turns to scrub up in a steaming grey tin bathtub that rocked about in front of the warming flames, sloshing oily water onto the floor. I washed quickly while he finished some job up outside, and waited in my room until Grandad had finished. I mopped the floor up while he got some food ready. By the time we’d worked our way through a pile of chunky fried-egg and bacon sandwiches, I was

completely knackered, and could see Grandad's head starting to nod as he sat in his armchair. We said goodnight. He creaked up the ladder. I flopped into the porridge-bed and listened to Peel for half an hour. I yawned and flicked the radio off - drifted off to the soft-pummelling waves of rain on the window, and the rumbling snuffling snores, rolling gently overhead.

plasma

It rained for a couple of weeks, near enough. Every day the same. Every day we did the same thing - up early, breakfast, walk the croft and check the sheep. We worked on the bike – soaked the chain in a bucket of oil, cleaned out the carb, cleaned the cylinder head tappets and flushed out the jets, got all the crap off the brake drums. In the evening, we fed the eagles and then I listened to Peel, while Grandad studied his old books. I wanted to ask him about what he was doing, but I was sick of words and studying, and scared he'd try and get me to read. His hand was fine for driving now, so he made a couple of trips into Tarbert for supplies. Every day the same, ticking like a clock, but it felt good. We lived on porridge, gallons of tea, and a mixture of cheese and onion, and fried-egg and bacon sandwiches. Grandad even got a few more chocolate oranges. With each rainy day, the memory of the panic in the kitchen faded, but I clung to the feelings of my kiss with Lorna - what she felt like, the smell of her appley hair. I expect she was busy helping her dad, or something. Every day, I'd lean on the gate and stare down along the bay - hoping for some sign of her walking down on the beach, or riding her bike up the track. But, the only person I ever saw was Grandad, limping out from the Blackhouse with a tray full of sandwiches.

I heard nothing more about Dad. Each grey evening lasted longer and longer, and Grandad went to bed a little bit earlier. Even the nights were the same - fantasies of Lorna, strange mixed-up nightmares - speaking eagles, ghost-like trees - my mum. Grandad had nightmares, too. Sometimes, I'd wake and he'd be yelling out - up in the loft. Things like 'More plasma! Now!', 'Morphine! Morphine!' or what something about 'The warning! The warning! Watch for the warning!' The worst time, he started screaming out 'Pick 'em up! Pick 'em up!' like he'd done before. At first, I'd called up the loft ladder 'til he woke up, but his cries never went on for long, so I'd lay there in the dark and listen to him, wondering what awful things he'd seen to have such horrible dreams. I never asked him about it. Each morning, he was up bright and early, crashing around like an elephant in a gong factory. One morning, though, I actually got up first, woken by the sunlight streaming through the smeary window. I could hear him purring overhead. He'd been coughing during the night, so maybe he needed a lay-in. I pulled on my jeans, jacket and some wellies, quietly opened the front door and trudged through the flooded yard and out to the loo. The morning light was really sharp. The rain had just stopped and a bank of dark cloud was moving away to the east. Water dripped from the eaves of the cottage into deep puddles - sunlit ripples fanning outwards. Light gleamed from every slick surface. Everything shone - sparkling and fresh, washed clean.

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The spider disappeared into its cramped hole as I fidgeted on the toilet seat. The artificial flowery smell of disinfectant had faded and the morning air was full off the scent of damp earth. Light glinted through the cracks in the door. I shoved it open with my boot and gazed up at the hill as I wiped my arse. The colours entered me again, like they had on my first morning on the island. Sky blue. Red and green. And gold. I flushed the toilet, stepped out into the light and breathed in deeply through my nose. And through my eyes.

Back in the kitchen I scrubbed my hands raw. Grandad still hadn't come down. I had a go at making some porridge, mixing water into it, like Grandad did. Stoked up the stove, stacked some wood and peat, scrunched up some newspaper, kindled it with a match. The kettle boiled, but there was still no sign of him. No sound of him snoring. I lifted the kettle off the stove and climbed up the first few step of the ladder. The darkness of the loft loomed above me. The mantle-clock was ticking.

'Grandad...?' I said, quietly.

No reply.

'Grandad, d'ya want some breakfast?'

Nothing.

I felt my chest tighten up. Climbed a few rungs further into the gloom. 'Grandad...?' I called a bit louder.

There was nothing. Nothing, but the thud of heart against ribs.

'Grandad!'

'Eh? Wha... what? Who yer bloody shouting at?'

I smacked my head on the wooden beam.

'Sorry. You OK, up there?'

'Aye.' He groaned. 'Course I am. Aye. What time is it?'

'Nine thirty.'

'Oh. Jeepers. Ugh! I'll be with you in a minute.'

'OK.' I said. My legs were trembling, shaking back down the ladder.

When he finally appeared, backing slowly from the loft, he was puffing a bit. He looked grey.

'You all right?'

'Aye. Just overslept. Unheard of, boy. Unheard of.' He smiled weakly and sat down heavily in his armchair.

He grimaced at the porridge and toast.

'Sorry, it's a bit burnt,' I said.

'No. It's fine, Stew. Thanks.'

We sat at the table as the light streamed in through the window. I watched him as we

swigged our tea in silence. Some colour returned to his cheeks. A pale rose, under the heavy grey stubble.

He drained his mug and stood up. 'Back to the bike, then. Eh, boy? Let's fix the old JC up!'

'Right-ho!' I said.

*

We carried on from where we'd left off the day before. After completely stripping and dismembering it, we'd bolted all the separate bits of the machine back together again. It was a relief to see the steel-framed skeleton become a whole metal-fleshed animal again – with spoke-wheel limbs, a cylinder-carb-petrol tank body, and a speed-dial chromed-headlight face. Bit by bit, over the course of the fortnight, it had become a motorbike again. It looked great. The only downside was - the bloody engine wouldn't start. No matter what we tried, we couldn't get it to go. We tweaked it and fussed over it all morning. We'd flushed all the muck out of the carb, put new plugs in and everything, but the engine was as dead as a doughnut. I sighed and kicked at a bale of straw. Grandad scratched his head. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the wind fell away and the air became still. Even in the shade of the barn the air grew stifling hot. We trudged across the yard to the cool of the kitchen.

After lunch, we sat by the barn doorway and looked at the bike. It stood tilted on its stand. It looked fast and powerful, despite the fact that it wouldn't go. The crimson petrol tank gleamed from where I'd polished it, over and over - trying to encourage it into life. The remaining patches of chrome on the forks and springs and spokes flashed in the shafts of light that stabbed down through holes in the roof.

'Looks good, eh?'

'She's a beauty,' I said. 'We'll never get her going, though.'

'Ah, don't give up yet, Stew.' He winked at me. 'Look. Why don't yer get yerself some fresh air? Dip yer feet in the bay.'

'Don't yer need me here?'

'I fancy a bit of a nap, boy. Tell the truth.'

'You feeling all right?'

'Aye. Just didn't sleep so good. You get yerself off for a while, eh?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I could have a walk or... or a swim.'

'Why don't yer take a look further along, down at Scarista, eh? It's pretty calm today.'

'Yeah. OK.'

Grandad had described the big lonely bay - the miles of sand where him and Gran had taken me dad, when he was small.

Pinhead

‘Hah!’ he said. ‘Mind yer don’t freeze yerself, though. And it’s a bit of a trek. What’s the time?’

I looked at his watch. ‘One thirty.’

‘If yer get moving yer could catch the bus to Horgabost and bike the rest. Yer need to be careful, Stew. And don’t... don’t go out too far. There’s been many lost to the sea. Reckon yer up to it, though. Stick near the dunes at the Northern end. Bit lonely up there.’ He slapped me on the shoulder. ‘Yer better take a bottle of squash and some apples.’

I peeled the boiler suit off and hung it on a hook by the door.

‘Wait here. I’ve just the things for yer.’ Grandad limped off across the yard and into the kitchen. After five minutes or so he reappeared, waving what looked like a small navy blue flag.

‘You’ll be on yer own up there if yer want to go *au naturel*, but if not these should fit yer, nicely.’ He grinned, and handed me a pair of huge moth-eaten swimming trunks. ‘The elastics gone, but they’ve got a draw chord. They’ve served me well. They’ve seen some action, I can tell yer.’

‘Yeah, they look like they’re full of bullet holes,’ I said. ‘I ain’t wearing those! They’re flipping massive.’

Grandad crackled with laughter. ‘Get on with yer, who’s gonna see yer down there. It’s not a fashion show, is it? Eh?’

‘Never,’ I said. ‘I’ll need a bloody pair of braces to keep ‘em up.’

‘I’ve got some of those an all, if yer want ‘em! Hah! Sherbet!’ He hooted, and slapped me on the back, nearly choking himself with laughter.

‘Hah! Serves yer right!’ I said, cracking up. ‘You enjoy making me looking like a right berk, don’t ya?’ I dragged the trunks on over my jeans and pulled them up as high as I could, around my waist. ‘Blimey! You must have been a right fat old so and so.’

Grandad nearly doubled up. He leaned against the barn, wheezing, crying and snuffling, wiping his eyes and the snot running from his nose onto the backs of his oily hands. He was still laughing ten minutes later, as he waved me off. I flashed him a grin and a v-sign as I bumped out of the gates, and peddled towards the bus stop.

Scarista

'This *must* be... the last hill...' I croaked. '*Must...* be.'

I'd got off the bus at the wrong stop. Too early. I remembered my previous shame of gasping for breath in front of Lorna when we'd walked up the hill. I thought a bit of cycling would fitten me up. Must nearly be there... must be. The faint tang of ocean filled another aching lungful of air. I strained and plunged all my weight down onto the pedals, forcing them - Left... right... left... right - struggling to keep a steady rhythm going as I stalled in the hot air. It was like moving through a solid wall of golden heat - getting closer to the sun. The sweat soaked into my t-shirt and trickled down my lower back, into the crack of my arse. It ran in rivers under my jeans, down my shins, soaking into my thick woollen socks.

On the bus, I'd given up all hope of getting the JC working. Weaving crazily across the barren moonscape, clinging to my seat along the helter-skelter road, my mood had sunk, but the new challenge of cycling up this last hill had blotted out my disappointment. My mind was filled with left, right, left, right, and breathing - In, out, in, out. In a vision before me hung the goal of a cool swim. My rucksack swung from left to right, loaded with apples, orange squash, a towel and the huge ancient swimming trunks. Christ! I'd look a right pratt if someone saw me.

'Hah!'

Stalled.

Plodded the bike up the crest of the hill.

Stopped.

Gasping, stunned by the view. Hills rolled away below me towards a glittering bay. Sunshine gleamed across a wide sheet of silver sands that stretched away to the South. It sloped gently into an ocean line that faded through a spectrum of aquamarine into a deep green-blue. A breeze swept up from the ocean - a welcome salt chill after the fierce grilling up the hill. I jumped back on the bike, stuck my legs out wide and free-wheeled down the track towards the back of the dunes.

Silver.

Blue.

Shimmer-glitter sun-breeze.

I skimmed down, down towards the northern end of the bay. The secluded spot. Free of people, hopefully - just me and imagined past days of the bay when Grandad was there with Nan and Mum and Dad. All of them, together, swimming and diving in the surf, larking around and

running across the silver beach. I got some speed up and shot past the turn-off to some cottages - bombed on down the track. About a quarter of a mile along the bay, a figure heading across towards the sea. I cursed the intruder, but getting closer, my guts lurched with excitement. The figure was familiar - tall, slim, long dark hair - flashing in and out of view as I whizzed past dunes and high tufts of grass - Lorna? Then, my eyes nearly popped out and my stomach turned over. If it was Lorna - she was stark naked. I slammed on the brakes and my front wheel slipped - the bike careering off the track sending me tumbling head first into the back of the dunes, skinning my shins on the bike-frame. I picked up the bike and wheeled it a little way into the sand, slowly scrambled forward on hands and knees so the last clumps of grass hid me. Crikey! It really was Lorna, Lorna Mackenzie, and she was bloody-well naked. What would the lads have said about this? *Phwoar!* Sharp breath - fast. It was like all my night-time fantasies coming true. She waded into the breaking waves. She splashed water up onto her body with her hands. Out in the bay a school of dolphins broke through the glittering surface of the water. Lorna dived into the waves and began to swim-thrash madly, her head dipping rhythmically below the white foamed water in time with the swell. I was still a bit dizzy from my crash in the dunes and my fingers trembled, but no time to brush the sand off raw, grazed shins. Heart thumping - I watched and waited for her to come out of the sea - get a good view of her. *Phwoar!* It felt like Sumo and the lads were lying beside me in the dunes - like when we'd turned the pages of porn mags stolen from his dad. I gave myself medals for having such good luck. Nothing like being at the right place at the right time. Lorna bobbed up and down in the surf, taking long strokes with her arms. I settled down to wait and my nuts tightened at the thought of what I might see. I looked back over my shoulder through the dunes... no one about. God! What if someone found me ogling her? A dart of shame stuck in my chest at the thought of discovery - the shame and embarrassment. But my head was full of porn images and the magnetic pull of the naked girl kept my eyes fixed on the sea. I was almost weak with anticipation. *Phwoar!* The lads would never believe this.

Lorna dived beneath the waves. The pod of dolphins slowly arced again. The waves rose and fell in a gentle endless rhythm. Cascades of spray blew across the sand and I licked at the salt on my lips. Gulls hung in the air above me. Sand whispered soft across my bare arms, and the gulls began to cry. Dolphins arced and fell and arced across the bay as Lorna Mackenzie rode in, naked, body surfing in a foaming wave. She stood up in the shallows and ran from the water. She jumped into the air and stopped still, raising her arms to the sky like wings, letting the breeze fan her dripping hair. The ocean flowed in streams from the slight curve of her breasts and glistened as it flowed down over her belly, hips and legs. As the gulls cried above me, Sumo's words faded. My hands became still and my heart pulsed heavily. I lay there still, calm. This girl, this woman, wasn't in a porn mag. Those pages burned and shrivelled. Lorna walked up the beach towards me, letting the wind dry her hair, stretching her arms out like wings, like a bird. She bathed her body

in the wind and sun. Above her, the gulls cried and soared as she disappeared behind the dunes. I turned from the sea and lay back in the warm sand. She was like a bird. Like a gull, like an eagle. No shame any more. I was alert and still, secret - and sad. I picked up the bike and wheeled it through the dunes. Free-wheeled slowly down to the centre of the bay. I chose a sheltered spot, lay down in the sand and closed my eyes. Images of trees and sea and domed mountains, heather and rock, people and eagles, flickered, blurred and merged behind my eyes. I lay still and listened to the waves crash and rush and drag. The sand sifted across my skin and the sun thawed through me.

*

Gulls called me back to a blue sky ceiling. An hour had passed on the old army watch. I sat up and looked across the beach where my nan and grandad had run, where my mum and dad had chased across the bay. There was no one around now, no sign of Lorna. Not a soul in sight in either direction. I jumped up, stripped off all my clothes - my Ramones t-shirt, my jeans, my DM boots, my socks... my pants and... I legged it. I legged it as fast as I could - yelling and splashing through the chilling shallows. Then I dived, gasping - into the chill-burning, thrilling sting of the ocean.

*

When I got back to the Croft, it was nearly dark. I'd only just made the last bus. I was exhausted and cold, but glowing from the wind, the sun, and the air. Inside, I glowed from what I'd seen.

Grandad dished me up some bacon butties, ruffled my hair and climbed up to the loft.

‘Early night for me, Stew,’ he said.

‘Night,’ I mumbled, and waved a chunky butty at him.

I sat by the fire, watched the flames, and let a second cup of tea thaw through me. It wasn't long before the familiar snoring began, and stuffed with butties, I dragged myself into my bedroom, stripped off stifling clothes and lay naked on the rough blankets. I ran my hands across my chest, remembering my dream of Lorna, and what she'd looked like on the beach. My fingers lingered on salt-sticky skin - the lingering layer of sea. Closed my eyes - reached for images of Lorna as she skipped across the sand - breasts dripping. Hips, thighs, long legs, all gleaming, wet with water - shining in the sun. I reached for the movement and shape of her. With a head full of Lorna, I rolled over and reached into my bag, pulled out my sketch-pad and grabbed pencils from my art box. The paper was smooth and clean - a fresh new-grown skin of a page. I began to draw. My pencil skating quickly, darting and shading, sketching, shaping - my hands somehow un-cramping, in a kind of relief of drawing, at last - after so long. Little figures and details of Lorna

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formed rapidly across the page. Paper memories of when her hair drifted across her eyes. How her lips turned up at the edges of a smile. How her eyes crinkled when she laughed. Another page - the small curve of her breasts, her arms outstretched wide - to the world. Another, her knees curled up beneath her dress, fingers brushing sand from her shins. Another and another - the nape of her neck, her shoulders, her belly, her thighs... and... in between. I could feel my pulse speeding up. I flung down the pad, rolled onto my back and ran my hands across my chest. My fingers reached down and stroked across my stomach. Lower - to my groin. I felt myself growing harder - hard. I moved my hand slowly, clinging to each image of her - Lorna. I moved my hand slowly. Then, faster, faster, faster - o Lorna - o - O Lorna. A stuttering breath released. I blew out the candle and slid under the blankets. I sobbed once.

Breathed

long

sank

into peace.

*

Shell down, boy. Shell down.

Beul a labhras ach gniomh a dhearrbas...

The mouth speaks but the deed proves!

Tire we - of wire, of stale, of shit, of still. This dark too close. Cackle you, shackle, chuck us weak meat. Soon, we'll rip us strong - beat us, lift us, soar us, far us. Sail us high, shun below.

An neach a ghèillas do ghiseagan, gèilleadh giseagan da...

Him that yields to spells, let spells yield to!

Watch you, boy. Sheer, are We.

*

My eyes half-drifted open for a moment. It was still dark. The mattress was damp, lumpy against my hip. It was time to start painting again. It was time to confront the eagles.

sketch of amber

'I'll be seeing yer later then, Stew.' Grandad struck his head out of the Land Rover window. 'Thanks for checking the sheep for me. Don't bother going up past the Cairn, though.' He jabbed his thumb up at the low grey cloud overhead. 'Bit o rain due, I reckon.'

'I might take a look in at the eagles,' I said.

Grandad examined me from under his eyebrows. 'Don't go upsetting 'em, now.'

'I just want to... I want to sketch them, a bit.'

'What... draw 'em?'

'Yeah.'

He squinted at me. 'Didn't know you were keen on drawing.'

'Yeah. I am. I won't bother 'em.'

'All right, then. But mind yer don't. They're coming along. Don't want to bugger up all the good work, now. Eh?'

I nodded.

'Hmm. Drawing, eh?' Grandad winked at me and started the engine.

The old rust-bucket Land Rover swung out of the gate. It looked like it was going to fall apart at any minute. I watched it bumping up the hill.

*

It took a couple of hours to walk round the field and all up the hill and back. A couple of the ewes were looking a bit matted up and dirty, but none needed bringing down. All done, I heated up some soup and lay on my bed for a while. The sketches of Lorna were pretty good. It scared me, how real they looked - as though somehow I'd caught something of hers - stolen it and trapped it on the page. She'd have a fit if she saw them. She'd know I'd seen her on the beach - accuse me of being some dirty sneaking Peeping-Tom. Maybe, she'd be right. I'd have no chance with her if she ever found out. Not that I had any hope after the way I'd freaked out. I doubt I'd get another chance. I looked at her sketched breasts and eyes and hair and legs. I wanted another chance. I wasn't gonna take any chances. I ripped the pages of Lorna out of the pad. For a second I nearly tore them up, but stopped and slid them under the bed and laid back. My heart thudded heavily. Partly at the thought of Lorna naked, partly at what I knew I had to do - I couldn't put it off any longer.

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Grabbed sketchpad and pencils. Marched into the yard. It did look like rain. The dull air was thick and motionless and didn't seem to carry any light, like it often did. It was as though something had drained the colour from the hills. The bay spread out below the croft - the sea was flat and calm, reflecting the mass of cloud that hung over the islands, a still grey dead sheet, the colour of lead.

Toh-tschil! A whistle-call piped out behind me and I dropped the key to the padlock into a puddle. I stooped, fished it out. The eagles piped again - I faced the sound. Hands trembled. Gripped sketchbook tight - grasped pencils in my fist - strode towards the shed.

*

Toh-tschil! The lamplight cast giant shadowed wings against the back wall of the shed. I crept forward and pressed my forehead against the wire. The cold twisted metal dug deep into my skin. Maybe this pain would stop me from imagining voices and stuff. The eagles twitched and angled their heads, flicking sidelong glances at me. I looked from bird to bird.

'Who are you?' I said. 'What are you?'

No reply. The big mother eagle looked straight at me with her black, inhuman, pupil-less eyes. No recognition. No response. No emotion. Nothing but an impenetrable ten thousand yard stare. My heart thudded heavily in my chest.

'There's nothing behind your eyes, is there?' I said. Nothing, but a dark bottomless well of - something else. Something I couldn't read. 'So, it was all just my imagination? My imaginary voice, not yours?'

Nothing, but the rustle of feathers, the scratch of talons on wood. I breathed easier, but felt a pang of disappointment. Still, at least I wasn't completely cracking up. Spending time on the island was doing me some good - helping me settle down. What had I expected? A conversation with some birds? Talking eagles? C'mon!

'So, I'm not Dr Fucking Doolittle after all, then?' I laughed. 'And you're just a couple of dodgy old birds, eh? Aren't ya.'

The lamplight played across their bronze and tawny, auburn crowns. I looked at each bird in turn. Dodgy old birds - but beautiful. My pencil flew wildly across the page, sketching the deep shadows into the hunched shoulders, the spiked fluff around the legs, the vicious curve of the hooked bills. As I focused on what I saw, my conscious mind blurred, and what I felt flowed into me. What I felt - about them, from them, of them - a presence of eagles. It soaked into me - through the lamp-glow - through my eyes, from the fusty scent in my nostrils, the bitter tang on my tongue, and from something that radiated from them - their eagle-ness. It filtered into my body, spread through my arms and into my hands, through the wood and lead of the pencil - onto

the page.

'Just animals. Just birds, beautiful birds,' I whispered.

The shed became a twilight haze of gold-feathered air, in which real eagles watched and stretched their wings, while thought-eagles wheeled in circles, swooped into my eyes and soared round and around inside my mind, lifted high on hot currents of imagination. They glided inside me and my hands became wings that sailed across the paper. I pored over the landscape of my sketch with eagle eyes. Eagles were my muse and eagles were my prey. Then, the lead snapped. The presence cracked - flew from me. The birds were just dismal, bored and caged.

'Soon be out, soon be free.' I packed up my pad, pushed the stool back. Grandad's watch glowed fluorescent - nearly three hours gone. 'Time for tea. Thanks.' I made my way back through the shadows of the shed. The lamp sputtered and flickered out. Then, I heard them.

Bi'd thosd 's ad chuimhne...

Be silent and mindful, boy!

Sheer We are. Sheer our drop from tide of air. Sheer our rise, our fall.

What beauty?

What are words but the sounds of is?

What is?

What are?

We are Sheer. We are!

Sharp-voice! Electric-flinch! Span round in the dark. A warm amber glow was coming from the direction of the cage. Gasp! Dropped my pad and pencils. Ran, blundered through the shed, scraping my shins and thighs against benches and tools. Bashed my cheek against a hidden wooden shelf. Tripped - fell against something hard in front of me. A pale crack of light ran vertically up from the ground - the crack of the door. Reached up - scabbled for the handle. Found it, turned it - fell out into the yard.

Grandad was struggling to pull some bags of shopping from the back of the Land Rover. He grinned over at me as I struggled up and brushed the dirt and dust from my jeans and jacket.

'Yer a clumsy bugger,' he laughed. 'Just like yer dad.'

I locked the door and helped him carry the shopping into the kitchen. We dumped it on the table.

'What yer been up to?' he said. 'Yer looking a bit pasty.' Grandad reached down to me, stacking the packets and tins into the cupboard as I handed them to him.

'I... I just did a bit of drawing.'

He paused and tapped a tin of Heinz spaghetti hoops with his fingers. 'Er... Is it a secret work in progress, Stew? Or can I see it?'

'You want to see my drawings?'

Pinhead

'Well... yer don't have to... if yer don't want...' He slowly straightened up and rubbed his back.

'No. I'd like to show you,' I said. 'Oh.'

'What?'

'I left my sketchpad in the shed.'

'Well, I'll get the kettle on, while yer get it.'

'Er... nah. I'll show you later, when you feed 'em,' I said. 'I'll come in with you.'

'All right, then. When yer ready.' He packed the shopping bags away and slumped into his armchair. He was looking a bit grey again.

'I'll make the tea,' I said.

'Thanks, boy.' He ran his big hands across his face. 'Oh. I've got a message for yer,' he said. He frowned as he spoke.

I filled the kettle and set it on the stove.

Grandad waited while I slid the mugs and teapot onto the table.

My stomach knotted up.

He raised his eyebrows. 'Someone wants to meet yer tomorrow. For a walk. Down by the bay.'

My throat begin to tighten up. I slumped down in the chair nearest the door. The fire was dead in the fireplace. 'Is it Dad? Is he here? Has he come to take me back?'

Grandad drew his hands slowly across his knees. 'No, Stew. It's Lorna.'

'Lorna?'

'Aye. She wants to meet yer down by the shore, after lunch. At about two.'

The knot in my stomach, loosened. 'Lorna?' I said, again.

'Aye,' said Grandad. 'I told her I wasn't sure if yer were up to it. Yer don't have to go, boy.'

'No.' I said.

Grandad studied me.

'It's OK. I'll go. I'll go for a walk with her.'

We finished storing the stuff that Grandad had bought, had a cup of tea and cooked some supper. I tried to pay attention as he rattled on about who he'd seen in Tarbert. But all I could think of was why Lorna wanted to meet me. What she'd say.

*

When it was time to feed the eagles, I told Grandad I didn't fancy it. He walked out into the yard, took some rabbits from the back of the Land Rover and disappeared into the shed. He was in the shed a long time. As it got darker, I peered out across the yard from the kitchen window. There

was no sign of him. I drummed my fingers on the table and watched the flames licking around the logs in the fireplace. I'd just decided to go across to the shed, when the door opened and Grandad came in. He leaned against the table.

'Phew!' he said.

'All right?' I said.

'Aye.' He handed me the sketchpad and pencils. 'Fancy leaving 'em all over the floor. Hope yer don't mind. I took a peep. Nice... nice pictures. Not bad, Stew. I er... I reckon you're wasted shovelling sheep-muck,' he grinned. 'I reckon we've got an artist in the family.'

'You like them?'

'Aye. Yer'll have to do me a nice big one of 'em... of the eagles, before we set 'em free? To remember 'em by, eh? Set it in a nice big frame. I'll put it right up there.' He jabbed his thumb at the wall above the mantelpiece.

'Really?'

'Aye.'

'OK. I will.'

After I'd cleaned my teeth at the sink, I watched him climb stiffly up to the loft. I thought about the picture I'd draw for him. I'd make it the best sketch I'd ever done. If I was able to sit with the eagles without freaking out, that was.

Laying in the cold bed, I tried to shut the imprint of eagle voices out of my head, but it didn't work. I turned Peel off - loads of shit new bands I didn't like. Laying on my back in the dark, I could still hear the Sheer whispering to me - *Shell down, boy. Shell down*. What did it mean? Was I really going fucking mad? Perhaps I should talk to Doctor MacKenzie about it. Hearing voices wasn't right. Somehow, though, the voices didn't seem so fierce. *Shell down, boy. Shell down*. As I warmed up, the thought of drawing the picture for Grandad grew. He really did want one of my pictures. My eyes closed and thoughts of Lorna on the beach rushed over me and thrilled and soothed. I rolled over and tried to sleep. I'd be seeing her tomorrow. What the hell were we going to say? But, who cared? I'd be seeing her - tomorrow. I'd be seeing Lorna.

nature boy

Down on the shore, Lorna wasn't there. Perhaps she'd decided not to come. Perhaps she'd seen me watching her naked swim. If she did come, it was going to be hard not to give myself away. Oh, God! Plonked myself down on rock surrounded by cold damp grass. Blinked at the hills across the water. Blurred and squinted the landscape into a fog of blues and green. Closed my eyes. The water was sleeping today - a resting creature. The softness of tiny waves on sand was slow and rhythmic - like breathing - hushed breaths exhaled from the lungs of the bay.

I remembered the surprise on her face after we'd kissed and I'd pushed her away. Surprise - or was it fear? Fear of rejection? Fear of me? I just hoped I hadn't fucked things with her for good. I narrowed my eyes and peered along the shore. No sign of Lorna on her bike, but there was a small figure making its way along the water's edge. Why was she coming on foot? The figure was slowly coming nearer. It didn't move like her - no long determined strides towards her next mission. The figure kept stopping, bending down, chucking stones into the bay, then stooping down again or disappearing behind the rocks for ages. It wasn't her.

A small boat with an outboard motor chugged way out across the water. It paused, then chugged on again. Probably getting lobster pots or fishing or something. Shit! Lorna wasn't coming. A hollow feeling spread outwards from my gut - became a weakness in my legs and arms. My eyelids lowered again. The rock glowed warm on my back. She wasn't coming. The bay breathed in and out... and in and out... and....

*

Somehow, I'd sensed that he was there - the figure walking along the shoreline. Now, he was right up close, standing there holding a folded piece of paper out to me in his dirty, freckly hand - a young kid. He was about nine or ten, I reckon. Sandy hair, blue eyes. Short trousers, red sandals and an anorak. His other hand gripped a driftwood stick and his knuckles showed white.

'All right, mate?' I said. 'Phew! You give me a right start.'

The kid's full-stop of a mouth stayed clamped tight shut. He just stood there staring at me through a thick pair of milk-bottle specs, holding the piece of paper out. He looked like the Milky-bar kid.

'That for me?' I said.

The full-stop became a comma for an instant, then went back to a full-stop. No reply. I

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took the paper and smoothed it out, while the kid watched me from behind his thick lenses. It was a note from Lorna. There was a rubbish stick-picture of her, in Wellingtons and a skirt. Above her head it said - L... O... R... N... A... LORNA. The stick-Lorna had an arrow from her eyes pointing at her wrist-watch and a blow-up of the watch showed three thirty. Above the watch it said L... A... blah... blah. I reckoned it said LATE - the watch with a later time on it being a major clue. After all, I'm not completely fucking stupid, am I?

Next to the stick-Lorna was a smaller stick-boy figure in short trousers. Over its head it said - D... A... N... N... Y... DANNY. I looked at the kid. He hadn't moved an inch - still staring at me, gripping his bit of driftwood like he was gonna whack me one. So, this was Danny. This was Lorna's little brother.

'All right, Danny?' I said.

He said nothing, but he held out his grubby little hand for me to take. I held back. I stood up, looked out at the lobster boat and cleared my throat.

'All right, mate?' I said. 'I'm Stew. So... your er... sister's gonna be a bit late, is she?'

Danny's full-stop became a dash-mark. He reached out, gripped my hand firmly, and pulled me towards the rocks that reached through the sand at the edge of the inlet. I walked alongside him. His hand was gritty with mud with strands of seaweed, still attached. Small and wet and warm.

'OK, Danny. So, where we going, eh?'

He led me to the rocks and dropped my hand. He carefully picked his way across, then squatted down and peered into a pool. He was completely absorbed in what he was doing. He looked up at me with his bright glass-magnified eyes and waved me over.

I knelt down beside him and peered into the water.

'So. What we looking at, then?'

Danny reached into deep the pool up to his elbow and tentatively shifted a stone to one side. As he did so, a whacking great red crab came out, shuffled quickly across the pool, and sheltered behind some ribbons of seaweed and mottled pebbles.

'Crikey, that's a big'n!'

He caught my eye, and for a second the mouth dash-mark nearly turned up at the edges - like Lorna's smile. Then, he hopped up and tip-toed from pool to pool, waving me over until I followed. He pointed his stick at crabs and weird looking worms, strange spongy seaweeds and tiny schools of glittering fish. He never said a single word, while I made little exclamations of surprise at all the different stuff he showed me. After a quarter of an hour or so my knees were getting stiff from bending, so I retired to a grassy hillock and sat down, but Danny beckoned me back over until I gave in. When I followed him, he gave me a big grin, and he looked just like Lorna. I felt sleepy and tired, but the nervous ache in my guts had gone. I yawned and stared into

a pool with him, as another school of diamond-specks flickered and flashed in the dark blue rocky pool-shade. A reflected face spoke from the pool.

‘Hello.’

I turned.

It was Lorna. I felt a really good kind of shock, like I’d eaten electric strawberries. She was so close, again.

‘Hello,’ I said.

‘Danny’s showing you his fishy friends, then?’

‘Aye,’ I said. ‘We get on all right. Eh, Dan?’

Danny nodded. He ran over to Lorna and dragged her across to the rock pools. The three of us knelt, bunched up together, and looked down into the water. Our reflections shimmered and I looked at Lorna’s mirrored face - no clues to what she was thinking.

‘Sorry, I’m late.’ She looked up while Danny poked around in the pool.

‘That’s OK. I liked your picture.’ My face felt stiff as I smiled.

‘Oh, that.’

‘Yeah. Great likeness. Stick-Lorna, Stick-Danny. You’ll have to do one of me.’

‘Hah!’

‘You’ve not got your Mum’s talents, then.’

‘Doesn’t look like it.’ She laughed.

Danny held up a tiny crab in the palm of his hand.

‘Yes. It’s lovely, Danny.’

‘Nice little one there, mate.’ I caught her eye. ‘I’m sorry about... you know.’

‘No, it was me,’ she said.

‘I don’t know... what happened.’

‘I just read it wrong. I’m sorry.’ Her reflection disappeared as Danny released the crab. ‘I... I... feel so stupid,’ she said.

Danny plucked a dripping pebble from the pool and held it out to me.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

The pebble shone like a wet speckled egg. I dried it and put it in my pocket. Lorna stood up and walked back onto the sand. She was wearing a pair of tight black Levi’s, and black Doctor Martin boots. She was real again - not the naked beach-creature I’d been dreaming about. Her bum looked really nice.

‘Anyway. No harm done, Stewie,’ she said. ‘We can still be friends, eh?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ I said.

Her mouth smiled, but somehow her eyes didn’t shine, and they wouldn’t meet mine for more than a second. ‘We’ll have to get back for tea-time,’ she said. ‘So, why don’t we go up

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into the hills for a little while, Danny?’

He stayed at the pool side and frowned.

‘We might see some rabbits. You could show Stewie the different flowers in the Machair.’

He grinned and jumped off the rocks. He ran up and across the grassy rise, clutching his stick. Lorna followed him, and I followed Lorna.

‘Yer Grandad said yer’d been drawing. Anything nice?’ she said.

I felt myself getting really red in the face. ‘Er... yeah. I did some sketches of the eagles.’

Danny waved us over. We stooped down and looked at a little patch of yellow flowers in the grass. He fingered them gently with his grubby little mitts - bright little stars of colour in a field of green. Then he smiled up at us, legged it off and found something else, further up the hill.

‘He’s really into this nature stuff, isn’t he?’ I said.

‘Yeah. It gets to be a bit of a drag at times, but... I don’t mind tagging along with him, really. His enthusiasm rubs off on me.’

‘Yeah. Know what you mean. You get caught up in what he’s showing you.’

We walked to where he was lying down, peering into a hole.

‘Rabbits,’ said Lorna. ‘He loves them.’

I wondered if a rabbit had ever spoken to Danny, the way the dead one had spoken to me. I wouldn’t be surprised.

‘Wish I had my art stuff with me. He’d make a good picture,’ I said.

I felt Lorna’s green eyes on me

‘I would’ve tried to capture this in a sketch - this... I dunno... energy... feeling, something.’

I looked out across the bay. ‘D’ya remember what it was like... when you were a kid? You know... just being a kid, not worrying about everything. I do. I remember being like that. You know what I mean? Totally lost in a game, your own world... yeah... your own world.’

Danny bounced up to us and legged it off, again.

‘He’s still got that, hasn’t he? He’s still got that... that magic own-world-feeling.’

Lorna narrowed her eyes at me. ‘When did yer lose that magic thing, Stewie?’

‘I... don’t know.’ I watched Danny searching for more rabbits holes. ‘I reckon it was long kicked out of me by the time my Mum died.’

Shafts of light beamed down onto the surface of the sea - like in those religious pictures - pictures of God, or those Wainwright landscapes. I thought about the nameless childhood thing that Danny still had. Maybe I hadn’t completely lost it. Maybe, the talking rabbit, the talking eagles, the ghost forest - maybe it was just me getting lost in a magic childish game - a mind-game. Maybe I wasn’t going nuts, after all.

‘I’d like to see some of yer sketches,’ she said. ‘Could I?’ She was looking at me intently, now.

'Eh? Oh. Er... yeah.' My sketched images of her naked body flittered behind my eyes.

'If yer want. I could ask Mum if she'd give yer a lesson or two. Yer know, if yer up here long enough. She's really good. She exhibits her work and everything.'

'Yeah. Her pictures are good.' I tried not to think about my pictures of Lorna and managed to return her gaze. 'D'ya reckon she would?'

'Yeah, maybe. I can only ask. Any idea if yer here for long?'

'Nah. No word from Dad,' I said. 'You were right about one thing, Lorna.'

'About what?'

'About Grandad. We've been getting on really well. Been fixing up this old motorbike. Well... trying to. It won't go, but we've been having a right old laugh together. Just like mates.'

'That's good.' Lorna smiled at me, and for a second her eyes lit up, like they used to. She pointed at Danny, who was bounding out of sight, over a grassy rise. 'We better catch him up, or we'll lose him.' A big bunch of crows flew off towards the bay.

We sped up. Her hips swung me gently up the hill, behind her.

'Hold up,' I said. 'I'm always walking behind you.'

'That's cos yer so slow,' she laughed. But she waited, and we carried on side by side.

'I like your new boots.'

'Thanks. I ordered them through Dougie,' she said. 'But the jeans, I sent off for.'

'They... I mean, you... you look really nice.'

'Thanks,' she said. Then she frowned at me, narrowed her eyes again.

'What?' I said.

'Nothing.' She still frowned.

'Really, what's wrong?'

'Yer a funny one,' she said.

'What d'ya mean?'

'Oh, I dunno.' She marched on ahead. 'C'mon, we better catch up.'

'Wait. Look... hang on a minute.'

She stopped and turned around. Her green eyes burned at me, and she rested her hands on her hips.

'Listen...' I said.

She folded her arms and raised her eyebrows.

'It wasn't your fault.'

'What wasn't?'

'In the kitchen... what happened.'

'Look, Stewie. It wasn't important. It was just a mistake, that's all.'

'No. Listen... it was important... and s-stop scowling at me like that. Y-y-your making me

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nervous, and you'll get stuck like it.'

'What was important? And I'm not laughing at your stupid jokes, Stewie,' she said.

'Well, I'm not joking. It was important... to me. Don't say it wasn't important.'

'What was important?' she shouted.

'What happened... what happened... the kiss... our kiss!' My voice bounced back from the rocks.

'There's no need to shout!' she hissed.

'Only the bloody sheep can hear us!' I stumbled up the hill towards her. 'You weren't wrong... about me... about me liking you.'

'Yeah. As a mate. Like yer said.'

'I like you more than that.'

'Funny way of showing it,' said Lorna.

'I'm sorry. I had some sort of... panic. It was like suffocating, but... it doesn't mean I didn't want to kiss you... that I don't like you.'

'I'm confused.' She was still frowning.

'I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, Lorna. I really like you. I... I can't stop thinking about you.'

Lorna bit her lip, and tears welled in her eyes. 'Don't mess me about, Stewie.' A big tear rolled down her cheek.

I slowly reached out and stroked her shoulder for a second, but put my hands in my pockets and scrunched up my shoulders. 'I'm sorry.' I turned away from her and spoke to the loch. 'I've never had a... a girlfriend. I don't know what... what to... and sometimes I get this knot in my insides... about my mum and everything... and anything... anything... big. I just panic. I panic. I'm really sorry about making you cry.'

I felt the weight of her hand on my shoulder, and she turned me around. Her lips felt quick and light and warm - soft on my cheek. She took my hand out of my jacket and clasped it in hers. She wiped her cheeks, sniffed, and smiled at me.

Danny was standing at the top of the rise, waving his driftwood-stick. Then, he disappeared again.

'C'mon,' she said. 'He wants to show us something.'

When we got to the top of the rise, we saw Danny standing about thirty yards away, staring down at something on the ground. As we got closer I could see it was a body. Something quite large. Dead. Some black crows were wheeling above us, croaking loudly.

'Oh, dear,' said Lorna. 'What is it? Don't touch it, Danny!'

When we reached Danny, Lorna pulled him to her. 'Oh. It's just a lamb,' she said. 'For a moment... I don't know... I thought it was a human child,' she breathed. 'Come away, Danny. It looks horrible.'

I looked down at the body of the lamb, rolled on its side against a rock, head tilted back. Its throat was open. Its eyes were missing, taken by crows, probably. Its stomach gaped, spilling little red ropes, black-purple bags and blue burst balloons. Everything was torn - by beak and claw. The neat little body of the lamb looked normal apart from the throat, eyes and guts. But the horrible red mess of spilled jellies, and its black, gaping eye sockets destroyed my previous picture of lambs - those stumpy little bundles of wool that scampered and skipped around Grandad's field.

Danny prodded it with his stick.

'Stop it, Danny,' said Lorna, and pulled him away.

'It's horrible, isn't it?' I said. 'I'll tell Grandad. We'll come back and bury it.'

'Oh, don't worry, Stewie,' said Lorna. 'They leave them out, here. The crows and things tidy it all up.'

I twisted up my face. 'Yuck!'

'I know,' said Lorna. 'C'mon, let's head back to the bay now.'

We plodded back down the hill towards the loch, past the rabbit holes and across the little patches of star-flowers. In ones and twos, the cloud of crows dropped back down from the sky, below the level of the rise. Danny stopped and pointed back towards the hill. At the top of the furthest rise stood a black figure holding a long black stick.

'Don't worry, Danny,' said Lorna. 'It's just that weird Mr MacDonald.'

full throttle

'Sit on it, Stew. I want to check the throttle,' said Grandad.

'What's the use if it ain't gonna to start?' I swung my leg over the seat and sat astride the scuffed leather seat of the old bike.

Grandad was squatting down beside me. 'Turn the key,' he said. 'I want to check the starter.' He fiddled around, then stood up with a groan, holding his back.

It was another grey day. I'd got up early and was hoping to meet up with Lorna, once I'd finished my chores around the croft. I reckon I'd just about given up on the bike, but Grandad seemed keen to tinker around with it. I turned the key. There was a click.

'Ready?' he said.

'Yeah.'

He stomped down hard on the kick-start and the engine roared into life. Suddenly the barn was full of noise and dark exhaust fumes. The vibrations of the engine throbbed up throughout my body.

'Woah!' I nearly jumped off.

Grandad grinned at me.

'It's going! It's going!' I yelled.

'I know.' He grinned.

'What did you do to it?'

'Eh?' He turned the key back and the engine shuddered into silence beneath me.

'You did it! How did you get it to work?'

He was grinning from ear to ear. 'I just kept on at the bugger when you were off swimming,' he said. 'Once it turned over, it was easy to tune it up. Running nice, eh? Considering it's been dumped in the shed for donkey's years.'

'But why didn't you tell me, when I got back?'

'I was gonna, but I knew you'd be off with Lorna, yesterday. You'd have wanted to be in two places at once, eh?'

'Yeah, I reckon.' We both grinned at each other.

'C'mon, then. Let's give it a spin round the field. I had a go yesterday, nearly came a cropper. It's more of a young man's thing, a motorcycle.'

We rocked it off its stand and wheeled it out into the yard.

'I tell you what, Grandad. It's got more oomph than Sumo's Fizzy'

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‘Sumo’s what?’

My mate Sumo. He’s got a Fizzy.’

Grandad shook his head. ‘A what?’

‘A Yamaha FS1E... known as a Fizzy. Fifty CC moped. I’ve ridden it loads.’

‘Yer know about changing gear, then?’

‘Oh, yeah. Don’t worry. I’m better with bikes than Land Rovers.’

‘Well, yer couldn’t get any worse with ‘em, could yer?’ he laughed. ‘Now, simmer down and promise me yer’ll take it easy, eh?’ He stopped laughing and nodded his head at me. ‘Don’t get too cocky, now, Stew. Show the bike some respect. It’s more powerful than a wee moped. Don’t want to go and break yer neck.’

‘Yeah, OK. I get the message. I’ve learnt my lesson, with Dad’s car.’

‘And mind the sheep.’

‘Yeah.’

Grandad opened the gate and we pushed the motorbike into the field. Most of the sheep were high up on the hillside. I had no intention of going up there. My hands and legs trembled with excitement. I switched the ignition key and kicked down on the starter. The spring-back jarred my calf. The engine fluttered a little, but there was nothing.

‘Yer gonna have to give it some more welly, boy.’

Still shaking, I gritted my teeth and slammed all my weight down on the kick-starter. The engine caught and thundered back into life. I could feel its power. I throttled back on the twist grip, so it was just ticking over nicely.

Grandad shut the gate and walked over to me. ‘Go on. Put it in gear and let the clutch out,’ he yelled into my ear.

My legs were weak with excitement. I clicked it into gear, with my foot and carefully eased the clutch out. The bike lurched, stalled and stopped.

‘Aw, shit!’

‘Hah! Never mind. Try again. It needs a bit more welly on the accelerator, Stew.’

I kick-started it again, and clicked through the gears with my foot. The bike was really heavy. It wasn’t like Sumo’s Fizzy. It was like holding onto a wild animal. I gripped the clutch and revved the engine. Dirty, oily fumes billowed out behind us.

Grandad coughed. ‘Go on. Give it some more,’ he yelled.

I tried not to shake and put it into first gear, revved up and let the clutch out. Too much. The back wheel span in the mud. It skidded from side to side as I shot forward into the field. For a second, I panicked, twisted the accelerator and bombed on even faster. Cold air smacked my face and flapped under my jacket as the bike bounced across the dips and bumps of the field. Fortunately, there was time and space to think. I throttled back and braked slightly. The handful

of sheep in the lower field fled upwards, away from me. I gently turned the bike, trying not to skid, and headed steadily back towards Grandad, who was watching me, standing at the back of the barn. The engine burbled and popped smoothly beneath me. I felt the bike's power - four times bigger than Sumo's crappy Fizzy. This was a proper man's bike. I drew up alongside Grandad and stopped. My hands weren't shaking any more.

We wheeled the machine back into the yard. The engine rumbled. It felt as though it was impatient to speed off again.

'D'yer wanna try it up the road?' said Grandad.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Why not? I'll follow in the Land Rover in case it conks out. Head up to Scarista. The road's better up there. Hang on.' He walked into the shadowy barn and returned carrying the old helmet, goggles, and a big pair of leather gauntlets.

'Now. Take it good and steady along the track. Don't go racing off, eh?'

'Yeah. I promise. You all right, Grandad?' He looked ashen around the eyes, and his face was a bit grey.

'Aye. Just pay attention to riding safe, eh?'

To be honest, I was a bit scared of going too fast. Didn't want to worry him, either. I wanted to show him I could be responsible.

Zipped up my jacket and put the collar up.

Pulled on the helmet and goggles.

Gripped - twisted the accelerator through the thick leather gauntlet.

Vrmmmm! Vrmmmm! Each rev sent a shiver right up the length of my spine to the top of my head. Grandad gave me the thumbs up from Seonaidh, and I eased slowly out of the yard and turned right onto the track. When Grandad was following, I changed up to second and steadily made my way up the hill, taking care to stay in just one wheel rut, where it wasn't so bumpy. The route was familiar after my bus journey, just days before, so I wound on and up above the open spaces of grass and rock, back down into steep sided gullies, then up and out again.

In no time at all I reached the last hill before Scarista - bit different to sweating and straining on a pushbike. This was freedom, this was amazing. At the crest of the hill I stopped. Across the bay, the sun was streaming through a break in the clouds, lighting the surface of the sea up like liquid silver.

Grandad pulled up beside me. 'How're yer getting on?' he grinned. He looked like he was enjoying the trip as much as me.

'Bloody brilliant!' I said. I wiped the dead flies off my goggles with a rag and pulled them back down over my eyes.

'Yer can try it in third, now,' he said. 'It's smoother along here. Stay under fifty, though,

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Stew. Be careful.'

'OK, Grandad.' I revved the bike up and pulled away - gripped the handlebars and took it quickly up from second to third. Faster, faster, faster - down the stretch where I'd crashed the pushbike. Images of Lorna, naked on the beach, merged with the dunes that flashed past me. Hills hazed on my left. Sea-glitter blurred on my right. The force of the air pushed my cheeks and mouth out of shape, sucking the breath from my lungs. I hung on. My forearms shuddered and strained as the front forks cribbled against the shock on the uneven surface - suspension absorbing each quivering contour and passing it back through my arms and into my body. I leaned forward and made my body taut, more streamlined. I looked down at the speedometer. Shit! Sixty miles per hour. Eased back, braked slightly, turning easily along the shallow bends. At the end of the bay I pulled up onto the grassy verge, switched off the bike and rocked it back on the stand.

Some minutes later, Grandad pulled up in the Land Rover and jumped out of the cab. 'I said fifty, not a hundred and fifty!'

'Sorry, I know. It just crept up before I realised. I didn't think it could go so fast.'

Grandad stepped from foot to foot. 'Well? What was it like? What was it like?'

I just grinned at him.

'Good, eh?' A massive smile spread across his face.

'It was brilliant! Varoomah!'

'Thought so,' he said. 'Yer gotta take it easy, though.'

'Phewee Musky!' I plonked myself down and swung my legs over the edge of the grass bank.

Grandad got a flask, cups and some digestive biscuits from the Land Rover. He eased himself down beside me.

'Used to come here a lot,' he said. 'With yer dad and yer nan.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'I can almost see 'em. Yer dad scampering around chasing the gulls, yer nan chasing him. He had a good set of pins on him, yer dad. Won his school sports day more than once.'

'Really? Me too,' I said. I stroked my fingers through the coarse tufts of grass.

Grandad nodded. 'Yer like him in many ways, Stew.'

'Hah! Great! That's me stuffed up, then.'

'Hah! He's not so bad. And if he is, well... it's probably my fault.' He poured steaming hot water into our mugs. 'I was a bit too strict on him, maybe. Didn't mean to be. It just happened.' He crunched a Gingernut. 'Anyway, yer got a lot of yer mum in yer too. She was a good lass. We got on well when she brought yer up here, when yer were a nipper. D'yer remember?'

'Not really,' I said. 'Did we come here?' I shielded my eyes from the sun.

'Aye, Stew. I think we did, once.'

'It feels like I remember being here. Sort of familiar.' I tugged up a clump of grass. 'I can't remember her very well, though. Not without feeling ill, though. It's like I've blacked her out.' The blades of grass blew free from my fingers.

Grandad poked the teabags in the mugs. 'She'll come back when yer ready,' he said.

The waves fell, slowly washing back and forth across the sand.

'This is the farthest from London I've ever been.'

'Aye?' said Grandad.

I tucked into another Gingernut.

'Yeah, well. I did go to France on a day-trip once, with the school. But it was only a quick hop over the channel.'

'Aye, just a quick hop. How did yer like it?'

'I was sick on the ferry,' I said.

'Hah!'

'Yeah, thought you'd laugh at that.'

'Yer an inlander. What did yer think of France?'

'It was OK.'

'Didn't yer like it?'

'Wasn't there long enough to see much, really. A couple of museums and gift shops, you know. Have you ever been, Grandad?'

'Eh?'

'Have you ever been to France?'

He looked out across the glittering sea. 'Oh, aye. That I have.'

'Did you go from here? Must have taken ages.'

He laughed.

'Not a day trip then?'

'No. Not a day trip. Wish it had been.'

'How come? Didn't you like it?'

He lobbed the teabags into the dunes. 'It was a bit different circumstances when I went, boy.'

'When did you go, then?'

'Nineteen sixteen. The great war, boy.'

'Really? Were you in that one, as well?'

'Aye. I'm that old.' He smiled and poured some milk into the mugs.

I wasn't sure what to say - all the nights I'd heard him calling out in his sleep. Nightmares. War nightmares, maybe. 'We did about the war, at school.'

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He just stared out to sea. He didn't seem to hear me.

'Grandad.'

He just stared.

'Grandad.'

He turned his head. He looked surprised to see me.

'Eh, Stewie?'

'Sorry,' I said. 'I bet you just want to forget, eh? I didn't mean to remind you.'

'Oh, don't worry,' he said. 'Yer can't forget it. Wrong to. Anyway, it wasn't all bad. I wouldn't have met yer nan, if not for the war.'

'Really? Was she in France, then?'

'Oh, no. Thank God. I met her in Stornoway, when I come back. She was a nurse.'

'Were you wounded, Grandad?'

'Aye. She used to screw me false leg on in the morning.' He tapped his shin and the motorbike helmet at the same time. The metallic noise made a realistic trick. We both laughed. Then his face fell. 'Shouldn't laugh,' he said. 'It was true enough fer many. And they were the lucky ones.'

I remembered the documentaries we'd been shown at school, of trench warfare, and the hours we'd spent in English Lit listening to the teacher reading war poetry. The First World War seemed so long ago, it didn't seem possible that Grandad was actually in it. The teachers had spent rainy afternoons going on about the waste and the carnage. I'd been bored, staring out of the window, waiting for home time. The First World War didn't seem as exciting as the Second World War. WW 1 was boring - no movies about it, that I'd seen, anyway. It was about sitting around in mud, waiting to die. WW 2 had *The Battle of Britain*, *A Bridge Too Far*, *The Great Escape*. It was Steve McQueen outfoxing hordes of daft Nazis on his motorbike. I looked at the beautiful James Captain, gleaming in the sun. Grandad had given it to me. I watched him staring out at the sea. Then, I saw him diving for cover - bullets whistling into the sandbags around him. I saw him sitting in a muddy trench with shells falling all around him.

'It... it must have been horrible... all that mud.'

He smiled at me. 'You're right,' he said. 'It was bloody horrible.' He looked into my eyes. 'Promise me something, Stew?'

'What?' I said.

'You won't ever let some stupid bastards trick you into going to war. Eh, boy?' He stared into my eyes.

'Er, yeah. OK... No. I won't.'

'It's nothing but... dirt. Dirt. And yer can't ever wash it off. It's inside yer.' He leaned on my shoulder and stood up. Then he shuffled over to the Land Rover.

'Dad never told me you were a soldier.'

'Medic, boy. Not a soldier.'

'Oh.'

'So, he never mentioned it, then?' Grandad got into the cab.

'Nah! Never said much about you.'

'Hah! That figures,' he said. He started the engine. 'Best be getting back, eh? Follow me back. Best take it easy. We've had enough speed fer one day. Eh, boy?'

love in a void

'Lorna! Will you keep it down a bit?' Dr Mackenzie yelled up the stairs. He obviously didn't like Lorna's mix tape of Peel favourites that she'd recorded, or maybe it was just Siouxsie and the Banshees he hated - Love in a void - blaring out of her dad's music centre.

'OK, Dad. OK.' Lorna got up from her bed, turned it down a micro-twitch and pushed the door so it was just ajar. 'I better do it or he'll take the stereo back downstairs. He's been really grumpy since I got those jeans and boots.'

'Why don't you close it? He wouldn't hear anything, then,' I said.

'He wants me to leave the door open.' Lorna tutted and raised her eyes towards the ceiling of her bedroom. She plonked back down beside me on the bed. Some coffee splashed from my cup onto my jeans.

'Why's that, then?' I said.

She tutted again, put her face up close to mine and opened her eyes wide. 'In case yer ravish me!' she said.

I spluttered and a mouthful of coffee went up my nose. I choked as Lorna giggled.

'Really?' I wiped coffee-dribble from my chin.

'Aye,' she said. 'I thought he trusted me.'

'Doesn't he like me? Doesn't he trust me?' I said. 'Maybe I should I sit in the chair?'

'Hah! Yeah. Sit in the chair. That'll stop me getting pregnant, won't it? Distance is the best contraceptive.' She carried on laughing. 'Sorry. I've made yer go all red. Look, don't worry. He's probably more worried that I'll ravish you.' She brandished her fingers at me like cat-claws, and grinned wickedly.

'Yeah. Parents, eh?' I was buzzing with fear and excitement - glowing from ear to toe with Lorna, Lorna, Lorna. Her room was big. So tidy. Not like my room, back home. Pens and pencils were lined up neatly on a writing desk. Three framed pictures hung on the walls - Tamara de Lempicka over the desk, Klimt's 'Kiss' over the headboard, and one of her mum's weird paintings near the window. Porcelain horses pranced on shelves, between books. The 'Why?' anti-war poster was stuck above a chair in the corner, and CND and 'Save the Whale' banners were dotted around the room. I recognised Lorna's pink dressing gown hanging on the back of the door. A few cuddly toys shared the bed with us. A big pink and white elephant, a small cloth doll in red knitted clothes, and two very worn looking Teddy bears.

I picked up the elephant. 'What's his name?'

'Sshh! Or she'll hate yer. It's Nelly. She's a she.' Lorna grinned.

'Sorry, Nelly,' I said. 'And them?' I pointed at the doll and bears.

'Selena, Big Ted, and er... Little Ted.' She laughed. 'Not very imaginative, am I?'

'No comment.'

'Have yer got any Teddies? Stewie?'

'Nah,' I said. 'Well... OK... one.'

'What's his name?'

'Er... Big Ted.'

We both laughed.

'BBC Play School's got a lot to answer for.' Lorna giggled.

'Yeah. There must be millions of bears all over the country, called Big Ted and Little Ted.'

'Doesn't say much for our individuality, does it?'

'Nah! Helps turn us into factory fodder.'

'Aye. Drones to prop up the consumerist society,' said Lorna.

'Yeah,' I nodded, frowning. 'They won't get me in a factory. Bloody careers advisor at school tried to get me a work placement in a Clark's shoe factory. I hate Clark's shoes.'

'D'yer know what yer want to do, Stewie?'

'Nah. Not really. I dunno. Wouldn't mind being a roadie for the Ramones, or be in a band.

Something like that.'

'What about yer art?'

'You mean, be an artist? What? Me?'

'Aye. Mum is.'

'Fat chance.' Lorna's eyes were fixed on me. 'I wouldn't mind, though.'

'Yer never know, Stewie. Mum's a professional artist. She spent years at college, mind.

But yer don't have to. Did yer bring those sketches, like yer said?'

'Yeah.'

'Could I see them?'

I hesitated, not wanting to reawaken the voices of the sketched eagles.

'Oh, pulease, Steewiee.'

I pulled the sketchpad out and laid it on the bed between us.

'Thanks.' She lifted the cover.

I stared at the face of a horse watching me from the wall opposite, then snatched glances at Lorna looking over my pictures. She turned each page slowly and carefully.

'Oh, Stewie. These are amazing. It's like they could move at any moment, flap their wings or something. Not photographic. Just something you've captured. Like you've seen exactly what they are, and put it on the page.'

'Do you like them? Really?'

'Are yer kidding me? They're fantastic. Mum'll love these, when she sees them.'

'You reckon? When?'

'Oh, yeah. Oh. I forgot to say... I asked her if you could come over with me, next time I visit Raasay. She said, "yes".'

I pictured the mad dark eyes of her mother's portrait. 'Great.'

'Yeah! I know. I was surprised.' Lorna cuddled the elephant and stared into space.

'What's up?'

Nothing.' She looked at me, intently. 'When yer meet her... well... she's a bit... different.'

'How d'ya mean?'

'Well... she's off in her own little world most of the time. She's a bit... well... things have to kind of revolve around her, a bit.'

'Will she like me?'

'Oh, yeah. She'll love yer. Likes Punk, anything radical.'

'She likes Punk-rock?'

'Well, more like the art side of things. She likes Dada. Vivienne Westwood - SEX. All the stuff that shakes things up.'

'I'm just into the bands, really.'

'Aye. Me, too,' said Lorna. Anyway, yer'll see what I mean when we go.'

'Great. We could go on my motorbike.'

Lorna picked at Nelly's ear. 'Dad told me to stay off it. Say's it's too dangerous, and that Grandad shouldn't let you ride underage, anyway.'

'Oh.' My dream of burning along the highland roads on my bike, with Lorna's arms wrapped round my waist and her hair streaming out behind us, faded. I picked at a frayed flower on her pink duvet cover.

'We can still go to Mum's, though.' Lorna tugged encouragingly at my arm. 'We'd have to stay over, too. Dad'll drop us off.'

The thought of sleeping in the same house as Lorna picked me up again.

The tape in the stereo clicked to an end. She hopped up, slid a record out from a cabinet, and held up a record sleeve. 'Have yer ever heard this? Ambient One.' She passed me the cover.

'Brian Eno? Music for airports.' I turned up my nose.

'Music fer homework, more like. It helps me concentrate. It's kind of dreamy.' Lorna's smile wavered. 'Don't you like it? It's sort of like being in a big open space. It is.'

I started to laugh, again, but stopped. 'OK. Go on, then,' I said.

'You need to close your eyes.'

She set the needle down on the record player and I closed my eyes. I felt her sit close

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beside me on the bed. The music was spacey - just a few piano notes and strange dreamlike sounds - like a kid picking out a tune on a school piano when everyone's gone home. Spacey - space for thoughts and... feelings. Notes drifted across some open inner landscape, drifted down - like leaves. Leaves settled in piles. I breathed out slowly. Lorna was close beside me. Warm and soft. Warm and soft. But something dark stirred under the leaves - a pain stirred under the leaves. I could feel my throat choking up and my heart was thumping. I caught my breath and opened my eyes. Lorna's eyes were shining - green - asking questions. She ran her fingers through my spikes and I tried to block out the pain stirring under the leaves. Her face blurred through tears that were spilling down my cheeks. She reached out and touched them and panic rose up in my chest as the pain began to grip me. I tried to move away. Lorna pulled my face towards hers and pressed her lips softly against my mouth. Panic, panic - kiss. Panic, panic - kiss... kiss. Kiss... kiss... kiss... kiss. Over, over. Gentle touches of her lips... falling onto my mouth, my cheeks, my closed eyelids. Kissing my tears. Panic, panic - kissss... kissssss... the pain, the panic settled down - back beneath the leaves... kissss... kissssss... peace. I met her mouth with mine. We slumped against her bedroom wall, squashing her Teddy bears and dolls, writhing in kisses. Voices - spacey-choirs from the record player floated around us and over us - leaves settling, covering us. Her head rested on my shoulder, my cheek rested on her dark warm head. We breathed slow, together. Drifted off - glowing together... peace. The record ended. Nothing but the sound of breath, the warmth of Lorna's cheek against my neck, her fingers stroking my hand. For a second I felt safe, like I was back home - long ago, or some home, somewhere. Then - *Clomp! Clomp! Clomp!* Loud footsteps clomped towards us up the stairs. Lorna shoved me away and pulled her dress down where it had ridden up past her knees. I grabbed for the nearest object stared studiously at the record sleeve - Music for Airports... Music for Airports... Music for Airports...

'It's getting near supper time, Lorna.' Dr Mackenzie's red face jabbed round the edge of the door like the head of a ventriloquist's dummy. He twitched back and forth to look at Lorna, then me, then Lorna. Back and forth, each time we spoke.

'Yes. OK, Dad.' Lorna's face was flushed bright pink. 'Just playing some music.'

'Yes, I can hear it. Can you keep it down a bit?' He frowned a bit. 'Bit hot in here, Lorna. Why don't you open the window for some fresh air?' The face twitched back at me, again. 'Will you be staying for supper, Stewart?'

'Er... no.' I tried to meet his gaze steadily. I hoped he wouldn't notice I'd been crying, or Lorna's pink face. 'I better get back to Grandad's.' I said. 'I think he needed a hand with something.'

'Aye,' said Dr Mackenzie, and his head disappeared.

Lorna turned her glowing face to look at me. We both stifled a laugh as the footsteps clomped back downstairs, then she kissed me again and again and again.

this kiss
 these homes of
 fire of Kilt-rock-fused
 Gneiss-desire reach out in ice-fingers
 across the coast-crags
 flurrying
 hurling
 banners of snow crack-whipping
 sharp
 white words in fierce grapples of endless-instants
 to bind you
 with earth in a stone-chain of knotted Gabbro-veins
 boned beneath
 the soil of your thoughts your dreams your flesh
 as you
 breath can you feel the is the
 are the WE when
 salt-sharp air speaks the peaks shift the plates
 drift the molten moments gather in waves
 Not hot basalt-anger but
 essential-consequence
 Not terrene-wild reprisal
 or flaming wrath-scoria
 but Earth-sap rising
 from an ocean of hurt-blood

Pinhead

the crossing

'See yer Monday, Lorna. I'll meet yer here at two-thirty. Sharp,' snapped Dr Mackenzie.

He nodded at me, clunked his door shut and stomped off behind the sacred Land Rover. He hadn't spoken the whole journey, since I'd scratched his shiny paint with my pushbike. All hail to the divine Land Rover. Lorna and me had managed to get off away from him on the sunlit ferry from Tarbert, when he'd met some other miserable looking git. But since we'd landed on Skye and started the journey to Sconser, the last three hours of stony silence had only been broken by me choking on his pipe-smoke. The journey had been spent staring out the window, suffocating, instead of being snuggled up with Lorna on the back seat. I bit my cheeks as he bike-wrestled at the back of the cab. It looked like he'd met his match. Lorna's bike-chain somehow got itself wrapped around my handlebars, and he puffed and hissed like a gas cylinder that was just about to blow. He was either praying or swearing under his breath, probably praying, because he gave an almighty wrench and dragged Lorna's bike free. He gasped with a hiss of relief, then clouted the door with a sun-flashing pedal.

'Blast! Blast! Blast!'

The pedal had left another big silver scratch down the side of the door. Dr Mackenzie thrust one bike at Lorna and one bike at me, and tutted as he caressed the wounded paintwork. I avoided Lorna's eyes. As we laid our rucksacks down on the grass, a clinking sound of bottles came from her pack.

Dr Mackenzie nodded at it. 'Don't give it to her all at once, girl.' He climbed back into the Land Rover.

'I won't,' said Lorna. 'Give my love to Auntie B, Dad.'

He slammed the door.

'Thanks, Dr Mackenzie,' I said.

Gravel crackled and scattered as he pulled away. Lorna waved, but he didn't look back. He sped off along the shore road until Land Rover became a tiny speck, like a small bug beneath the shadow of huge rock slopes towering along the shoreline. Lorna waved again as the speck headed for the last bend. 'Bye, Dad.' She stared after him until the speck disappeared. She booted a rock across the road, her sleek black hair blown wildly across her face.

I fiddled with the straps of my pack.

She touched my shoulder and pointed up at each high crest that loomed above us. 'Sgurr nan Gillean. Beinn Bhreac. Ben Lee,' she said.

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Ragged slopes. Skewing crags. Pitch-drops. Rugged-shelves snag - *Sgurr nan Gillean, Beinn Bhreac, Ben Lee.*

‘Bye, Dad.... Bye, Lorna. I love you,’ Lorna mumbled to herself sarcastically. She picked up her rucksack. The bike’s gears ticked as she wheeled it towards the jetty.

Down past the neat garden of a grubby pebble-dashed house. A stiff wind whispered weird - music in the branches of low battered shrubs. Behind us, the barren weight of rock seemed to lean over us. Wave-like ridges and wedges spanned between bulky cones, squat and funnelled like giant worn-down limpets reaching down, clinging to the unseen sea-bed, planted hard, far below the surface of the Sound. The limpet-giants dwarfed the few houses dotted along the roadside. These whacking great moody masses of rock brooded behind us. Before us, was a clear, wide strait of water, deeper and bluer than the clear sky above.

‘Look, Stewie!’ Lorna pointed across the water.

I squinted in the bright light and saw a little red funnel across the other side of the strait. This ferry was smaller than the one from Tarbert. Like a toy boat. Behind it, the low tan slopes of Raasay spread dirty and wide. A dark patch of green forest sprawled just above the South West shore, nearest us. Above this, an escarpment of wan scrub and rock was capped by a distant flat-topped crown.

I screwed up my eyes. ‘Blimey, that looks like a volcano.’

‘It is. Well, it was. Once,’ grinned Lorna. ‘That’s Dùn Caan.’ She squeezed my hand. ‘We can climb it, if the weather’s good.’

‘Climb it?’

‘Aye, yer big softie. It’s not that steep.’ She laughed at the horror in my voice. ‘Don’t worry it’s extinct, and there’s no dinosaurs or monsters on it. Hah!’ She dumped her pack and sat on a rickety bench beside the pebble-dashed toilet block. I squeezed close beside her and she jiggled her leg impatiently against mine. Slowly, the toy ferry became a real-sized one and drew up against the quay-slope. A couple of old cars rolled off, unfamiliar - from the fifties or sixties, I reckoned. Big square fenders, polished paintwork and chrome headlights gleamed in the sun. Some cyclists pushed their bicycles up the slope and pedalled off towards the West.

‘Come on, Stewie. Mind you don’t slip.’

I shouldered my rucksack and followed Lorna, carefully leading my bike and skidding down the dodgy weed-slippery slope onto the ferry. We stowed our bikes against a gang-ladder and ducked into one of the passenger cabins that ran along each side of the ferry. We plonked down on the empty seats. Powerful engines throbbed below us - robotic, rhythmic, restless.

‘Are yer OK?’ said Lorna. ‘Yer a bit quiet.’

‘Yeah. I’m OK. I just wish I hadn’t scratched his paint.’

‘Aye. Me, too. Still, can’t be helped, eh? I’ll see yer in a minute, I need the loo.’

The ferry was old, but tidy. Rows of yellow life-jackets were stowed on shelves just below the ceiling. Through the bleary salt-smearred windows, the water looked calm enough. The engines throbbed slow, deep -*Whumm.. whum... whum... Whumm.. whum... whum... Whumm.. whum... whum...*

‘Hah!’ Lorna whipped my head with her hair, as she sat down.

She looked different. Strange. New. Thick dark eyeliner around her eyes. Her green eyes looked even bigger.

‘Yeah. I know,’ she said. ‘I’m too scared to wear it at home, cos of Dad. And there’s only the sheep to see it.’

‘There’s me, now,’ I said.

She put her arm through mine.

The slide door opened. Lorna yanked her arm free.

‘Hello, Lorna. Three-day returns?’ A spotless young crewman in a blue uniform sold Lorna our tickets. ‘It’s nice up top today, if yer fancy a bit of a blow.’ He flashed her a wide irregular grin.

‘Thanks, Jimmy. Maybe we will,’ she said.

‘Nah. Thanks,’ I said.

‘Yer welcome.’ He studied my hair for a second and nodded curtly. ‘Are yer a punk, now, then Lorna?’

‘Mebbe, I am. Just a wee bit,’ she said.

Jimmy grinned at Lorna again and left.

The engines throbbed.

The ferry lurched.

We were underway.

‘C’mon.’ Lorna pulled me up and led me outside. Our boots rang on the sheer metal gang-steps up to the viewing platform. Sunlight glittered on the water. Icy wind-fingers ruffled and tugged at my hair. Lorna’s black flag flew out madly behind her head.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ said Lorna. She waved towards the lines of blue-grey mountains that loomed on the Eastern horizon. ‘The mainland.’ She shouted against the wind and pointed to the white-topped peaks. ‘Beinn a`Chlachain. Sgurr a`Chaorachain. Beinn Bhan. Bealach na Ba. My eyes can never seem to get them in focus, even on a clear day.’

Beinn a`Chlachain. Sgurr a`Chaorachain. Beinn Bhan. Bealach na Ba.

She was right. Even on a brilliant day like this, the distant shapes were shadowy and blurred - beyond focus, somehow. She pointed back at the shore we’d just left. ‘Look,’ she yelled above the rush and blast of wind. ‘Meall a`Mhaoil. Glamaig-Sgurr Mhairi. Beinn Dearg Mhor.’

Behind us, the whacking great slopes that frowned down on the quayside were reflected in the vivid blue water. Their rounded outlines sloped along the horizon and into the sea, until

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another more distant ridge of huge peaks and white-veined heights began a jagged wall that faded away into the West. All along the length of Skye a mirrored double range of rock reached back towards Harris and Grandad.

Lorna turned to me with a sunlit face. 'The Sound of Raasay,' she said.

Meall a`Mhaoil.

Glamaig-Sgurr Mhairi.

Beinn Dearg Mhor.

Ragged slopes. Skewing crags. Pitch-drops. Rugged-shelves snag. Haggard earth-bones have smouldered, will smoulder, a` smouldering. Grew knurly-green, grow gnarly-grey. Grown. Groaning earth-bone smoulders a` jag-shoulders rise. Sun-blasted knuckles, cheek-back-bones. Spines gravel-up, gurn-up - wind-splintered. Hike yawning a` snouting - grout-bluff-jaws bite sky -

Sithean Bhealaich Chumhaing.

Craig Ulatota. Fiurnean.

Ben Dearg. Storr.

When I turned back towards the Island it was much closer. Dùn Caan had disappeared behind the level of the escarpment and little clusters of houses clung along the shoreline, below the darkness of the forest.

'What's that?' I yelled into the wind, pointing at an old ruin, high on the brown slopes. It was the same colour as the wan rock - a roofless, toothless skull of a building. No doors. Black empty eye sockets where the windows had been.

'It's a derelict mine,' said Lorna, 'dug by German prisoners of World War One.'

Within fifteen minutes we'd arrived - the only passengers to push our bikes up the seaweed covered ferry slope. Clusters of sheep glared down at us from a forty-foot ridge that ran above the shore road. Sheltered from the wind again, we didn't have to shout.

Lorna swung her long leg over the bike. I really fancied her in those tight new jeans. Her cheeks glowed from the wind. Her flag flailed around whenever she turned her head.

'It's a bit of a ride to the village,' she said. 'But we need to visit the store to pick some things up for Mum.'

She peddled off slowly along the road. I wobbled after her, squinting at the high wall of rock across the bright water. More groups of sheep stared defiantly down from their battlements, or bleated begrudgingly before backing away, along the road.

'They've got a bad attitude here, too,' I said.

Lorna laughed.

At first it was baking hot. Sweat trickled down my belly. But as we turned past the shelter of the ridge, a bitter blast swept down the channel. It slapped into our faces, stopping us cold, holding us back with an invisible grip. We dismounted, zipped up up, leaned forward into the tide

of air and pushed on along the shore until we reached the quiet shelter of a wood in the shallow hollow of the bay. Bicycle gears ticked loudly in the warm, still air, past a few small houses, dirty grey pebble-dashed buildings half-hidden behind the bright pink and green blossom of stunted cherry trees. An old man with stooped shoulders stopped to wait for his dog as it limped after him. He patted its head as he watched us. He stared at me. I smiled at him. He nodded back and walked on. The dog waddled behind him, losing ground.

Sweat prickled my scalp. The sun beat heavily on the worn tarmac road. Lorna took her jacket off and pointed at a big grey pebble-dashed shed, to the sign above the door.

'What's it say?' she said.

'High... lands and Is... I... islands... Fire Brigade.'

'Good.' She grinned at me, then whispered. 'Er... yer might find the people are a bit strange, with yer.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well. There's no punks here. No music at all,' she said. 'They might stare at yer, a bit.'

'They'll stare at you, too, now,' I said.

'Hah! Yer cheeky sod! I've only come out in support,' she grinned.

'I'm used to people staring, but no music? You're joking me?'

'No. Really. They're nice people. Just not used to... yer know... outsiders. It's very strong church here. No music. No work or play on Sunday. That sort of thing.'

'No music at all?'

'No. Not for over a hundred years.'

'Bloody hell! What's wrong with them?'

'Shh! Don't swear. Mum'll tell yer the history of it all.'

I laughed. 'Blimey, it's worse than Harris. OK. Don't worry, I won't whistle, or sing or do the pogo. And I'll try not to gob at anyone either.'

Lorna giggled. 'Stop it. They're good people,' she said. 'And we have to respect their beliefs. They've been good to Mum, considering she's an incomer, and so... well... different to them.'

We carried on through the village, past a playground. Lorna pointed at a big sign. 'See. Do not use this playground on a Sunday. Thank you,' she read.

'Bloody hell! They're not much fun, here. Are they?'

'Shhh! Stewie!'

A group of kids came legging it out of the woods, chasing each other. A girl of about ten bumped into me, and stood gawping up at my face - my hair. She was bug-eyed. 'Sorry. Mister,' she said.

'That's OK,' I smiled.

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'Yer look funny,' she said, pointing at my hair. 'Is it a wig?'

I laughed.

Two women appeared from a side road. A stocky, grey-haired older lady with a slimmer younger one, pushed a pram. The older woman called, "Come here, Susan", in a rounded rolling accent. All the children legged it off, away from me, in through the gate of the playground. The women stared at us.

Lorna nodded and smiled at them. 'C'mon,' she said.

We pushed our bikes up through the village and leaned them against a red telephone box. It was just the same as one up-town, in London. The chipped red paint looked right out of place amongst all this greenness, fresh air and blossom. But when I creaked the door opened, it wasn't at all like a London phone-box. There were no advert cards for prossies and it didn't stink of piss. Lorna walked towards a house that had the word S... T... STORE on a sign above the door. As I followed her up the steps, a grey bearded man opened the door and moved aside to let us in. He nodded at her and took a long hard look at me. He shook his head and a little bell tinkled as he banged the door behind him. Inside, the shop was just like a big living room packed with shelves, and it was stacked with everything you might ever need. From fresh vegetables to cardboard boxes of screws, they had everything.

A short, rosy-faced woman smiled at us from behind a battered, ancient till that squatted on a table beside the door. Her dark hair was neat, shiny, simple - dragged back tight in a bun that seemed to pull her eyebrows halfway up her forehead. 'Hello, Lorna,' she said. 'Back again, are yer?'

'Aye, Mrs Lennox. Just fer the weekend.' Lorna's accent suddenly sounded much thicker and rounder.

'And who's this, then?' The woman nodded in my direction.

'Stewart MacLeod. He's up from London.'

'Hello,' she said to me. 'They have MacLeods down there, too, do they?'

'Aye,' said Lorna.

'Is he yer boyfriend?' she said quietly.

'Oh, no. Just a friend.' Lorna blushed bright red.

Oh shit. *Just a friend.*

'Good morning to yer, Stewart.' Mrs Lennox looked me up and down.

'Hello.'

She turned back to Lorna. 'I'll just get yer mum's groceries. No need to pay. She can do that next time she's in. There's not too much, anyway. We've just sent her up a big delivery.' She scurried out of a side door. Lorna and I waited in the silence, as a big round cock-eyed clock ticked loudly from behind the till. A laugh bubbled up in my stomach, and I bit my lip.

Mrs Lennox scuttled back in, carrying a big brown-paper carrier bag. She was followed by a chunky, bearded bloke, who stomped up behind the till and nodded at Lorna and me.

‘Staying long?’ he asked me.

‘Just for the weekend. Mr Lennox,’ said Lorna, before I could answer.

‘Oh, aye,’ he nodded. ‘Up from London, then. Are yer?’

‘Er, yeah,’ I said.

‘A spot o walking?’

‘Er...’

‘Aye, if the weather’s fair,’ Lorna interrupted.

‘It’s gonna be a mix,’ said Mr Lennox. ‘As per usual.’

‘Thought we might do the coastal path, or maybe Dùn Caan.’ Lorna took the groceries from Mrs Lennox and nudged me towards the door.

‘Better keep a weather eye out North, lass,’ he said. ‘If yer dressed like that.’ He nodded in my direction. ‘Snow comes in fast, higher up. Despite the warm sun.’

‘Snow?’ I said. ‘But, it’s May.’

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘It’s not like London up here, yer’ll find.’ He looked me up and down again, but smiled warmly. ‘Best not take any chances if yer not used to it.’

‘I’ve been staying with me Grandad on Harris,’ I said. ‘Gets pretty rough weather there, too.’

‘Aye. That it does. Harris, eh?’ he raised his eyebrows. ‘Best take care, though, eh? Mind yerself.’

‘Yeah. OK,’ I said.

‘C’mon, then.’ Lorna opened the door and gestured for me to follow her. ‘Bye,’ she called.

‘Enjoy yer stay, and give our best to yer mum.’

‘Bye,’ I said, and pulled the door shut behind me. The little bell jingled inside. I could still hear Mrs Lennox’ voice. ‘What on earth did he look like? Did yer see his hair? Aye. And he’s a bad effect on Lorna, too. Eye make-up! Such a good girl.’

Her husband answered. ‘Hah! Southern softy. Thinks he’s a weatherman, too!’

Lorna raised her eyebrows. ‘C’mon. Let’s go,’ she whispered through her teeth, and rested the groceries in her bicycle basket.

We grabbed our packs, pushed the bikes up the hill and left the village behind. Before long, we were climbing steeply up a ragged, potholed road, through a thick pine wood. Above us, the wind whished with force and swayed the tree-tops, but it was warm and sheltered at ground level. We stepped out above a wide clearing that fell away in swathes of dead ferns below us. It was like the whole world was flooded with sunshine.

‘Snow. In May,’ I puffed. ‘Who’s he kidding?’

Lorna sucked in a lungful of air and swept her arm across the horizon. 'I wanted you to see this view, before we go to Mum's.' She sighed and gazed out beyond me. The slopes stood tall across the straits. The sky was blue and the sea glittered. 'I love it here.'

The light flickered through the shifting ridge of woods above us. It flickered across her face. A wooden *knock-knocking* came from a narrow mossy path that left the road behind us and wound up into the trees.

'Can we have a sit down, in the shade?' I pointed into the woods.

'OK, yer *great big Southern softie*.' She dug me in the belly. 'We can have a rest, if yer need it.'

We propped our bikes against a rusty wire fence and stepped off the hard tarmac road onto the soft carpet of the forest path. We followed it up the hill through masses of trees which stood in cool shadow or glowed in warm stripes of sunlight. The path was coated with thousands of tiny needles and twigs and moss. I stooped, picked up a pine-cone and looked at it in the light that shifted through the whispering trees. It gave off a fusty smell as bits fell off and crumbled in my hand. I took another. Soft, but only just starting to decay - about two inches long, made up of tiny, layered, musty leaf-shelves that flaked open to shed their seeds. All around me, the forest was in a state of breaking down. And... re-growth. The air was fresh with the smell of living pine-needles - earth, wood and moss. And the trees. Huge trees lay toppled all about, where fierce storm winds must have ripped the roots up. Rock showed through the fanned, torn root-tendrils, exposing the shallow soil. Massive trunks had fallen and smashed. Some lay propped, leaning against other sturdier towers. Roots and branches grasped at us - gnarly twisted fingers and limbs clutched at our legs and faces as we struggled past the fallen giants. Through gaps in the canopy, small white clouds raced in the wind. Lower, it swayed the brilliant green crowns of the sunlit pines, and the wood was filled with creaks and groans, as trunk ground against trunk.

'Bloody hell,' I whispered. 'It's like the trees are talking.'

'I don't like it,' Lorna whispered back. 'All these dead trees. It's like the forest is dying. Like they're growling, complaining. Like the timbers of wrecked ships.'

'Wooh. Ghostly,' I said. 'Hey. Wait,' I said. I held her arm. 'Listen.'

Knock a clack a thudnck! Scree - chack! Whyyyeh-nneh! A chack! Twii-gnasnapck! Braa - braa-nnch! Nnnck. Nnneenck. Nnnee - dlssss.

The wind rushed overhead and the creaking got really loud. Sounds like doors opening and shutting - clacks, thuds and knocks. Squeals and whines. The sound of an unbearable pressure as the trees ground against each other - wood on wood - grain against grain. And all the time, the air about us held a dreadful heavy expectation that some fragile holding limb would actually snap and the whole wood would come smashing, crashing down around us, down on our heads.

'Can we go?' said Lorna, pulling at my arm.

Pyyyehh-nnneh! Sssseeee - ddsah! Pyyyehh-nnneh! Bbreeee - zeh! Zeh! Pyyyyeh - nnneh!
Breee - thhh! Thhhh! Knock, a clack, a thudnnck!

'It is like voices,' I whispered. 'I wonder what they're saying.'

Pyyyehh-nnneh! Sssseeee - ddsah! Pyyyyeh - nnnssseh! Breee - thhh! Pyyyyeh - nnnssseh!
Breee - thhaah!

'Don't be daft. You're spooking me.' She walked further up the path. 'C'mon.'

For a moment the wind dropped and the trees became still. I pressed my palm against the rough leathery bark of a tree. It was like the hide of an animal. Like elephant skin. The wind moved again in the tree carnage - the forest was barely hanging together. Under my boots, twigs and needles and cones were rotting in an ancient tree-mulch. The pine-seeds lay within it, waiting to grow.

'The dead feed the living.'

'Yer what?' said Lorna.

'It's like the dead trees and cones are feeding the living ones, isn't it?'

'Eh? Well. Yeah. I suppose so.'

'You said it was dying, but it's not. This whole forest. It's not just dying. It's alive. There's all these seeds waiting to grow.'

She questioned me with her eyes. 'I didn't know yer were so into nature? All this hippy-dippy shit?'

'Nah. Nah, I'm not. I was just saying.'

'Sounds like yer are.' She tugged at my sleeve. 'C'mon, Stewie. Mum'll get cranky if we're too late.'

'OK,' I said. I followed her back down the soft path onto the road. But I could still hear the voices of the trees in my head.

Thudnnck! Scree - chack! Pyyyehh-nnneh! Sssseeee - ddsah! Pyyyyeh - nnnssseh! Breee - thhh! Pyyyyeh - nnnssseh! Breee - thhaah! Thudnnck! Scree - chack!

Ruadh Óran

Mrs Mackenzie's house was bloody miles away. Lorna was more used to cycling than me and she really rubbed it in. She'd bomb off with a rocket up her arse, wait for me at the top of each hill, then free-wheel off again. I gazed around, breathing hard. The rock-top of Raasay rose steep above the forested heights to my left and long brown slopes fell away to the sea on my right. I gritted my teeth, peddled hard and drew alongside her.

'It's lovely here, isn't it?' she said.

'Blimey... yeah... great,' I gasped. 'Can we have a res...?'

She zoomed off, again, laughing. 'Not far, now,' she yelled back over her shoulder and hurtled off down another long slope, her hair flying out behind her.

I sped after her, bouncing over the crumbling tarmac, avoiding deep potholes, ruts and cracks in the track. Loose gravel and stones rattled in the mudguards. After pumping my legs up another hill... finally... caught her. She grinned wickedly at me, slumped forward on my handlebars, puffing... blowing.

'Yer Southern softy.'

'Not... not. Not... used... this bloody peddling. That's... all.'

'Don't worry. It's not far, now. Just down there.' She pointed to a big stone cottage nestled in a scrubby-grass dip, between the rock-edged coastal path and the grey shoreline. A couple of outbuildings sat alongside the cottage in a wide garden surrounded by a low stone wall. Smoke was rising from the chimney. It looked pretty cosy. Maybe there'd be a cup of tea going. It looked like there were two or three animals rearing up or standing in the garden - deer, maybe.

'Look, Lorna!' I shouted.

Our brakes squealed as we drew up outside the cottage. Lorna smiled knowingly and opened the rickety gate. We leaned the bikes inside, against the cottage wall. It wasn't deer in the garden. Not live ones, anyway. It was filled with wooden sculptures which were a mixture of animals and humans - a deer-man, a cat-woman, and a few which had bits of fish and birds and all sorts of species in them. Patches of flowers clung to the ground around the walls of the garden. The air was still on this side of the island, and warmer.

'Ruadh Óran,' said Lorna, taking off her rucksack and picking up the groceries.

'Eh?'

'The name of Mum's house,' she said. 'It means deer-song. In Gaelic.'

Far across the bright blue of the sea, a darker, smoky-blue line of peaks stretched away to the south. I followed Lorna along a stone path lined with brightly painted and patterned rocks, around to the front of the house, facing the sea. The big wooden door was painted in patterns like the stones, but faded and weather-beaten. Lorna nodded at a freshly mud-spattered pair of wellingtons standing next to the doormat.

‘Looks like she’s just got back from one of her treks,’ she said.

A shadowy form moved behind the dirty glass of a little window. Lorna turned to me and squeezed my wrist.

‘Mum can be a little weird...’

‘Weird?’

‘Well... argumentative... at times,’ she said. ‘If she starts to get a bit... worked up, just try and ignore it. She usually calms down.’

‘Er... Ok.’ I said. ‘What happens if she doesn’t calm down?’

Lorna raised her eyebrows. She pulled the bell rope hanging by the door. A dull *Clang-Clung!* rang out across the grass slope. Immediately, the door opened wide. Mrs Mackenzie appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a grey smock splattered with multi-coloured patches and streaks of paint. Her long black hair was like Lorna’s, but streaked with grey and tied into two thick plaited ropes. Her pale face was as startling as the wide-eyed portrait I’d seen at Dr Mackenzie’s. Actually, she looked like a living portrait - daubed and splodged with fresh paint, and bright red lip-stick.

‘Mum, look at you!’ Lorna attempted to wipe her mum’s face with a hanky, but she pushed past Lorna as though she wasn’t there.

‘Hmm... Stewart Macleod?’ Mrs Mackenzie gripped my hand and sized me up with her big black eyes.

‘Hello, Mrs Mackenzie,’ I said.

‘Hmm,’ she said, and dragged me past Lorna, through a small hallway and into a big room full of easels, canvases and old furniture. Incomplete wooden sculptures of dolphins, birds and naked human bodies stood all around, as though ready to spring into life at any moment.

‘You look very like your father. But, never mind. Oh, look! I’ve redesigned you, already.’ She laughed, as I pulled away.

Red paint was smeared all over my fingers.

‘Let me clean you up.’

She clasped my hand again and led me to a table littered with semi-squeezed out tubes of oil paint, murky bottles of unidentifiable liquids and crusts of half-eaten sandwiches. Her paint-flecked plaits whipped and her smock swished against the sculptures as she whirled and sniffed at a couple of whiskey bottles before finding what she wanted.

'White spirit...' she said, splashing some onto a rag. '...is the right spirit.' Her accent was different to Lorna's. Posher. She gripped my fingers again and started rubbing at the paint.

'Er, I can do it.' I tried to pull away.

'Nonsense,' she said and rubbed hard, until the stain had gone.

'That'll do,' she said, and stared intently into my face, still holding my hand. 'Rob MacLeod's boy.'

'Er, Mum. Perhaps Stewie might like a cup of tea?'

Lorna had followed us in with the groceries. Mrs Mackenzie seemed to notice her for the first time.

'You better put the kettle on, then, dear,' she snapped. 'And you can put those other things in the kitchen. Make yourself useful.'

'Hello, Mum. Hello, Lorna. How are you?' Lorna mumbled something and caught my eye as she carried the food into the kitchen. 'I'll just be in here, Stewie,' she called.

Mrs Mackenzie pulled me towards the big open window that faced South-East. She swept her arm theatrically towards the mountains across the straights. 'Just look,' she said. 'What a sumptuous view?'

'Nice,' I said.

'And, isn't the air simply delicious?' She closed her black eyes, sucked in deeply through her nose and blew out noisily through her lips. She looked scarily familiar - like Lorna, but older, and totally bonkers. Like Lene Lovich meets The Bride of Dracula.

'Lorna tells me you want to be an artist. If you do, then that's something. Her, her father, these islanders... they've got nothing. They've got nothing..... here.' She pointed at her eyes, then at mine. 'They see nothing,' she said. 'It's all... ALL... in the ocular sensitivities.' She tilted her head slightly to one side and stared unblinkingly into my eyes, which began to water.

I edged towards the open window. 'Er... Yeah, nice,' I said. 'I wouldn't say I'm much of an artist, though.'

'A shrinking violet? Eh, Stewart? Lorna said you had some drawings?'

'Yeah. In my notebook.'

She held out her hand.

'They're in my rucksack.' I felt like I was back at school.

'Lorna!' Mrs Mackenzie yelled.

Lorna stuck her head round the doorway. 'Aye. What?'

'Bring Stewart's rucksack here.' Her mum paused. 'Please, dear.' She cleaned her hands with white spirit and dried them on her overalls.

Lorna huffed and ducked out of sight, again, mumbling something under her breath. She reappeared with my rucksack and plonked it at my feet. I knelt down and rummaged for my

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notebook.

'Did you fetch the Bourbon biscuits?' Mrs Mackenzie smiled at her daughter - sickly-sweet.

'I'll have a look.'

'And did you bring the, er... the things... your father sent?'

'Yes.'

'Put a little in my tea, please. There's a dear.'

'Mum... I don't...'

'Yes, dear? You don't... what?'

I caught the flash of Mrs Mackenzie's black eyes aimed at her daughter. Lorna's eyes flashed back - green. I held my breath. Lorna sighed and sloped off.

The black eyes turned back to me. The red hand thrust out. 'Drawings?'

I held out my sketchpad, remembering as Mrs Mackenzie took it, that I'd stupidly put the naked sketches of Lorna back inside. 'Oh, sorry. Wait a sec.' I tried to grab it back, dropped it, and watched - frozen with disbelief, as the loose leaves of naked Lornas scattered across the floor at Mrs Mackenzie's feet.

'What's this?' She stooped and snatched up some of the sheets as I scrambled to collect them. She looked at each of them a long time before handing one back to me. It was covered with details of Lorna - naked, arms outstretched to the sun. She kept the others.

'Well. I can see that you use your imagination very well,' she said. 'Or was it your eyes?'

'I... I...'

'Well,' she said. 'You've certainly got something of an artistic perspective. Have you any that are not of my daughter?'

'Yeah... yeah.' I gave her the sketchpad and collected the drawings from the floor. I slumped down at the table. My knees were shaking and my chest felt tight.

Mrs Mackenzie pored over the book. After several minutes she looked up. 'They're very good. Lorna was right to bring you to see me.' She handed me the pad, but kept the nude sketches. 'You like using colour on yourself, I see.' She brushed her hand quickly across my orange hair. 'Have you ever used oils?'

'No. No. I've got some, though.'

'You won't need them here. But I can help, if you're willing to listen, and... you can watch me work... If...' She raised her bushy left eyebrow. '...if you have the patience.' The right eyebrow climbed alongside its partner. 'Are you a patient boy, Stewart?' She leafed through the other sketches of Lorna.

'I... I dunno. I am interested in art.' I could feel my face burning.

'And this is combined with your interest in my daughter. That's just peachy. Isn't it? I

wonder... What she would make of these little pictures of yours?' The left corner of her red lips turned up in a flicker of a smile. 'And here she is... with the tea.'

Lorna set a tray on the table beside me.

'We were just talking about you, dear.' Mrs Mackenzie's eyes flickered at me. My mouth was dry.

'Nothing good. I hope?' said Lorna.

'No. Nothing good, predictably. It seems that you're a source of artistic inspiration for young Stewart.' The dark eyes flickered.

'Oh. Really?' Lorna smiled at me.

I felt sick.

Mrs Mackenzie held out the sketches to me, but didn't let go. 'Yes. Very much so. Isn't that right, Stewart?'

I nodded with my mouth hanging open. I gripped the sketches and pulled.

'How have I inspired yer, then? Tell us, Stewie?' Lorna beamed.

Mrs Mackenzie tugged back at the sketches.

'Er... I... er...' I looked from Lorna to her mum and back again. The corners of the red lips curled. I felt dizzy. 'Er..... I...'

'Are those your new pictures?' said Lorna, reaching forward to see.

'You've inspired him by bringing him here... to Raasay... to me, of course.'

'Oh,' said Lorna. She leaned forward to look at the pictures.

Mrs Mackenzie let go of them.

I whisked the drawings back in the sketchpad and stuffed it into the bottom of my rucksack.

'Better take care of those sketches. Eh, Stewart?' Mrs Mackenzie winked slowly at me, with a big, dark eye.

'Yeah... yeah. I will.'

She walked to the window and stared out across the straights. 'Pour the tea, Lorna,' she said. She stroked her long plaits. 'Has she shown you the Sheela Na Gig, yet, Stewart? At Rodel church?'

'No... no... what's a Sheela...?'

'...Na Gig,' said Mrs Mackenzie. 'They're very ancient and wild carvings on the church tower. They're very...'

'Mum! Don't.' Lorna blushed.

'It's on the South side of the tower. They're renovating it I believe.' Mrs Mackenzie raised an eyebrow.

'Mum!'

Pinhead

'No. You haven't shown me.' I said. 'Have you, Lorna?'

'Don't worry, Stewart. She will... she will.'

the wicked witch of the western isles

'Shhh!' Lorna held her finger to her lips, and tip-toed across the floor to my bed. It was still light enough to see, although the sun had set ages before.

'Mum'll be asleep soon,' she whispered. She sat on the end of my bed. 'Aww. Look at yer, all snuggled down.' She leaned forward and roughly squeezed my cheek. 'Coochie-coochie coo.'

'Get off.' I brushed her hand away, gently.

I blinked at her grinning at me through the half-light. My body ached. I was knackered. The journey alone had been a right old gruelling expedition, but the shock of meeting Mrs 'Mad' Mackenzie and her discovery of the nude sketches had just about done me in. After lunch, her mum had worked on some sculpture in the cottage, and I'd spent the afternoon following Lorna around the local shoreline. After that, I'd been press-ganged into helping her in the kitchen. By the time Mrs Mackenzie had appeared for supper and we'd done the washing up, I was feeling half dead. From what I'd seen, Mrs Mackenzie hardly knew how to cook, wash-up, boil a kettle, or do anything other than paint and sculpt. Lorna did everything. God knows where her energy came from. Even now her eyes were shining like she'd been plugged into the mains. She brushed her hair away from her face.

'What do yer think of Mum, then?'

'She's... she's not really like anyone I've met before.'

'No, I bet.' Lorna sighed and fiddled with the stitching on the quilt. Her pyjamas were gaping open at the neck. 'Sometimes, I wonder if she's actually my mum. I'm useless at art. And that's all she's interested in.' Lorna's breath was hushed and slow. 'I must be such a disappointment to her. And we've got nothing in common.'

'Actually. I think you're quite similar to her. In some ways.'

'No, I'm not!' Her eyes flashed at me.

'Hah! No, of course you're nothing like her,' I said. 'Like now... with your death-ray eyes. You can both kill people from thirty yards with your dirty looks.'

Lorna's eyes simmered, then fell. 'Aye. I suppose. Maybe we are similar, in some ways.'

'I think... with her art... maybe she gets obsessed with whatever she's working on. I get a bit like that.'

'Of course,' Lorna hissed. 'The great artists obsessed with their important works. Hah!'

'I was just saying...'

Pinhead

'She's been obsessed with it since I was born. She's not interested in me. Or Danny.' She snapped a loose thread on the quilt. 'She's taken a bit of a shine to you, though. I bloody knew she would.'

'But that's good, isn't it? I mean your dad hates the sight of me.'

'Yeah. Of course it's good. He doesn't dare go against her, in case she turns up at the Kirk and embarrasses him.'

'How come *she* likes me, then?'

'Probably glad to see someone from London, someone who's not so... so normal. She used to spend a lot of time there in the sixties, before she moved here permanently.'

'So, you're saying I'm not normal, then?' I laughed.

'Yer know what I mean. Someone prepared to... stand out from the crowd.' Lorna squeezed my shoulder.

'She's completely different from your dad. I mean how?... how did...?'

'How did they consummate their love?' Lorna giggled.

'Ugh! No. Not that. How did they get together in the first place?'

'Ugh! Exactly. How did they? Yuck!'

'Well? How?'

Lorna sat up cross-legged, and laughed. 'Jackanory, Jackanory, Jackanory. Bom, bom. Are yer sitting comfortably?'

I nodded.

'Then, I'll begin.' She took a deep breath. 'Well... he was a medical student at Edinburgh. She was a swinging art student up from London..... A party... soft lighting... hormones. They got pissed, I suppose. Booze is one thing they have in common.'

'Yeah, but they got married. There must have been more of a reason than that?'

Lorna turned away from me. 'Yer not very bright, sometimes, Stewie.' She shifted on the bed.

'Eh?'

'Yer don't even see what's right in front of yer.'

'How d'you mean?'

'What's literally right in front of yer?'

'You?'

Lorna sighed.

'You. Oh... Oh... I see.'

She stood up and walked to the window. 'Finally. Yer get it? I'm the reason. I wasn't on the agenda. I'm the big mistake. People had to get married back then. Well, yer still do, up here.'

I blinked at the silhouette framed in the glow from the window. 'Sorry. Sorry, I didn't get

it.'

'Don't worry. Yer weren't to know. Anyway, it's not how yer get to the party that matters. As long as yer get to the party. That's what Mooner says.'

'Nice. Yeah. Welcome to the party, Lorna. Mooner's right.' The bed springs pinged as I sat up. 'So how about Danny, then?'

She tip-toed back and sat softly on the bed. 'How did Danny arrive at the party? I reckon they must have got drunk again at some stage.' She started pulling at the quilt again. 'I think having Danny might have been the last straw for Mum. She went a bit..... a bit...'

'Is... is she an alchy?'

'No. No. Actually, she doesn't drink that much, really. In comparison to many folk here. No. She's just got a condition.' She laughed. 'I've got it, too.'

I tried to read her face in the dark. 'Really? What... what is it? Can... can they do anything about it?' The headboard dug into my spine as I sat up straight. Was Lorna going to grow into a total nut-job, like her mum?

Lorna laughed silently into the crook of her arm. 'Don't worry. It's not catching.'

The headboard was hard and cold. 'What's it called? Your... your condition?' I frantically tried to remember what the lads had said about nutters, schitzo's, people with manic depression - how they'd switch - turn psycho. Stab you in your bed. In the dark. In your dark bed.

Lorna slowly stretched out her hands towards me and formed a strangle hold. She spoke in a low zombie-witches whisper. 'It's... it's called...'

I froze as she gripped my neck with her fingers.

'It's called Doctor bloody Mackenzie. Mwuhahaha!' She leaned across my chest and tickled my ribs. 'Aye. Doctor bloody Mackenzie He's what we suffer from. But don't worry. It's not catching. But I'm telling yer Stewie, if yer spend enough time with him, YOU TOO will go mental. Like my poor mum.'

'And you.' I laughed and squirmed and tried to grip her arms. 'And you. You're a right bloody mental.'

Lorna whipped her leg round astride me - pressed herself hard against me. She leaned close. Hair fell around us like a curtain. She clamped her hand across my mouth and whispered. 'Shhh! She'll hear yer! She'll come to get yer! The wicked witch of the West... ern Isles.'

She whipped me with her hair and I managed to grip hold of her arms. 'You nutter. I reckon you're the mad-zombie-witch of the Western Isles.'

'Hah! Me on my broom stick. Ih-hihi-hi! Yeah. Maybe, I am.' She rolled off and sat up beside me. 'Poor Mum,' she said.

I wanted to feel her body against me, again. She breathed out slowly. I felt it against my cheek. It smelt of mint toothpaste.

Pinhead

'Are yer gonna show me yer new sketches then?'

I tensed. 'Er, yeah. Yeah... one day.'

Lorna nestled against me and laughed quietly. 'Mum's such a lazy cow, isn't she?'

'Eh?'

'Yeah. She's lazy. Oh, sorry. I'm asking the wrong person about laziness. Hah!' She poked me in the chest.

'But, I helped you in the kitchen.'

'After I forced yer to, yer lazy dweeb. And yer *watched me* working in the kitchen, more like. Hah! Don't worry. I'm used to it.' She paused and looked into my face. 'Anyway, I just thought I'd kiss yer goodnight.' She leant forward and kissed me full on the lips. 'Is that OK?' she said. 'Doesn't make yer panic?'

'No... nice.'

She pinned me against the headboard, with her lips. The bed-springs pinged and creaked as she lay alongside me. She felt warm and soft, glowing through her pyjamas.

'Goodnight. Better get some sleep, yer've got yer art lesson in the morning.'

'Night, Lorna.'

She tip-toed back across to the door. It creaked and closed.

I lay back in the bed.

The soft mint taste of her fresh on my lips.

A hard-on in my pyjamas.

The wind rushed softly in the eaves of the cottage. I could feel the waters of the Sound flowing endlessly, outside the window. Mountains stood silent. A couple of miles off, a forest of trees were swaying, knocking - speaking with their wood. A curlew called. A curlew... called.

Cu-cu-cew, Cur-lew, Cour-lee, Cour-li.

an art lesson

'I want you to feel what you see.' Mrs Mackenzie's breath tickled my neck as she spoke.

'Mum, you're making him feel uncomfortable.'

'No, I'm not,' Mrs Mackenzie hissed at Lorna. 'Am I Stewart?'

'Well, just a bit. I'm used to doing stuff, like drawing, when I'm on my own,' I said.

'All right, then,' she said. Then, added sarcastically. 'I'll try not to crowd you so much.'

'Don't worry. We won't watch you, Stewie,' said Lorna.

'Who's the artist here, girl? You or me? I think we all know it isn't you.'

'All right, Mum. Calm down.'

Mrs Mackenzie took a long deep breath, and exhaled slowly, the air whistling out loudly between her teeth. I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing.

She spoke in theatrical soft voice. 'We won't *watch* you then, *Stewie*.' She drew out my name. 'Just listen to my voice and breathe in rhythm with me. In and...' (big pause)... 'out. In and...' (bigger pause)... 'out.'

I screwed up my face to stop from laughing and hoped my shoulders wouldn't shake. I prayed she couldn't see my reflection in the window-pane.

She took another long breath. 'I want you to feel what you see. Feel what you see.'

The view through the window began to blur as tears of silent laughter filled my eyes and streamed down my cheeks. I was glad that I couldn't see Lorna's face, in case we both cracked up. Or that she'd be embarrassed by me laughing at her loopy mum.

'Look, Stewie. Look. See how the sunlight catches the mountain-tops. See how the light changes as the clouds pass over, filtering the sun. Try and capture that movement, that moment. Try and feel the wind blowing.'

I strained to see across the Straits, through a strange swimming prism of tears. But as they cleared, I started to sketch the peaks. Mrs Mackenzie was going on about "feeling the life-force", "feeling the power of the earth", "feeling" this and that. My stomach still trembled with silent laughter, but my pencil began to skip across the paper.

'Hear the mountains, Stewie. What are they saying to you?'

I wished she'd shut up, but actually, it was weird. As her voice babbled on in the background, her words fell away and the sound of her voice encouraged me, lulled me. Listening and looking became a feeling of the mountains - memories from walking with Grandad - looking

Pinhead

for sheep - the cold breath of wind, the hard knock of voices bouncing back off the rocks, and of words dropped dead into deep heather. Eagle-calls whistled and stretched across the horizon of my imagination. Across the Sound, the mountain peaks became sunlit, then cloud-shadowed, then sunlit once more. I stood on the slopes - breathing, tasting, freezing, feeling the mountains. Sending myself across the straits, onto them. Dizzy, tired.

‘Are yer Ok, Stewie?’ Lorna was at my side, holding my arm. ‘Yer looked a bit wobbly, there. Like yer were gonna fall off the chair.’

‘Eh? Eh? Did I? I was just concentrating.’

Mrs Mackenzie smiled at me, slouched in the window seat. Her skirt had got hitched up above her knee. ‘He was up there, weren’t yer, Stewart. He was up on the mountain-top. Feeling the earth, sharing himself with it. Weren’t yer, Stewart, eh?’

I nodded. ‘I spose I was, a bit.’ I looked down at my sketch-pad. The peaks were rough textured outlines, covered in movements of cloud - shapes passing - blurs of wind-blown vapour. What I’d tried to show was on the page, but I wasn’t sure if anyone else would see it.

‘It’s really nice, Stewie,’ said Lorna, her hair falling over my right shoulder.

‘Nice,’ snapped her mum. ‘Hah!’ She loomed over my other shoulder, her breath tickling my cheek, again. ‘It’s basic. Very basic.’

We breathed there, three heads in a row - looking at the page-mountain.

Lorna rested her hand on my chest. ‘Mum,’ she said, chiding her.

Mrs Mackenzie stood up and changed her tone. ‘It’s basic...ally very good,’ she said, and ruffled my hair. ‘It’s a good start. But, you need to practise this interaction between what you feel and see, and what you draw. You need to try this exercise actually on a mountain-top. Smell the heather, see the wildlife. Deer, eagles, our rare mountain hare.’ We watched her turn way and walk to the window. She looked out, away from us. ‘You need to try this on the mountain slopes... in a storm. Feel the ice, the fear. Feel the storm on your skin and in your blood.’

‘Oh, that’s really sensible,’ said Lorna. ‘Send him up a mountain in a storm. That’s a safe thing to do.’

‘Be quiet, girl!’ her mum growled. ‘There’s more to life than being safe!’

Lorna tugged at my shoulder. ‘C’mon,’ she said. ‘Let’s get some real air and leave Mum to stir her magic potions in her cauldron.’

‘That’s enough of your lip, girl!’

‘And don’t trip over her broomstick.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Mackenzie.’ I smiled at her, slid the chair back and followed Lorna out into the garden.

‘Never mind her, Stewart. The map’s in the sideboard drawer.’

Lorna gripped my wrist and dragged me away.

'Lorna tells me you've seen *the ghosts of trees*,' Mrs Mac called after me. 'Get yourself up Dùn Caan. You'll see more living myths in these islands.'

skimming

'Come on, Lorna. There's no way it's going to snow. It's May!'

'You heard what Mr Lennox said, at the store. I don't want to be halfway up Dùn Caan in a snowstorm.'

'Yeah. I remember. He called me a southern softy. And you keep saying it, too. Well, I'm not the one who's scared of a little bit of snow. If it does even come, that is.'

'You should understand what it's like here, Stewie. You've seen how quickly it changes at yer Grandad's. Well, it's even quicker when you're higher up.'

'So what if it does? Your mum's not afraid of a bit of snow.'

'I wouldn't trust her opinion on anything. And notice she's not offering to go with you, is she?'

'I've been up Clisham? Haven't I? That's higher.'

'It was good weather then.'

I waved my arms at the sun-bathed view. 'Like now.' I kicked a rock across the beach.

'Don't sulk,' said Lorna. 'Look. The sunshine doesn't mean a thing!' She was getting red in the face. 'We can go round to the waterfall, or maybe along to Hallaigh instead. It's lovely there and you can see all along the coast. Anyway, I don't think you're a Southern softy.'

I looked out across to the looming blue of the mainland peaks and span a pebble out across the flat calm water. It skipped - kicking up little splashes of sunlight.

'Thirteen,' said Lorna. 'Well done.'

'Eh?'

'Thirteen skips. You broke my record.'

'Oh. OK.'

'Aren't you going to claim yer prize, then?'

'Eh?'

'For breaking my record.'

'I dunno.'

'Here it is.' She leaned close against me and pressed her lips against mine. Over and over. I closed my eyes and let myself be kissed. It was as though all my senses became concentrated in my lips. And then, in my trousers. The kissing stopped, but the glow on my lips lingered. And in my trousers. I opened my eyes. Lorna stepped back and smiled. She looked like she'd won something. Pleased with herself. Enjoying the power she had over me, like she was in control.

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'C'mon,' she said. 'Back to the house for supper. C'mon.' She beckoned me and I followed after her, like a dog.

I was wrapped around her finger and she was happy with that. I'd do anything for her. But I was still going up Dùn Caan, no matter what she said. I knew where the map was. I was no Southern softy.

Dùn Caan ascent

The crashing of the waterfall fell away, behind and below me. I was alone with the scrudge of my boots on the muddy path, until my own breathing became the loudest sound in my ears. Paused - puffed-out from the long trudge from Ruadh Óran and the steep climb up through the forest. Glanced back - over my shoulder across the tree-barbed roof of the pinewood. Beyond it, the steel-blue Sound stretched away towards Skye, where the rounded rocky mounds watched on, cloaked in swirls of mist, or hidden by mushroom-crowns of cloud. Dùn Caan wasn't as high as the peaks across the water. Above me and before me, the sky was clear as a bell.

My boots slipped and sludged on up the path, through a gully clumped-up with naked boulders and blocks of rock half covered with pale moss and grass. At least it was greener here than back on Harris. Strange - I was glad to see trees again - to stand among those giant leaning trunks in the talking wood. They were almost like silent, trustable people. Maybe that was why Mum loves trees so much. *Loved* trees so much. For the shelter and sanctuary they give. Somehow, they'd welcomed me, comforted me in the woods. But now I was leaving all that behind and the voices of the forest were gone. I was climbing up above the tree-line, naked and alone on open hills, scrambling among squatting rocks on the path to Dùn Caan. Alone - except for the sheep, that is. Even here, gangs of the tough, miserable old bleaters stood and stared, defying me to climb further before bundling off at the last second, their legs a frenzied blur below cream and brown skirts of mud-stained wool.

Mrs Mackenzie's Ordnance Survey was well-worn. I spread it across a mossy rock and carefully traced my finger along the picture-path. It shouldn't be too long before the track met and ran alongside a stream. Follow until it turned east. Then, fork northwards and climb up to the Loch and the summit. A dark patch appeared beneath the contours of Dùn Caan as mossy water soaked into the map. It flapped wildly in a sudden gust, then flipped from my grasp. I grabbed it just in time before it was whisked back down the path to the waterfall. I folded it safely into my pack and zipped my jacket up. As I headed on again, a thin grey line of cloud seeped towards me from the northern horizon. Trudged on. In no time at all the cloud blotted out the sun and darkness filled the sky above me. A steady drizzle began to fall. I pulled my orange cagoule over my biker and strode on, following the path up steep rises and wet, shallow gullies. After half an hour or so, a distant black crack appeared, snaking through the heather about half a mile to my

Pinhead

right - it was the stream. It was still the right route. When I reached it, I celebrated my map-reading skills with a big-smiled-swig of orange squash. Above me - mass of cloud passed. Relief - as it swirled off to the South-East. Cagoule-crackle - stripped-off.

Basked in the sun. Glad-warmth.

Fingers of breeze dried my hair.

Squeezed between two dry rocks - jammed into a chair-shape.

I tucked into the cheese sandwiches - covertly made in Mad Mackenzie's kitchen. I was starving. Even the manky old cheese tasted good up here, in the fresh air. Beside me, the oily brown water of the stream gurgled and splashed over a speckled bed of dirty, ginger-washed rocks. The colour was probably from the peat. Grandad had told me never to drink water from below "The highest level of human habitation", or below where sheep or cattle grazed - so I wouldn't get poisoned by sewage, animal shit, or a rotting, dead carcass. I wouldn't have fancied drinking this water - not that desperate, but the sound it made warmed me as it rippled, murky and lively, through a mini heather-canyon. I finished the sandwich and settled back into the rocks. Sunlight flickered on the stream and soaked into me, thawing me. I closed my eyes...

Lap - purl-la - plash shashapple-bubble... Plop - urlap - plash la -shribble-babble... Lopsh - mur-merush-ush shribbubble-abble... La-purl-lap-trick-els- splash sha-shapple-blubble... Plop-urlop - lap - lash spla-shribble-babble...

Lop - urlop dripshmur - mer-rush shush shribbubble-abble...

*

I shivered, shook myself, stood up and stretched. The sun was hidden by a thin grey veil of cloud and the wind had picked up a bit. Grandad's watch warned me. Crikey - slept - lost about half an hour. I swung my pack on and got going again. Stiff. My legs began to burn with the effort of the steep climb and sweat tickled my scalp. I was blowing hard, but feeling good - strong. Hah! All that fuss Lorna had made about me coming up here. This walk was no trouble. I was no "Southern softie". I kept up a good pace for another half hour, then checked the map against the land.

Below me, now, the stream followed its own path, disappearing behind a big round ridge to the east. The watery music of the stream faded away behind me and the air was filled with the harsh rush of a cold wind. I followed the path around the west side of the rocky divide. It was steeper here and smooth slabs of rock paved slimy gaps beneath the wet patches of grass. 'Woah!' My right boot skidded from under me and I crashed down onto my knees, into the boggy ground. That was close! Just missed smashing my knee on a sharp knuckle of rock jutting out of the heather. Focus on footholds - pick the safest route. I shuddered at the thought of struggling for miles to find the nearest house with a fucked-up knee, or ankle, or head.

Focus.

Focus.

Push on.

the summit

When I reached the top of the rise - there was Loch na Mna. It shone with sunlight glittering from a deep blue surface rippled by a gentle but constant wind. The map crackled as I tried to figure out the east path to Hallaigh, for the return journey. There was no sign of any *clear* path, but some sort of track was marked between two hills. As long as I stayed between them on the way back down, I should be on course. I'd be OK. Grandad was with me. It was Grandad who had taught me to read the contours and signs - easier than words. The summit of Dùn Caan should be visible from near the Loch, just a mile or so away. Right to the horizon the sky was clear blue and the threat of rain had gone. So much for snow. I stuffed the map back into my pack and walked fast, down into the shallow valley and alongside the loch, then slowed to pick my way through the deep puddles. Closer now, to the steep wall of rock on my left, there it was - Dùn Caan, way across the loch. A stump of a dead volcano - a crater top angled into the sky, its steepest face jutting like the mane of a Spartan's helmet towards the east. Breath came hard between glugs of orange squash. Cold lips sticky on the back of my peat-flavoured fist.

Well, Dùn Caan wasn't exactly Mount Everest or what-not - not like famous mountains on the telly - like the Eiger. It wasn't even as big as the Cuillins or Clisham. But it had a big attitude, a presence. It was like looking at a person. It felt like a person was looking back at me.

The grass trail closed tight against the cliffs that ran alongside the Loch. My boots slogged through puddles beside the deep-blue water, close beneath the steep shelf of rock and heather. Here the track became pocked into deep ruts, cut by the hooves of sheep. For decades they'd picked their way through the ragged rubble and boulders that'd toppled from above, now overgrown with brown heather and coarse grass. I edged my way along in their footsteps, slotting my boots into slippery cavities, making sure of each foothold so as not to tip head-first into the deep, inky water. Ahead, the summit never seemed to get any closer. On the map the distance was barely half a mile, but ages were passed scrabbling and clawing along the sheep-track before reaching the north end of the loch.

Map-crackle into rucksack.

Squelch the steep shelf towards Dùn Caan.

Dùn Caan, itself.

As I searched the walls of scree for the path to the top, an animal bolted from behind a rock and sped off like a shot, back down the long slope. It was like a rabbit, but really big and grey, really fast. It went like a rocket and pitched down the grass ramp and disappeared into the rocks

Pinhead

below. Mrs Mackenzie words about mountain hares came back. It must have been one. Must have been. A thrill ran through me at seeing something strange and new, a bit like the first shock of the eagles in the shed.

Breathe.

Avoid the patches of bog, hidden under the grass. Breathe cold air.

Push on.

When I next looked up, I nearly packed it in. Better off limping back down again. I was just a tiny ant at the foot of a sheer, grim-grey wall. It piled-up like a huge pyramid or ancient fortress. But, gawping up at Dùn Caan - knowing in my bones - this old mass of rock wasn't made by people. Once - lava had spewed from its cone.

Lava spews burning - fiery red all down the mountainside.

Grit teeth.

Force myself up.

Then - a path runs up the shallowest ridge.

Breathing.

Breathing - as loud as the wind that whips around me.

When I reached the top I was absolutely knackered, but buzzing madly. The wind fell silent and still as I flopped against a rock and stared around at the flat plateau of stubby grass. Faded green was peppered with knuckles and tips of grey and white rock, like fists and fingers had punched through from below.

Once, this must have been a blazing crater, scorching, full of lava.

Shuddering at the thought of the volcano coming alive beneath me, I walked to the eastern edge of the summit and looked out over the massive drop. My head swam as I clung to the cold concrete of the triangulation point. Far below me, sheer cliffs dropped to Loch a' Chada-charnaich and beyond, down to the shallow curved bay of Hallaigh, there - on my right. All around me the land fell away in reds and tans, sloping to hazy seas where shadowy mountains and islands loomed blue-grey from the depths of misty waters.

I was standing on top of the world.

On the top of a dead volcano.

It had sat there from just about the beginning of time, I reckoned, brooding over all that had happened since. I knelt down, stretching, reaching forward to the cliff edge.

I gripped the jagged crag.

Wind whipped and whacked me.

I peered down into the space.

Dizzy in the near and the far.

Far sheer cliffs reared above Hallaig, grinding rock teeth into sky.

My fingers gripped rough grey-tan close – cold, encrusted bird-shit scabs, moss-green growths.

It was all so old, so bloody old.

But the rock wasn't dead - it seemed to shudder under me, and I sat back with a gasp and pressed my back against the triangulation pillar. Stupid imagination, again... I was just scared of the drop - jumpy from the climb and the scramble. At this rate I'd be hearing eagles talking, again. South - towards the Fearnas, and Lorna, the sun gleamed on the sea. My heart pulsed with a slow, strong, bass-drum-beat.

I was cold, but full of fire - and the drum beat.

I stood up proud - Stewie MacLeod - threw my arms wide to the world.

'Hah!' I yelled 'Who's a Southern softie, now?'

I throbbed to the drum of Dùn Caan.

Its pulse pumped out through the rock, into me. A rock-heart, blood-beat, lava-drum surged into me. I throbbed with the rhythm of rock-head, rock-groin, rock-feet.

The rock shuddered again. And I staggered. It wasn't my imagination.

Tsil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

I knew that... that voice - I spun to my left. Almost level with me, a golden eagle soared around the top of Dùn Caan and glided north and west. My eyes stretched wide.

Amazing.

Ama...

The rock shuddered again and the laser-gaze of the eagle fixed on me, as I gaped back - reeled as a bright eye-bolt shot between us - fell back against the pillar.

Our sight spanned the air.

lolair-shuileach -

Eagle-eyed-boy

Air aonadh an lolair -

Boy-eyed-eagle

Sight-stream flash - Eagle - Boy - Boy Eagle

Eagleself - Boyself

For flickered seconds we soar on the air-currents past Dùn Caan.

A bird-boy - blurred.

I stood up and watched myself fly past. We were full of fire.

Then, I reeled and fell over - fell back into Stewie, again. The rock shuddered hard beneath me and the fire left me. As my eyes followed the bird sweeping west, I felt my sweat turn chill on my skin - looked higher into the sky - my hands dropped to my sides. Boiling towards

Pinhead

me across the island were towering clouds, not grey like before - but deep ink-black masses that reached as high as I could see. The advancing storm blotted out the domed heights of Meall Daimh and cast its shadow across Loch na Mellich to the North.

Tsil! Tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

I ripped out my cagoule and pulled it over my jacket, tugging the hood over my head and drawing the cord tight at my throat. As if this flimsy sheet of nylon was going to protect me. In an instant the wind picked up. The sun was blotted out. The temperature plummeted. Sheets of dark rain drove through the air before me, lashing closer.

Tsil! Tsill! Tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tSchil!

The eagle circled and turned back towards Hallaigh. That was the way back down - back home, to Lorna. My head spun as I staggered towards the ridge path over on the western side, but halfway there, the squall struck me.

I was completely unsheltered, exposed on the top of the open summit. The sudden whack of the wind rattled my teeth and bones and knocked me backwards in a wailing wall of rushing air. Rain and sleet lashed me, harder and heavier, until it became a frozen hail of bullet-ice. I dropped my pack and turned my back to the blast. The hail stung and drenched the backs of my legs 'til they burned numb. I squeezed myself behind a low rock.

The hail grew softer.

I turned and squinted into the weather as the landscape around me vanished behind a veil of biting white snow. It froze the skin on my nose and lips and drove into my open mouth. I turned away again and leaned against the rock, into the wind. It rocked my body, buffeting me back and forth as rocks and grass, just five feet away, disappeared behind an almost solid curtain of snow.

I'd heard about this sort of thing on some BBC documentary about mountaineering - it was called a "white-out". I even remembered the cosy, wintery Sunday night we watched it - just about eight years old - wedged on the sofa one cold night - between Mum and Dad - blinking at the TV. Safe and warm, allowed to stay up late. Safe and warm. I remembered what the climbers in the programme had said - "Stay put!" Yeah - in a white-out you must stay-put.

Don't lose the path.

Don't go blundering into a bog, or off the edge of a cliff.

If you can - wait it out.

Wait-out the white-out.

If I wandered around up here I could literally go straight over the edge of Dùn Caan. My legs wobbled, but I tried to think straight. The weather changed so quick up here, maybe it wouldn't last long. Leaned into the wind. Numb with its cold. Shocked at its power - shivered with its chill. It raged and swirled around the hillside like a huge roaring creature - a rushing voice of

ice, a body of blistering snow. I didn't feel too scared, just stunned, dazed by the dreamlike danger of what was happening. I clung to the message from the TV memory.

Wait it out, Stewie, boy. Wait it out.

Then, as just as suddenly as it had struck, the wind fell away. The white-squall moved on beyond me. The air around me became grey, as snow turned to sleet, then rain, and then stopped. Clouds passed over. Sun burst through, gleaming in a blue sky. For a couple of minutes I stood gasping and shivering, staring around me at the glistening landscape, as the thin white blanket melted before my eyes.

'Right! C'mon, Stew!' My breath blew a frosted steam as I jumped up in the crystal-fresh air. A coat of melting snow flew from my body. Snatched up my pack and tried to feel my way down the side of the old mountain stack as the path became visible again. Slipped and skidded on the wet rock and mud, trying to go super-fast without breaking my neck.

Did the rock shudder beneath me?

The rock shuddered beneath me!

'Don't be daft, Stew. This old volcano's not gonna blow. It's dead.'

But it didn't feel dead. I swear it shuddered again. I skied on Doctor Martin boots. Down the slope towards the loch, back the way I'd come.

And the rocks reached out to trip me.

Above me the sky was clear and blue as though the snow-storm had never existed, but looking back, there was another black wall of cloud advancing from the horizon. As I ran, my planned escape route flashed through my mind. Get past Loch na Mna and take the path to Hallaigh. It looked quicker than the way I'd come, and lower than the snow-line. It was about three miles to Hallaigh and then there was the coastal path, back to Lorna. The trouble was, although three miles wasn't far in places with pavements, like London, here, over rock and heather, one mile felt like five. I looked beyond the crest of the sleeping volcano, clouds billowed and swirled like an angry, cloudy animal. There was no time to hang about. I had to go.

My heart pounded.

My feet searched stone for the safest path.

And the rocks reached out.

I forced my legs faster.

I did not look back.

Over and over, I slipped and slid along on my knees. I tripped and careered through the long grass, across the slopes down to Loch Mna. I edged my way along the sheep track at the foot of the cliffs, and not once did I look back. Over and over I wanted to turn my head, but I focussed down and straight ahead. With every step I could feel the volcano reaching out for me - across the loch and through the rock. With every step I heard its rock-heart-drum-beat - *Dùn Caan Dùn Caan*

Pinhead

Dùn Caan. I wanted to tower on it, look down from it, join with its pulse. But I forced myself on, and I didn't look back. Only when I reached the far end of the loch did I finally give in and turn my head. The mountain stood pulsing hard and sharp - a black tooth outline edged by a swirling animal snow-cloud.

Dùn Caan stopped me.

It reached out across the loch.

(I am reaching out across the loch)

And it clamped my feet in rock.

(I am clamping my feet in rock)

I wanted to run, but it reached out with pulsing molten lava and held me in fire.

(I will run)

I saw Stewie from the summit - rooted in rock.

(I did see I see now)

I saw Stewie spewing fire - I was Dùn Caan.

(I see I spew fire)

I was boiling molten fire.

(I am boiling molten boy of fire)

I was hard living rock.

(I am hard living boy of rock I am mountain of boy)

A fiery gaze flickered between us and the storm swirled across the black water towards me.

'Let go of me!' I yelled. 'Let me go!'

(But we are holding YOU! ME! !! WE!)

Then, she bolted - A grey rock that ran - a rock of grey fur - a silver blur -

A HARE.

Black stare-eyed - leg-pumping - a flash-tail -

Run! she said.

Her speed stung me - her body said *Run!*

Her paws beat a rhythm of *Run! Run! Run!*

He flicker-switched gaze from *Orange-hair-boy* to *Silver-flash-pelt*.

He watched myself standing there.

Air aonadh a Giorasach -

He... I joined with the hare.

Run! she said.

From *Fire-Rock-boy* to Hare speed - *Run!*

The mountain gripped me with fingers of fire and rock -

It dragged me back. Back myself drag I.

Run! Run! Run! !nuR !nuR !nuR !nuRRun! nuRRun! nuRRun!

FFFFFUUCKING RRRRRUN!

I ran.

Her speed flickered into me, filled me, and I broke free of Dùn Caan. I shook the rock from my boots and pelted after her, losing sight of her, losing sight of myself, arms pumping, legs pumping - running through the rush of cold air, full of her fear of fire, speed flickering between us - full of hare.

When she'd left me behind, I fell.

I fell back into myself.

A boy again - chased by a storm.

Dùn Caan was out of sight. No longer was there a hare's speed in my legs, but I picked myself up and followed her trail towards Hallaigh.

*

Away from the path and across the sea of heather. Towards the eastern horizon. My head spinning. Stumble. Reached after eagle. Reach out for hare. There was nothing much to guide me but them. Stared around and tried to place the landscape around me, like Grandad had shown me, but recognised nothing.

Toh-tschil!

Was that an eagle? Through the wail of the wind? Through the grey storm-gloom, I couldn't swear - but through the gloaming - the shape of an eagle, above, to the east. Below it, stood what looked like the two hills that marked the so-called route across to Hallaigh. In the sky- dusk the eagle was gone. Imagined?

I glugged back some orange squash and stumbled towards the hills through the heather. It clutched at my boots, slowing me down. The storm-blast drove down from the loch and knocked me off balance - wind-words singing in my ears.

Aiteamh na gaoithe tuath, sneachd is reothadh anns a vair...

After the thaw with Northern blast, snow and frost follow fast.

Get lower down the mountain-cir-beinn.

Bolt before the storm. Don't get caught-glacte-glacar-glac.

Don't lose the race with the white-out-gailleann-schneachda.

Get lower - to where snow falls as rain-uisge-fras.

Blindness in this landscape of sucking bogs and sudden drops. Seek the cliffs at Hallaigh and the coast path while light lasts. Get down before dark.

Pinhead

My head swirled with eagles and lava and hare-speed.

'C'mon! Get it together, Stew!'

I worked my way through a shallow dip between the two hills - stepped out faster, stumbling as hope shifted under my boots, twisting my ankles - soaked through. And my DM's were giving me bloody blisters. Back towards the loch through dingy air, Dùn Caan was just a shadow looming behind me. The wind rushed harder and the sun vanished behind the boiling black mountain of cloud.

Get lower down the mountain-cir-beinn...

I trudged on.

On the other side of the hills, Dùn Caan was hidden below the horizon. But it was still reaching out with rocky-fingers. Before me, a wide plain of heather and high grass ran to a tall ridge of rock at the far Eastern edge of the island.

Bolt before the storm. Don't get caught-glacte-glacar-glac.

'Bloody leg it!'

Get across, find the old droving track - find the steep slopes to the coast-path home. The low cloud roof was swirling above me now - chasing me, and a haze of pale snow swept towards me.

Don't lose the race with the white-out-gailleann-schneachda...

'Pile it on, Stew!'

Down the long slope - breathing hard, stumbling through knee high clumps of heather, tripping over unseen rocks. Roots reached out at my boots, tripping me - *Slip! Splash!* Through sudden hidden pools of peat marsh. The squall was sweeping down.

Get lower - to where snow falls as rain-uisge-fras...

Slip. Struggle on.

'C'mon, Stew!'

Then it struck me in the back. A walloping wall of wind and snow enveloped me, and my sodden cagoule billowed out like a sail. I scrambled onwards, downwards, unable to see, gasping for breath. Everything around me vanished in an all-surrounding blizzard of driving white snow - *gailleann-schneachda*. Within minutes - confusion - couldn't tell which way was what - wasn't even sure about up and down. I fell to my knees and peered forward through the white snow-swarm. Face and fingers freezing. Something... something... in front of me... moving.

Just a few yards before me a small grey rock-shape stirred. I crawled towards it and it shifted away. In the snow - down between my hands, were small tracks - tracks like... like... paw prints. Hare-prints. I struggled up and swayed, tried to catch up, while the rock - the hare-shape, moved just beyond me, into the snow-haze - on the edge of sight. Follow... follow...

The ground grew softer, boggy - and I plunged into thigh-deep pools of freezing water -

gripped long clumps of grass to drag myself out. Snow froze on my cagoule and became hard, like cardboard. The white-swarm swirled around me - into my eyes and mouth, but I stumbled on... on... following the rock-hare down a steeper slope.

Ready to drop.

Legs buckle.

The snow-swarm buzzed slow - to a grey fog of sleet... then heavy rain... then drizzle.

Wind slackened. The hare was gone.

I stopped and bent double with my hands on my knees until I got my breath. Back the way I'd come, the tops of the hills and ridges were hidden in a thick white fog of snow. The icy air stung my face and stabbed my lungs as I gasped, but I clenched my teeth into a smile.

Gailleann-schneachda-schneachda-schneachda-schneachda...

I'd escaped the blizzard.

I straightened up.

Flung my arms out wide to the world.

'Ffff... geeuuargh...shhhh!'

And I fell to my knees.

'Bloody hell!'

Down across the heather-plain the steel-blue of the sea shone beyond a high ridge of rock. I finished a bottle of orange squash and stuffed an apple into my mouth. Snow dripped off my hood and onto my nose. My breath steamed in the air and I shuddered violently with cold. It was time to get going again, before I completely froze my bollocks off.

*

On the plain the ground was so waterlogged and uneven that half the time it was all I could do to stand up or walk straight. Every muscle in my body was taugt and burning - over and over - slumping to a halt - thighs on fire from lifting legs over the thick clumps of grass-growth. I sucked huge gobs of cold air into my lungs and laughed out the warm steaming breath.

I was scared.

Buzzing-mad.

Alive.

After nearly two hours I broke free of the foot-sucking bog and stumbled across a wide meadow of short grass that lay alongside the ridge. Up... up... up a narrow raised path at the foot of a wall of rock... up - slumped again. The wind had dropped and faint sunlight warmed me as I sprawled out on the ground. Small groups of sheep glowered down at me from ledges on the rock walls.

Pinhead

Baah! They said.

'Yeah! Fuck you, too!'

My human voice sounded out of place as it bounced off the rocks. I stuffed my last cheese sandwich into my mouth.

Hallaigh descent

My jeans were soaking and cold as I knelt on the grass, but my relief at escaping the storm warmed me as I spread the soggy map. The descent to the coast seemed clear to me now. The hardest part of the journey was over, surely. Surprising how quick your muscles seize up when you stop moving, though. It took ages, limping along the raised path, before my legs got going again. There'd be no more stops 'til home. Dreaming of hot soup, I hurried alongside the craggy cliffs that frowned down on me.

'C'mon, Stewie-boy! Just get up this last bit!' I said, in my best Grandad voice.

But this rise wasn't the last bit. My map-reading was wrong. There was no steep, manageable slope down to Hallaigh... Sure enough, grey-green shelves of Gabbro rock and grass pitched away towards the sea, but the coast was way off in the distance, and there was no sign of a deserted village or woods.

'Ah, well. C'mon, boy! No dawdling!'

The cliffs on my right rose into a sheer wall that dominated the way down. Along its base, a stream flowed swiftly down into a deep gully, swollen by the rain, shining and glinting - hidden here and there by huge slabs that looked like they'd been hurled from the mountaintop by giant hands. Further down, the river disappeared behind the edge of the closest grassed horizon, which suggested another massive drop. I looked beyond it. There was no visible path that tied-in with the map.

'Yuck!' I glugged a stale-swig from my last bottle.

Angry looking sheep bleated back at me from the surrounding hills.

'Which one of you pissed in my orange-squash?'

I began criss-crossing diagonally beside the river - my legs trembling with fatigue and fear of falling. Time and time again - the ground fell away - too steep. Turn back, try again, turn back. Over. Over, my knees buckled and I fell flat, clinging to the grass, dizzy from looking down - wobbly, sick with hunger -

Tired.

Cold.

Confused.

Each time I reached the edge of the next ridge on the horizon, there was another sheer drop, scattered with huge smashed boulders and more dots of miserable sheep. The sun was

Pinhead

sinking, steadily getting lower and lower. Soon it would be too tricky to get down in the dark.

Heavy waves of exhaustion and panic broke over me.

'Tsil! Tsill! Tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tSchil!' My whistles to the sky were lost in the whine of the wind.

No eagle answered.

None in sight.

No mountain-hares would lead me to safety down the bluffs.

Over and over, I saw myself plunging to a bone-crunching death. The voices of sheep echoed around. Weird muffled moans - cries of lost children - the angry braying of bewitched babies. Deformed cliff-faces turned in the twilight - giant twisted grimaces and crag-busted noses, gnarled chins and cheeks, dead black skull-sockets of eyes. The wind blew harder and blundered me down the exposed East side of the island.

And the cold sweat froze on my skin.

Even if I survived a fall, exposure would get me.

'Aw. No more!'

I fell to my hands and knees. Too much - wind, air, pain. In the grass - a small beetle crawled from the tufty pale blades and onto my hand. In the light of the setting sun, its black back flickered with tints of iridescent blues and greens. It shone like a gem on the back of my hand, then tumbled off and trumbled away.

KaarghK!

A barking cough rang out below. I squinted into the wind.

KaarghK!

The bark-cough hit me again and saw it - a stag. About fifty yards away. Tall and defiant. Challenging. Proud. Aggressive. Fuck! Even the deer were bigger up here. Not like those in the park, with Mum, at home. Nothing like this one. Like a monster in the twilight - as big as a fucking moose.

KaarghK!

I struggled up, heart thumping. Did deer attack people? Great choices for my end - my final chapter - fall and break me neck, freeze in the wind, or get gored by a psychotic stag.

KaarghK! KaarghK!

The stag shot me a sharp glance and bounded off below the level of the slope.

Is àrd ceann an fhèidh sa chreachann... High is the stag's head on the mountain crags.

Get up! Up!

Follow it... follow it!

Lumber after it.

It looked dangerous, but if it knew the best way down, it was worth chancing it.

Desperate - plunge -

After it -

Trip -

Roll - roll - the last few yards to the edge of the bluff.

Cling on to grass. Safe grass.

The fall knocked the stuffing out of me. The land below looked clearer. I got my wind back. The stag was far away, bombing down the hill alongside the river. Every now and then, it stopped, turned and looked at me, then moved off again. It bounded along a line of low brush, then vanished into a big dark triangle of trees, a triangle that could only be the...

The forest of Hallaigh.

I checked the soggy map.

'Thank God!'

Thank God!

I wasn't home yet, but I wasn't lost.

A thin trail of many-hoof-trodden mud wound down through the vast expanse of grassland and veered back towards the cliffs. Scrambling down, I got caked in sodden mud, but the land levelled out and became drier. I found the river - ducked beneath dingy canopies of twisted burrs and branches. Breaking through the scrub, the woods of Hallaigh lay clear before me. Behind it on my left, long black cliffs faced out across the white-horsed, churning sea. Topping it all was the distant crown of the place I'd fled from, hours before - the steep, black muzzle of Dùn Caan, its ragged helm thrust out above everything.

Dùn Caan Dùn Caan Dùn Caan - its heart-root pulsed down throughout the island - into the high-bay cliffs and the long grass ramparts, and out into the steel-blue sea. But its pulse couldn't hold me.

Not here.

Not now.

I flopped down in the wet grass and stared at it all, choked - as the light faded and the weight of fear dropped away from me. I'd nearly done it. I was nearly safe. I'd find the coast path, now, even in the dark. I'd follow it back to Mrs Mackenzie's, and Lorna.

Bowls of hot soup.

A log fire.

A safe warm bed.

I left the river and turned south - staggering, twisting through moss-bound trees along ancient paths. Twigs cracked behind me. Slow, vague forms shifted at the edge of my sight.

Deer?

Trees?

Pinhead

Ghosts?

Ruarrk!

Another voice - this time above me.

Ruarrk! Kruarrk!

Tha fios fithich agad... You have a raven's knowledge.

A pair of big black birds dived and tumbled close to the cliff-walls - playing with the wind, twisting, spinning out towards the sea. Darkness deepened. I lumber-stumbled on - faster - clouting sudden solid timber-limbs that dusted my cheeks with musty bark. Branches reached, recoiled - clutching, whipping, dragging at my face and hands. I raised my arms as a shield, blundered out of a dense thicket.

'Woah!'

Stumble to knees -

Twist-scrabble-heels...

Cliff-crust Soil

falls

slow -

Smashes to the boulder-beach below -

Where the sucking-sea quarries the shore.

I locked my grip on a trunk. Embraced the slim waist of a tree... inched back from the mossy, edge-crumbling rim of a plummet-drop to slam-churning water. I gagged – sick with fear - one more step and I'd have gone straight over the edge. I backed away, crawled on hands and knees, through drenched undergrowth, until I could reel forward again. Keel through tree-barricaded wood... to glade. Flop to moss-grass. Kneel before toothless-roofless blackhouse-shell. Tree-wraith-shades call shadow-folk beckon - breathe wind-sighed words.

Ludh an spioraid... Ludh a t-sneachda – tighinn gun sireadh, gun iarraidh...

The way of the ghost... The way of the snow, coming unsought, unasked.

Coit do'n buin sibh?

Twig-fingers stretch-reach.

Coit do'n buin sibh?

Leaf-mould my mouth

Bark-dust my cheeks

I slump to a dark moss slumber.

slowly
 stewie
 time's fingers
 reach out for rest forests reaching out to you
 drifting through the whispered air in
 flailing
 falling breath
 our singing twilight voices calling
 rest-taste
 our sleep-melt-moss our nation branches our down-falling
 folk our tribe of wizened-oak leaf beds of pine-soft-pins
 broad birch blankets juniper-cloaked settle in aspen
 in ruined rowaned-dreams clasp ferned-fingers lick our
 lichened-lips suckle heathered peat-kissed
 spirit-tips of rock-edge of ghosts of trees
 Now day now night - fire-sky
 withers inspires lingers
 now slumber-wood falls
 now land-murmur-moss
 calls - casts you adrift in
 an ocean of unquiet sleep

Is àrd ceann an fhèidh sa chreachann...

‘Stewie!’

A girl’s voice echoed mournfully around the heights above Hallaigh. The tiny sound drifted far across the bay and out to sea.

‘Stewie! Stewie!’ she called - some sad wandering siren. Some wretched barefoot ghost searching for another boy, in another tragic game of hide-and-seek that had ended years before.

‘Stewie MacLeod! Where are yer?’

For centuries MacLeods had lived here, died here. I was just the latest one. I’d be joining them - the ghosts of Hallaigh. The sodden ground was bitter cold. Shadows twitched beyond the walls of the black-house shell.

‘Stewie! Stewie MacLeod!’

Strange pale lights flickered in the half-light - fleeting phantoms of bygone days. The girl ghost grew closer. She sounded angry.

‘Bloody hell, Stewie! When I find yer, yer gonna wish yer were bloody well dead!’

I sat up. I wasn’t dead. I wasn’t dreaming. A powerful torch-beam was flashing through the trees - dazzling, as it fixed on me.

‘Ah! Hah! There yer are! I’m gonna... I’m gonna bash yer bloody head in!’ Lorna almost screamed at me.

If I hadn’t been so knackered, I’d have got up and scarpered. I sat there propped up on one arm. ‘Lorna!’ I called.

She broke free of the trees and ran towards me, past the old ruin. She stopped a few feet away and began to hop from one foot to another.

‘Yer bloody... yer... yer... bloody... bloody stupid bastard!’

‘Sorry, Lorna.’

She reached forward, smacked me hard round the side of the head, and continued hopping about.

‘Yer bloody idiot!’

‘Oi! Owch!’ I rubbed my ear.

‘Don’t yer dare laugh at me!’ She whacked me round the head, again, even harder.

‘Ow! Leave off, Lorna!’

A torch beam shone into my eyes.

‘I suppose you think you’re bloody clever, Stewart MacLeod! How dare yer laugh?’

Pinhead

'Cos I'm so pleased to see you, Lorna!' I tried to stand up.

She stopped jumping around and started to sob. 'Yer selfish bastard. Selfish! How stupid are yer? Going off on yer own like that?'

'I... I left a note.'

'Yeah. Great. Thanks. I read it. Thank you, so bloody much!'

I slumped against the wall of the ruined house, as she ran the torch beam over me.

'Look at the bloody state of yer. Have yer been swimming in mud?'

'I'm sorry, Lorna. Look... you were right. It was too... bloody wild... up there. But, it was... Oh... oh, hang on.' I leaned back - dizzy, dizzy, hazy.

She shone the light in my face. Maybe I looked as rough as I felt.

'Are yer all right?' She stopped sobbing.

'Yeah. Just... just a bit rough. Could you stop blinding me with that torch?'

There was a pause before the light shone downwards.

'Look. Just cos yer a bit woozy doesn't mean I'm gonna let yer get away with this.' She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

'No. of course not.' I tried to get to my feet, but failed.

'Oh. Yer drive me nuts.' Lorna helped me to stand, and we shuffled off towards the distant light of her mum's house.

Her voice softened. 'Why did yer go off on yer own?' 'I wanted to prove it... that I could do it... do the walk.'

'What? To me?'

'Well, yeah. And me. I'm sick of everyone calling me a bloody southern softy.' I staggered and leaned against her.

She felt warm, soft. But she held me with a strong grip. 'Yer great twit,' she said.

'You were right,' I said. 'I'm a right old softy.'

'Hah! Well... Aw. Yer not that exactly. Yer just not used to it.'

'It bloody snowed,' I said. 'In May. What's wrong with this place?'

'Hah! Aye. Yer should have listened to Mr Lennox. Was it really awful up there?'

'Well, yeah. And no. I climbed it... Dùn Caan. And Hallaigh is so... so.... I was so alone up there. But I read the map, and I er... followed an eagle and a hare, and er... a deer... and I got back, and...'

Lorna held me as I slumped. 'Look. Tell me tomorrow. We'll get yer some warm soup. Then, bedtime.'

I hung onto Lorna and we made our way through the trees, along a clear grass track that ran high up around the edge of the bay. I looked back towards the site of the old village. As the light failed, I could just pick out a few black stumps of roofless walls and grass mounds, dotted

across the grass-span and amongst the trees. Below, a grey beach ran down to the sea. Dùn Caan stared down upon us all.

‘How could people have ever lived here? How could they cling to this?’

Blasted for centuries by wind and snow and sea? They must have been as tough as old boots - as tough as the land itself - made of rock - born of it, not on it.

‘I don’t know, Stewie. C’mon, now.’

‘I s’pose it’s beautiful, isn’t it? Isn’t it?’

‘I guess so. Shhh, now.’

‘It’s not the right word, though. Is it? It’s not beauty... beauty... like a picture on a wall. This is different... more... alive. It’s not just there to be looked at, is it? It... it reaches out. It... touches you back. Hurts you. I... I can’t say... I can’t say *what* it is...’

She looked at me. ‘Ark at you. Quite the poet.’ She pulled me away from it all. ‘C’mon, now.’

Krark!

Krark!

Krark Ruarrk!

Ravens echoed all about us. The great black birds dived through the dark - flipping and swooping on the shifting winds. I took one last look at Dùn Caan and rounded the point, forcing my legs up and down in a floundering rhythm along the shadowed, grass path.

Back to safety.

Back with Lorna.

*

The last couple of miles to Ruadh Óran took forever. I trudged along the path in the twilight, staring towards the sea or glancing up at the dark hills that were looming above me. Every now and then I stopped - scanning, sure that someone was watching from the slopes.

Watching.

Watching.

Then, I saw them.

Human figures silhouetted on the crest of a rise.

No, not human.

Some other animals...

Deer...

As they ran off I could see the outlines - four legs, not two. Just one deer remained. As big as a fucking moose. A stag - the same one I’d seen earlier, I reckoned.

Pinhead

Is àrd ceann an fhèidh sa chreachann...

Lorna gripped me and we stood still - stared at its black outline against the pale violet afterglow. We stood and watched until I shivered with cold, then moved on, and the stag moved off behind the level of the hill. The sun set slow along the coast. Darkness stole into the air around me. We rounded the last bend... lights were shining from Ruadh Óran.

*

Lorna's mum was waiting by the door. She didn't speak, but shoved a big crystal tumbler of drink in my hand. I knocked it back. Ugh! Whiskey. Fire burned deep into my hollow belly.

'Thanks,' I croaked, trying not to choke.

'Nice stroll in the mountains, Stewart?' She helped Lorna manoeuvre me into a chair beside the kitchen fire and handed me another full tumbler.

'No thanks,' I said.

'Drink it. It's your punishment.'

'No. That comes tomorrow,' said Lorna, draping a blanket over my shoulders.

I drained the glass and choked. They watched me. Lorna handed me one bowl, then another of steaming soup. They watched me spoon it down. When it was gone they shoved me up the stairs and into the bathroom, where the tub was full and steaming.

'I'll be ok now,' I said, and shut the door.

'Call out if yer get stuck.' Mrs Mackenzie rapped on it, and I could hear them laughing as they clomped back downstairs. I stripped off my sodden icy clothes and lowered myself into the water. I sobbed with relief and lay back, my head spinning in a heat and whiskey rush. When I'd thawed, I struggled out and pulled some pyjamas on. Lorna helped me stagger into my bedroom and roll under a pile of blankets. She pressed close beside me and kissed me. She blew out the candle, and I fell into a bottomless, warm peat-swamp of sleep.

entangled

I opened one eye. The room was full of sunlight. Outside, a couple of seagulls screamed past the window. I tried to roll over but couldn't move. Lorna was lying next to me under the covers. Her head rested against my shoulder - her arm stretched across my chest - holding me still, protecting me. Her hair tickled my nose - apple-blossom shampoo. Her breath clicked softly in her throat.

I was in bed with a girl!

She pressed close against me.

A girl!

The gulls screamed again. I blinked in the bright light. After waiting forever for this to happen, it didn't feel like I'd expected it to. It felt safe, warm, cosy - part of something. More than just me. Lorna made a contented little sigh. She stirred and draped her thigh across my leg. My drowsiness began to slip away. The warmth of her thigh radiated through my pyjamas. My groin stirred. I peeped under the covers. Lorna was still wearing pyjamas, too.

'Mmm.' She squeezed herself against me, and a map, a geography of her body flickered in my mind - where its hills and slopes and dips touched mine.

She slowly opened her eyes. 'Good morning, Mr MacLeod.' Her face was pink and puffy. She looked younger than the Lorna I knew.

'Hello,' I said.

'Mmm. This is nice.' She blinked. 'Did I forget to draw the curtains?'

'Er... Won't your mum come in and catch us?' I could feel a hard-on swelling.

'Catch us... doing what?'

'Together... you know.'

'Don't worry. She's not like Dad. It's all free-love and shagging with her. In theory only, of course, though. God knows how they ended up together. She'd tell me to have sex with yer, right now.' She giggled. 'Hah! Should see yer face. Scared, are yer?'

'I... I...'

'Don't worry, Stewie. Yer luck's not in... yet. Hah!' She roughly dragged a pillow from under my head and propped herself against the headboard.

'Anyway, I'm not talking to you. Not after yer ran off, yesterday.' She prodded me in the ribs and as I jerked away from her, I groaned. Stabs of stiffness jabbed all over my body. My hard-on faded.

'Hah! Serves yer right.'

'Crikey. I feel like I've been beaten up.'

Pinhead

‘Good. I hope yer’ve learnt yer lesson.’

I tried to sit up next to her. ‘Reckon I have.’

My stomach grumbled, loudly. Lorna prodded it. More gently this time.

‘Uh-oh! Sounds like it needs feeding. Eggs? Bacon? Fried bread?’

‘Yes, please.’

She laughed at me.

‘What?’

‘You’re always so polite when it comes to being fed.’ She skipped out of bed and stopped at the door. ‘Oh no! I’ve slept all night with a boy!’ She wiggled her bottom at me, grinned and shut the door after her.

I lay back against the pillows and sighed. Wow! I’d been in bed with a girl - all night. But I hadn’t even known it.

*

The smell of food cooking drifted into the room. The stairs seemed steeper on the way down to the kitchen. My knees and ankles didn’t seem to want to bend. Was it me or the wooden stairs creaking?

Lorna was busy at the range, wrapped up in a shabby tartan dressing gown and humming to herself. ‘I’ve had mine already.’ She smiled as I sat down with a groan. ‘That’ll teach yer,’ she said, and slid a plate of eggs and bacon onto the table in front of me.

‘Ah. Thanks.’

She stood watching me sipping from my cup of tea as I wolfed down the fried bread. ‘Yer a lazy devil, aren’t yer?’ she grinned. ‘Yer’d let me wait on yer hand and foot, wouldn’t yer?’ She put the tea in front of me.

I tried to reply, but my mouth was full of food, and I was enjoying it too much.

‘Yer can do the washing up while I put some clothes on.’ Lorna shoved me gently in the back of the head and ran up the stairs laughing.

When I’d finished my breakfast, I stood staring out of the window as the sink filled with Fairy Liquid bubbles. My head was still woozy from the whiskey, but the breakfast energy began to kick-in. Snow lay on the sunlit mountain peaks across the straits. I shivered, remembering the white-out on the slopes of Dùn Caan and the whole mad escape down the mountain. The snow, the Hallaigh sunset - it all seemed like a story I’d made up, but my aching body told me it wasn’t. I’d actually seen the eagle, the hare, the stag - it was almost like they’d led me down. I stacked the plates and pans on the wooden draining board, and creaked my way back upstairs. No sign of Mrs Mackenzie. Maybe she’d gone out, already. I washed quickly and pulled on my dry jeans. Back

downstairs, Lorna was waiting with a rucksack packed. 'Fancy a walk?' she said.

'You must be joking?'

'No. I want some fresh air.'

'Can I leave it, Lorna? I'm really tired. Can I stay here?'

'C'mon, Stewie. Just down to the shore won't kill yer. The fresh air will help.' She fidgeted with the straps of the rucksack and bit her lip. 'Please..... Mum's not feeling so good today. I think she could do with a bit of time on her own.' She bit her fingernails and her eyes flashed at me. There was an empty bottle of whiskey lying on the draining board. Her mum must have polished it off last night.

'OK. I reckon I can manage it. You might have to carry me back, though.'

'It's a deal. Mum'll be all right after a lie-in.' Lorna smiled, but her eyes wavered.

My boots and jacket were still drying-out, so I sat on the floor of the storeroom and squeezed into some wellies that pinched my toes and a tweed jacket that came halfway up my forearms. 'Great! I look like a right nob!'

'Don't yer always? Hah! You're a bit bigger than Dad,' she laughed at my horror. 'Don't worry. No-one's gonna see yer out here.'

Lorna picked up the rucksack, and I followed her out into the bright sunlight. How long would we have to stay out while her mum sobered up? My soft warm bed called me, but I kept my mouth shut. We reached the shoreline and dawdled along, kicking pebbles and lumps of driftwood into the water. My head was too muzzy for talking, and thankfully Lorna seemed happy to gaze at the blue humps of mountains across the water. The wellies made my toes sore. I slumped gratefully onto a rock. My stomach rumbled loudly.

'Yer can't still be hungry?'

'Er, yeah.'

Lorna tutted, but she unpacked the sandwiches and passed me one.

'Your guts are like a bottomless pit,' she said.

'I'm still growing.'

Lorna stared out across the straights. 'Mum's got a hangover,' she said.

I nodded.

'She's better than she was. With the drink, I mean.' She flashed glances between me and the mountains. 'Living here alone makes her more stable, if she takes her medication. The Lennoxs are good. They run her groceries up here. And they turn a blind eye to the drinking, and the music. They're very kind. And they like her art. God knows what they make of her, though.' She stared at the mountains for a very long time. 'I'm not sure what I think of her, myself.' She handed me another sandwich and nibbled at the corner of another one. 'The Lennoxs won't give her drink, but they don't judge her like the others would. It's a dry island, yer see. The community

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would frown on it. And the music, well, there's no-one to hear it up here. Raasay was famed for its pipers, yer know, before the Free Church moved in.'

'I couldn't handle that,' I said.

'What?'

'No music.'

'Nor me.'

I squinted at the whacking great masses of rock across the sound. 'I think she's all right, your Mum.'

'Do yer?'

The low, tan limpet-slopes spread dirty and wide beyond the deep blue sound. 'Yeah. I can see she's inspired by all this. Her art's great. She must be... hard work... for you, though.'

'How d'yer mean?'

'Well, it's easy to like other people's mad families, isn't it? It's different when you have to live with 'em.'

'Aye,' she said.

'What did she mean about you getting set for September?'

'Oh. I've been meaning to tell yer.' Lorna poured some coffee from the flask. It trickled slowly into the cup.

'Tell me what?'

'I... I've been accepted at university.'

'Oh.'

'I don't know if I'll go.' She blew into her steaming coffee.

'You never told me you might be going.'

'It was Mum. She applied for me.'

'Oh. So you're going away then?'

'Maybe. I might not even go.' Lorna blew and sipped.

'You never said anything.'

'Well... it's not like yer gonna stay with yer Grandad, is it?'

'How d'you mean?'

'I mean why shouldn't I go?'

'To stay and be with me.'

'Yer don't even know if yer'll be on Harris, Stewie.'

'Why didn't you tell me? How will we see each other, if you're off at some college somewhere?' I got up and brandished my half-eaten sandwich at her.

'I don't know. But you might go back to London.'

'No, I won't.'

'Yer don't know that.'

'Don't you care about not seeing me?' I said.

Lorna looked up at me. 'Of course I do.'

'Don't sound like it, to me. You wouldn't be bugging off to college if you did!' I flung the sandwich into the sand.

'It's university, not college.'

'What the fuck does it matter?'

'They're different.'

I glared at her.

She took hold of my arm. 'Look, don't go into a sulk, Stewie. I do care about yer. But I need to get away... from the island. And Dad. And Mum.'

'You'll be getting-off with some fucking college pudden!' I tried to pull away from her, but she held on.

'Don't be stupid! Don't yer dare say that!'

I pulled away from her and sat on the rock. I held my head in my hands.

'Don't be such a sulky little boy!' She tipped her coffee onto the sand.

'Get stuffed!' I said.

'That's nice.' Lorna booted a rock into the sea, then she sat down beside me. 'Yer might even end up at art college yerself.'

'Fat chance of that.'

'Mum thinks you're good enough.'

'You're just saying that.'

'Don't be stupid, Stewie. I wouldn't lie to yer.'

Away to the west, a dark roof of cloud lay above the wave-like ridges and wedges of the Skye rock-wall. 'Well. You didn't say anything about leaving me, did you?'

'What d'yer mean - leaving yer? We're not bloody married, are we?'

'You know what I mean. You should have told me.'

'I wasn't sure what was happening with us. I might not even go, anyway. I mean. What's the point? Girls are just meant for cooking and having bloody babies!' Lorna plonked down on the rock beside me. We sat in silence. After what seemed like ages, she took my hand and started to press my fingers. I could hardly feel anything. A call rang out from the top of the slope behind us.

Lorna shifted round. 'Who's that?'

A figure was waving at us from the direction of the house.

'Oh! It's Mr Lennox. I wonder what he wants. C'mon.' She picked up the rucksack. 'Why's he up here?'

I dragged myself after her, up the slope.

Pinhead

'I hope nothing's wrong.' She turned to me, her eyes wide. 'Maybe it's Mum!' she said, and ran off up the grass.

When I caught up with her, she was talking with Mr Lennox. Lorna stepped towards me and took my hand, again.

'It's yer Grandad, Stewie. He's been taken poorly.'

I just stared at her. I felt dizzy.

Mr Lennox was talking. I couldn't hear him at first, but gradually his words broke through. 'We had a phone call at the store. Yer Grandad had a bit of a bad turn, but he's fairly stable. Dr Mackenzie'll be there to pick yer up from the ferry, on the Sconser side.' He turned to Lorna. 'Best get yerselves packed up, eh? I'll drive yer to the terminal. We'll have to hurry, though. I'll wait in the van.'

'Thanks, Mr Lennox. C'mon, Stewie.' Lorna pulled me by the arm and towards the house. I stumbled through the door and sat in the kitchen while she thundered up the stairs. 'I'll pack our stuff,' she said.

A ghostlike Mrs Mackenzie wobbled in from somewhere. She handed me a cup of tea and put her hand to her forehead. Red lipstick was smudged across her mouth. Her long hair was all over her face. 'It was enchanting to meet you, Stewie,' she said. She leaned against the kitchen table and did her best to pin it up, but it kept falling back down.

I could hear Lorna rumbling around upstairs, and it wasn't long before she crashed back down clutching our rucksacks, my leather jacket and boots. 'They're still wet,' she said.

Mrs Mackenzie gave my arm a squeeze as Lorna lugged all the stuff out to the transit van. 'I'm sure he'll be all right,' she said.

How the fuck did she know?

Lorna kissed her Mum goodbye.

Bright air... green garden... wooden deer.

I crawled in the back of the van.

The door - wham-bam!

Lorna jumped in the front and slammed the door. Gravel flew from the tyres as we sped off to the ferry terminal, through the long tan hills and the whispering forest. Before long, I was pressed beside Lorna inside the ferry cabin, staring blank-eyed out of the salt-smeared windows. The engines churned, carrying me to Sconser, Skye and the Western road - to Harris and Grandad - wearing Dr Mackenzie's old tweed jacket and wellies.

she-soul
germ-calling she
speckled egg-girl
reaches out ripe as fruit ripe as soil for seeds
fluttering within hidden whisper-words wise-she
wanting
healing death
our stillness wise-she singing twilight
calling rest taste
speckled breasts-flow-motion-flight fight endless sleep

melt-loss her nation of she calling deaths down-falling spiral-drops

sycamore more-sycamore-seeds to her-our flow all is her our moon-flow

the folk the tribe of trees mulched in pent-spent lives of wizened

feather-weavers wives wrapped warm in earth-blankets woven in

sun-sap-soil fertile with fern-fingered sketch-scrawl dreams

drawn-sheer drawn-blind clasp-close lick her our lovely

lichened-lips suckle-speckle peat-kiss the groves of
earth cliff-crack the rock the edge of ghosts
of trees of night of fire of sky of all

when water withers

chick eggs crack

fledglings fly-free from

prison nests - adrift in

an ocean of unquiet sky

dreek-road

The journey back was a blur of dark slopes and seascapes that lay veiled through pipe-smoke and warped beyond the shower-streaming windows of the Land Rover. A sort of black stupor fell over me, regularly broken by Dr Mackenzie's mad cornering, which flung me around and battered my head against the door. At first, Lorna scolded him from the back-seat, for nearly mowing down several bewildered sheep. She'd made a few comforting noises, and I'd been vaguely aware of her squeezing my shoulder every now and then, at least until her dad coughed his disapproval. But by the time we'd reached the long straight stretch of road towards Uig, thick clouds had blotted out the sun and she'd given up trying to comfort me.

We joined the queue on the quay and sat in silence, watching drizzle gather and trickle down the glass. Eventually, we pulled into the belly of the ferry and Dr Mackenzie went off to get some sandwiches. Lorna led me up a gangway to a viewing deck, as the engines powered us out towards the open expanse of the Minch. Beyond the shelter of land the drizzle turned to rain and the sea-swell rocked us gently. Lift and settle, lift and settle.

'C'mon, Stewie. Let's go inside now.'

The air was solid soaking grey. The steel-sea lined the drab horizon. Cold salty droplets bathed my face and entered my mouth. 'He's gonna die, isn't he?'

'No, Stewie. No.'

She squeezed my hand and rubbed my cheek, but I couldn't connect, couldn't feel it. What did *she* know?

'He's just had a bit of a fall.'

'Nah. He's gonna die. Doctors always let you down gently.'

She led me from the deck into a wide lounge that smelt of stale vinegar, fish n' chips, and bitter tea. She pulled me down beside her on a seat. Dr Mackenzie appeared and handed me a can of coke and a sandwich - sweaty yellow cheese, and pickle - I think. Ring-pull - fizz. Nobody said anything. I sipped and stared at the blurred horizon, let my eyes drift in and out of focus - for ever. By the time we reached Harris the swell had picked up and my stomach was feeling queasy. Pulling into Tarbert, I stood wobbling in the bog, staring down into the toilet bowl. My spit dropped into the gently rocking toilet water.

Puke.

Puke.

Puke out all the filthy heavy iron fear from my chest and guts.

Pinhead

If only I could.

I flushed, filled a sink, splashed my face with water, slammed my fist into the mirror.

Lorna was waiting outside. She led me down to the car-deck as the ferry drew nearer the dock.

frozen

The drive up to Stornoway from Tarbert dragged on and on. The road wound up and over dark rock through steep blank passes where walls of rock frowned down from dizzying great heights. We were insects on the surface of the moon. All was leaden grey and lashing rain, with an occasional distant croft huddled far below us, beside a massive, black, bottomless loch. The road twisted north and fell back towards shallower ground where more crofts and homes whizzed past behind the streaming glass. Eventually, after an eternity, we pulled up outside the grim walls of the hospital in Stornoway. It looked like a prison. I couldn't move.

'C'mon, Stewart.' Dr Mackenzie held the door open.

'We'll come in a minute, Dad.'

He ran through the rain and ducked in through the gate-like entrance. I could see him talking to the receptionist through the water streaming down the window. The rain drummed hard against the roof of the Land Rover.

Lorna rubbed my hand. 'You're frozen like a lump of rock,' she said. 'C'mon. Let's go in and see him, eh?'

'I fucking hate hospitals.'

'I know. Me too. Try to think of yer Grandad, eh? He needs yer, Stewie.'

'I... I can't go in.'

'Aye, yer can. Yer scared, that's all.'

'I'm not. I'm not scared.'

A squall rocked the Landrover.

'Yes, yer are. We all are. C'mon. He needs yer. Think how pleased he'll be to see yer.'

'D'yer think he's conscious, then?'

'Dunno. Maybe he's asleep. He'll still know yer're there. And he'll be so happy to see yer when he wakes up.'

'What if he don't wake up?'

'Course he will.'

'Will he? Will he, though? You don't know that, do you?'

Lorna gripped my hand. 'No, Stewie. We don't. But we do know that we love him, eh? Don't we?'

'I'm not close to him, Lorna. I hardly bloody know him, really. Do I? Do I? Anyway, a fine lot of good love does. Love don't stop people dying, Lorna.' I dragged my hand out of her grasp as

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she clung on. 'It didn't stop my Mum dying, did it? Did it? Love means nothing.'

Lorna wrenched me round by the shoulders so I faced her, and shook me hard. Her face went beetroot and her eyes glittered as she sobbed. 'Don't yer bloody say that! It does matter! It does! Love's everything! Everything!' She shoved me away, wrestled with the door handle and almost fell out of the door. 'Are yer bloody coming or not?'

The rain pelted down, plastered her hair to her scalp and drove into her cheeks, mixing with her tears. She sniffed and wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve. She held out her hand to me. It was the only warm thing in the cold world.

*

The receptionist doesn't smile with her eyes. Dr Mackenzie shifts from one boot to the other. We follow him and my wrist itches - *Scratch-scratch*. Breath - coming in short gasps. Sterile, bitter air. Arms, legs - Cold. Rigid. Lorna's hand - warm. She draws me on. We follow her dad past corridors of dirty, rain-soaked windows and doors. My boots fight against the vinyl floors. Squeak - flap. Squeak - flap. On through the judder and swing of heavy, scratched fire doors. *Scratch-scratch*. *Scratch-scratch*. More corridors. More doors. My heart thumps heavy inside my chest. Breathe in. Breathe out. *Love is everything! Love is everything!* Breathe in. Breathe out. Squeak - flap. Squeak - flap. Another, smiling receptionist... and... The Ward. *Scratch-scratch*. *Scratch-scratch*. *Scratch-scratch*. Dr Mac walks halfway into the ward, stops outside some drawn curtains and beckons to us. I take root in the vinyl floor. Lorna pulls me forward - *Scratch-scratch* - through drawn curtains - *Scratch-scratch*. Grandad's laid out in a white bed. Covers up to his stubbly grey throat. Grey bloodless face. Tubes up his nose. Eyes tight shut - ringed with a darkness. A monitor softly *bleep-bleeps*. My roots drive down into the floor and I sway like a pine caught in a powerful breeze. I can't feel my legs, but can feel my chin trembling. *Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch... Scratch-scratch...*

I don't want to lose him.

Lose him.

Lose him.

Grandad's dark-ringed eyes open - smouldering, razor-grey as he looks up at me.

'Well, yer took yer bloody time getting here, boy. Didn't yer?' he said. His eyes glitter as he winks at me, the old bastard.

eagle prayer iolaire

As I stepped through the door into the shed it was like entering a different building. First off, you could actually see. I hadn't realised, but there'd been several windows in the left wall and these had all been cleared and cleaned. Light streamed in. Lots of the old shapeless black junk had gone. I hadn't ever known what half of it was - just a load of shadowy mysterious shapes that loomed at me out of the dark. Now, there was more space and you could see all the way to the back wall, where the eagles were caged. Up towards the cage, on the right hand wall there was actually a door which I'd never noticed before, and another three windows on that side of the building that you could see the rickety barn wall through. I ran my hands over all the stuff that had just been like ghosts in the gloom - old wooden chests and tools and shelves piled with dusty swatches of cloth. Through dusty beams of sunlight, the eagles watched me and ruffled their feathers. It looked like Grandad had polished up one of the looms. Its old wooden frame felt smooth and clean under my fingers. There was new wool on the spindles and a fair bit of cloth had been made. I reckon he'd been getting a bit of practice in. He still had plans to teach me, then. The wool made a confusing tangle of threads on the frame. God knows how I was going to get the hang of that. Didn't fancy it, much, but I'd have a go to keep the old man happy. Alongside this loom was another, with a heavy canvas sheet over it that had been tied down. This must have been what he'd been going on about at the hospital. "Mind the loom under the cover," he'd said. "Make sure you leave it be. Eh?" He'd made me promise. I patted the cover - what was the old bugger up to? Maybe he was making me a kilt or something and didn't want me to see - a present? Oh, no! Surely he wasn't gonna make me wear a kilt. I'd - better take a look. I bent down and tried to undo the chords that secured the cover.

Tsil-tsill-tschi! Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

Both eagles burst out calling. I covered my ears and jerked up to see them spreading their wings.

'OK! I'll feed you in a minute.'

The birds quietened down and I turned back to the loom. Surely it wouldn't hurt to have a quick peep? Even if I *had* promised. The chords were too tight. Blimey! Grandad had done some serious knots on this cover. I tugged hard at the cover.

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

Again, the eagles burst out shrieking, and I clamped my hands over my ears until they'd stopped. Pulling at the cover again only got same reaction. The birds shrieked and flapped their

Pinhead

wings violently. Only when I stepped away from the loom did they stop calling.

‘OK! OK! I get the message. He’s left you on guard duty, has he?’

So it seemed. When they’d calmed down a bit, I sat and made some sketches while they ruffled themselves up and glowered at me. The light from the windows revealed their gold, bronze and amber feathers in new fires I hadn’t seen before. As they became quieter and still, they fixed their black eyes on me as I bent over my sketch pad. I pushed my face up to the wire.

‘Listen to me. I think you understand me. Don’t you?’

The birds ruffled their feathers, shifting from side to side.

‘Look. It’s Grandad. The old man. The one who found you. The one who feeds you. He’s ill. He’s sick. I’ve got to feed you. Me. You can fluff yourselves up and shriek at me all you want, but it’s just me here. I’ve got your meat, your rabbits. Look. God! How can you eat this stuff? Hah! I expect you’d think the same about us eating porridge, maybe. Actually, that’s what I think about eating porridge. OK. I’ve left most of the fur on the rabbits, this time. Grandad says you need to learn what they’ll look like when you’re out on your own. They’ll be running around then, though. I hope you’ll learn to live out there. Right. I’m going to open the door, now. OK. OK. I’m not coming right in.’

Tsil-tsil-tschil! Tsil-tsil-tschil!

‘No need to scream at me like that. You don’t need to defend yourselves against *me*. Uh! Oh! Phew! There you go. Tuck in. Nice, eh? Tasty? Yuck!’

I ducked back out of the cage as they tore into the rabbit.

‘You really are something special, aren’t you? You really are quite golden. People say you’re proud. “Proud as an eagle”, they say. But maybe you’re beyond knowing that. You are what you are. Don’t mind me. I’ll just sit here and sketch you again. I’m going to try and paint you, too, if that’s OK? For Grandad to remember, when you’re gone. Crikey! You can’t half put that rabbit away, can’t you?’

My pencil is drifting - across a paper-limit. I’m drawing - drawing back a curtain - etching endless animal moments across skins of trees - parched parchments starved of shifting-shapes. Paper suckles shapes - drinks mind-blind-blurred-inspections. Feel. Be. Soak-steal. See. Knuckle-brushes freefall-forms sketch-scrawl is... is... is nearing me - of eagles.

The wind whispered in the eaves. Two hours had passed.

‘Right... right...’

The golden birds eyed me.

‘I better be off. Lorna’s coming over. She say’s we need to clean the old place up a bit, for when Grandad comes home. I’ll be in again, tomorrow. Look. I don’t know if you understand me or not, or if I just imagine your voices, or what... but... thanks, for... the eagle at Dùn Caan. It was like you sent it to me. It helped. Gave me strength, somehow. And well... if you can send out an

eagle to guide Grandad home, safe and sound, back here with me, then that would be... that would be great. We all want him home, don't we? Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow.'

the flesh of the Earth

Slap-chafing of wellies on shins. Rub of rough-scuff-wool - sea-boot-socks. Slop of soft shit on shovel - slop-off shovel to barrow. Rumble barrow - slap-shit-off barrow to pile.

‘Want it tidy, for when the old bugger gets back.’

Sweep-scrape broom-brush brash brush - sweep-scrape broom-brush the yard. Finger-graze – scratch-blood.

‘Shit! Bloody splinters! Whisht! Whisht-there! C’mon. Soon as I finish this I’m off on me bike.’

Vvveerrroomma! - wind-smack bike-stack - speed-more more-speed.

Some of the bleaters are well matted-up. *Fleece-face wool-scuffle*. That’ll be a right old job. *Hoof-scrabble wool-scuffle*. A right old job. I won’t catch ‘em now. I’ll get ‘em with Lorna. *Green-eye-flash. Dark-hair-drift*. Lorna’s coming. Lorna’s coming later. *Dark-apple-hair-drift raspberry-lollipop-lips*. Lorna’s coming. *Speckle-suckle swing-hips*. Lorna. *Breast-suckle-close close-skin. Fingers*.

‘Whisht! Whisht-there! Hah! Go on. Leg it, then. Ya little bastards.’

Hoof-scrabble wool-scuffle - right up the hill.

This is why my dad left. I don’t... I don’t see him ever enjoying this... this lark. Not even in this... this... *mist-seep-silver - this... green-roll-grass hill-slopes lush-flourish-flush-shelf - this... mist-taste mist-seep-silver - salt-tang-air - sea-ghost-hair apple-hair apple-ghost-hair. Red-raspberry-lick lollipop-lips*. Lorna’s coming.

‘Right! That’s enough of that. C’mon, Stewie-boy. Let’s get on ya bike.’

Wind-smack bike-stack - speed more-speed.

Wood-barn-door scrag-drag back - black. Stump.

Stump.

It squats there like some burnt-black-wood lump - a claw - clinging on in our barn. Clinging on in our world. Clutching, gripping the ground. It’s dried out a lot since we dragged it here. But... no can’t be... it seems bigger - taller. I could swear it’s taller. I measure it against my chest - got to be taller... than it was. The black wood feels warm in the cool barn. Cracks and fissures run down its trunk sides. The knots along its sides seem to stick out more than before. The talon-roots seem longer. My finger-blood drips into its cracks. I suck my finger.

It squats there... gripping the ground - a burnt-black wood-claw. Blood seeps into black wood-claw.

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Now - *slow-mist*. I don't feel... I don't feel like taking the bike out. Not now - *Slow-mist*
mist-seep-silver - I'll have a cup of tea, instead – *finger-blood-seeps mist-taste mist-seep-silver* -
salt-tang-air - I'll have a cup of tea and some Gingernuts and wait for Lorna - *apple-hair -ghost-*
apple-hair. Red-raspberry-lick-lollipop-lips.

Lorna's coming.

Lorna's coming.

Finger-blood seeps-deep.

Ghost - ghost-apple-hair.

teenage kicks

Grandad's armchair wasn't very comfortable. Lorna was late. I fidgeted around and tried to nestle into the lumpy cushions, but the chair was moulded to his body, not mine.

'Gah! Eh, Stewie!' My grandad-voice seemed to echo off the walls. 'Eh! Boy!' It seemed to bounce hard off the stove and pots and pans. I stared into the cold, dead ashes of the fire. It must have been tough for him, alone for all those years. Extra hard being stuck in a place full of memories - of ghosts - of who and what he'd lost. Why did he stay? I tried to imagine Nan cooking and busying herself around the Blackhouse. All this furniture, all the pots and pans, plates and cutlery must have been stuff that was here when she was alive. Stuff that her and Grandad chose or made together. I tried to picture my dad as a young kid, running in and out of the door, kicking a ball in the yard, flying a kite. I'd seen Grandad sitting staring into the flames in the fireplace - lost in his thoughts. Lost in memories. Maybe all those pictures in his mind were a solid part of the place now. That was why he stayed.

'Oi! Mopey Dick!' Lorna grinned at me from the doorway. 'Bit gloomy in here, innit? Eh?'

'Hah! You're never gonna do my accent right. I'm not bloody Dick Van Dyke, ya know.

Maaary Popyins!'

She laughed and put a bag down on the table. 'Cleaning stuff,' she said, and brandished some cloths and a bottle of Vim at me. She sat on the arm of the chair. 'Are yer OK?'

'Yeah.'

'I told yer he'd be all right, didn't I?'

'Yeah. Trouble is... he's not, really. Is he?'

'No. Sorry. Yer right.' She ran her fingers through my spikes. I leaned my head against her waist.

'I thought he was going to die.'

'Aye. I could see. We'll look after him, eh?' She ruffled my hair. 'Even yer spikes have gone all floppy. Yer orange is growing out, blondie. Yer hair's getting quite long.'

'Hah! Yeah. I daren't get it cut in Tarbert, though. I'd probably come back with a pudding-basin cut or looking like a skin-head.'

'Aye, that's the truth.'

Her fingers felt good in my hair.

'I'll do it for yer.'

'You? Cut my hair?'

Pinhead

'Aye, why not? I do Dad's and Danny's for 'em. I even did yer Grandad's, one Christmas.'

'Yeah, but... you know. Mine's more...' I laughed. 'Important to me.'

'Hah! You're so vain.' She leaned away and pushed the side of my head. 'We mustn't destroy your public image, now. Must we?'

'No. It must be maintained. At all costs.'

She knelt in front of me, straightened my face and started tugging at tufts of hair. 'Hmm... Yes. We must preserve it. We don't want to trigger an identity crisis.' She stood up. 'Actually, it suits yer a bit longer. I reckon it just needs a bit of re-shaping and re-organising. Less Johnny Rotten, more...'

'More who?'

'More... John Mayer from the Buzzcocks or...'

I raised my eyebrows. This was sounding interesting. 'Or?'

'Or... Yer know the Cure?'

'Yeah.'

'More Robert Smith.'

'Hmm. Yeah... maybe. Him or John Mayer, maybe. Anyway, sounds better than being a pudding-head or a bone-head. But, can I trust yer not to scalp me? An Englishman's barnet is his castle.'

She laughed. 'Well, yer can't trust me, that's fer sure. But I'll do me best.' She rubbed her chin. 'So, yer an Englishman are yer? Not an Anglo-Scots hybrid?'

'Nah. I'm English, me. Better football team.'

'Hah! So that's why Scotland are in the World Cup finals, and England aren't?' She started to sing, 'We're on the march with Allie's army!'

I put my hands over my ears. 'It's pure bad luck.'

Her eyes were bright in the gloomy kitchen.

'So. You're gonna cut me hair, then?'

She stepped back and grinned, grabbed the broom from beside the fire and handed it to me. 'First things first, Mr Lazy Bones.' She hauled me out of Grandad's chair. 'Let's get started on this place first and see if we have time before tea.'

*

When we'd finished cleaning, I was knackered. Lorna made sure we went over every last inch of the blackhouse. I reckon we cleaned things that hadn't been cleaned since Nan had died.

I slumped down in the armchair. 'It's weird being here without him.'

Lorna packed the cleaning things away. 'I know. The house has a kind of atmosphere of

him, doesn't it?'

'I don't know how he's managed to live here on his own, all these years. I couldn't hack it. It's so lonely.'

'That's not unusual here,' said Lorna. 'Being lonely. There's a lot of old folk stranded out in the middle of nowhere. On their own, where there were once whole communities. Whole villages have died out.'

'How come?'

'It's almost a way of life, here. People emigrating, being starved out, being moved on. Have yer never heard of The Clearances?'

'No. What's that?'

'For the last two hundred years, all across the highlands, perhaps here more than anywhere, folk have been moved on to make way fer sheep, or game. We've been shoved around all over the islands at the whim of landowners, to be a workforce for some new laird's latest money making project, or sure-to-fail industry. Some families have scraped through, and some have died out, or emigrated. Canada, Australia, America.'

'London,' I said.

'Aye.' Lorna smiled. 'Yer are half one of us, then.'

'Hah! Which half d'you reckon?' I stood up and faced her side on, first from the right, then the left.

'Ah. Now let me see.' She stroked her chin and squinted at me, then poked me on each side in the ribs. 'Hmm. Aye. Definitely the left side. It's got more character.' She poked me again. 'Oh, aye. This English side's a lot softer.'

I tried to fend her off.

'Aye, aye. The English side's all puddeny.' She poked me over and over.

I cracked up, laughing and pushed her hand away. 'Gerroffamee!'

'Oh, my. Yer really ticklish, aren't yer?'

I tried to escape around the kitchen table, but she chased me and prodded me backwards into the bedroom. I collapsed onto the bed.

She dived on top of me and pinned me down. 'Oh, my lord! I've never met anyone so ticklish. This could be fun.'

'No...n...no... Get... offfff!' I was almost crying with laughter. Completely paralysed.

'I don't believe it. You're even more wimpy than usual.' Lorna sat astride my stomach and pinned my arms down with her hands. Her eyes glittered. 'Hmm. I wonder what a wimpy English boy tastes like?' She slowly leaned towards my face gnashing her teeth until her face was close to mine. She licked my cheek. 'Mmm. Tasty.' She nibbled towards my lips. 'Mmm.' Then, she burrowed her face into mine, gnawing the sensitive space where my jaw met my neck. I wriggled

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and squirmed. Totally powerless. Gasping at the delicious feeling. Gently, she bit me and began to suck at my neck.

'Mmm.'

'Mmm,' she said.

She let go of my neck and kissed my lips, sliding her tongue into my mouth. I felt my strength returning. I clasped her and rolled her onto her side. Her legs clamped round my waist. Her hands wandered over my face. I followed her movements, copying them, scared I wasn't doing it right. I lost myself, kissing her.

'Mmm.'

I let my hands explore the shape of her neck and her face, letting them wander as I closed my eyes. We spoke with our hands and our mouths. I didn't understand what we were saying. It didn't matter. My body seemed to know how to learn her. My hands listened and heard what her body was saying. They travelled down from her neck. With a jolt, I suddenly realised I was clasping one of her breasts. I opened my eyes. Lorna was staring at me, with a little smile at the corners of her lips.

'Oh. Sorry,' I said. I took my hand away.

Lorna kissed me on the end of my nose. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'It's all right.' She sat up and smiled down at me. 'Mmm. That was nice, wasn't it? Oh, no. Look. I've given yer a big black love bite.'

A car horn blared outside.

'Oh. Shit! It's your dad.' I leaped up.

'Don't panic.' Lorna laughed at me, but she tidied her hair up into a knot. 'Don't worry. We haven't done anything wrong.'

I followed her into the kitchen and picked up the bag of cleaning stuff. 'Thanks for helping me,' I said.

'Is that what I was doing?' she giggled.

'With the cleaning, I mean.'

'Yer welcome, boy,' she said, and skipped out to the Land Rover.

I pretended to rub my neck and waved to Dr Mac as she jumped in and slammed the door. He glowered at me but raised his pipe. I staggered back inside and plonked into the armchair. My balls ached.

tiugainn dachaigh

It was a week before they let him come home. A vicar and a man and a woman - neighbours from the Crofters Association - picked him up from Stornoway and drove him back. He looked pretty grumpy - still a bit rocky on his pegs, refusing any help as he slowly grumbled his way towards his beloved armchair. He stopped and looked around. 'Yer been cleaning up in here?'

'Yeah.'

'Hah! I didn't know yer could clean.'

Lorna filled up the kettle.

The vicar nodded at her and held out his hand to me. 'Pleased to meet yer at last, Stewart. My name's John.' He shook my hand firmly, looked me in the eye, smiled warmly.'

'Hello,' I said.

Grandad looked through the bedroom door. 'New bedding? Who's money have yer been wasting?'

'Mine. Well, Dad's. It's for you. Dr Mackenzie said yer shouldn't be climbing up into the loft til yer better.'

'Gah! What does he know?'

'Don't you like it?'

He looked at the bright new duvet cover and new curtains.

The chubby, red-faced woman stared at my hair. 'It looks lovely, there, Stewart. I'm Mrs Munro and this is my husband, Alasdair.' She smiled and her husband nodded and bumped into the table.

'Gah!' said Grandad.

'Lorna chose it all. She thought you'd like blue.'

'Oh,' he said. 'I didn't say I didn't like it, did I?' He smiled over at Lorna and slumped down into the armchair with a gasp. 'I do like blue.'

'Aren't you glad to be back?'

He sighed. 'Aye, boy. I am.'

'Looks like yer been busy, boy,' said Mr Munro, knocking a book onto the floor and picking it up.

'Yeah,' I said.

I had been pretty busy. Me and Lorna had done the place from top to bottom, whenever we weren't rolling around kissing, on the bed. When she'd seen how worn all the blankets were,

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she insisted we got new bedding for the loft and downstairs. We'd gone into Tarbert on the bus, had lunch and everything. Smoked a joint with Mooner. Dodged past and laughed at mad-moody MacDonald. And I'd really enjoyed splashing Dad's cash.

'Yer all right then, Doug?' said the vicar.

'Aye, fit as a fiddle.'

'So, yer were just hoaxing us all, then? With the hospital an all?' The vicar looked in through the bedroom doorway, and then at me.

'Will yer be staying long, Reverend?' Grandad scowled.

'Just seeing yer settled, now. Yer know folk are more than happy to stop by, for the sheep, an such like.' The vicar smiled across at Lorna.

'No need o that. Eh, Stew?'

'Yeah. All under control, thanks,' I said.

'And of course, there's Lorna... to help,' said Mrs Munro.

Lorna edged towards the door. She looked a bit red in the face.

'We've not seen yer at the Kirk lately, Lorna,' said the vicar.

'Er, no,' she said. 'Been busy with Danny, an all. Yer know.'

'Aye. I do,' he nodded. 'Be nice to see yer on Sunday, if yer able.'

'He's growing up quick. Eh, Lorna?' said Mrs Munro.

'Aye.'

'Will yer mother be back any time soon, now?' The vicar raised his eyebrows.

'No. She won't,' said Lorna, firmly. 'How's your Susan? Mrs Munro?'

'Oh, she's just fine. Thanks you. The new baby's doing well. Just fine... fine.' Mrs Munro nodded, looked long at me and then at Lorna.

'Well. OK, then. Goodbye, now. I'll be back later to do yer dinner, Mr MacLeod.' Lorna left without even glancing at me.

'Aye. Thanks,' called Grandad. 'She's a *good* girl, that one,' he scowled at the three visitors in turn.

'Aye,' they said in unison.

'Aye. Well, don't let me keep yer, now,' said Grandad. 'I'm sure yer've plenty o other folk to assist in their lives.'

'Er... yes,' said the vicar. 'We'll be going, then. Goodbye, Stewart.' The three smiled warmly, stole last glimpses at my hair, and filed out. Mr Munro banged his head on the door-frame.

'Gah! That was the star in the dark night,' said Grandad sarcastically, and settled into his chair. I made him some tea and toast and slapped some raspberry jam on, but not too thick. He growled his thanks and took a big swig from his mug. 'Ah! That's better. They couldn't make a

decent cup o' tea in that hospital.' He tucked into the toast, crunching and spitting crumbs in all directions. 'Didn't like the food they served up there,' he said. 'Everything tasted the same. Like bloody cardboard.'

'We can do you some proper food, now,' I said.

'I wouldn't mind some eggs and bacon.'

'Er...'

'What?'

'Egg and bacons are right off, I'm afraid,' I said in my best Basil Fawlty-type voice.

'Eh?'

'Doc's orders. You've got to stay off fatty food. I've got to cook... healthy things. I've got to do you fresh vegetables and fish, for a while. And fruit.'

'You? Lord preserve us! Since when could you cook?'

'Well. Lorna's showing me.'

'Oh.'

'She's coming back later to help with the dinner.'

'Good! I won't get poisoned just yet then.' He seemed to perk up a bit. 'I could do with some decent grub. What's this?' He held up some magazines.

'Lorna thought you might like some light reading, 'til you're up and about more.'

'Looks like she's got us both organised. Eh, boy?'

'Yeah.'

She'd really been great. In the last week she'd come over every day - *Mmmm*. She'd even travelled right up to Stornoway with me to visit Grandad. On the rain-soaked rickety bus, crossing the black granite mountains, up into Lewis. Her dad wouldn't let her go on the bike with me. Mind you, even Dr Mackenzie had been helpful, if not exactly friendly. I left Grandad thumbing through the magazines and rushed my chores. I wanted to get back to my drawing, but it took me about forty minutes to check the soggy sheep around the back field and up the sodden hill. One bleating ball of angry, matted wool had got itself caught up in the big chicken wire cage that Grandad had built for the next stage of the eagle's rehabilitation. It was probably how he'd overdone it and made himself ill. Mooner was going to come up and help with the eagles some time. He'd done it once before, so Grandad said. I cut the grumpy sheep free and re-secured the wire. When I got back, Grandad was snoring like a hog. He looked comfortable and warm, so I left him sleeping.

Across the yard.

The stump sat lurking in the gloom of the barn.

I walked towards the shed, to the eagles.

*

Pinhead

'For Sir and Madam. The finest lamb road-kill. Courtesy of Chef Dr Mackenzie.' I plonked two small legs of lamb down onto the feeding tray and jumped back out of the cage, a bit sharpish. The young bird ripped straight in, but the mother just watched him, fidgeting from side to side on the wooden beam. I secured the latch and settled down with my sketchpad. This was part of my routine now and it felt natural - good to lose myself in something I could do. Two hours drawing a day, every day - while Grandad was in hospital. There'd been definite improvements. Whenever the light had been poor the oil lamp had come in handy, and although it still creeped me out a bit, being alone with the eagles when it was gloomy, the strange lamplight was really effective. It was weird how the colours and shadows of the eagles changed depending on things like that. I carried on with a large sketch of the mother that I'd begun the day before, focussing on capturing her position whenever she looked down and across to her feeding offspring. Patiently, for about an hour, with soft lead and fingers, I tried to capture the curve of her nape - shape the shadow on her neck - *Shade-scratch-shade... Shade-scratch-shade... Smudge-smooth... Smudge-smooth...* it was going well.

But the mother still wasn't feeding.

'Go on, darling. Tuck in.'

Shade-scratch-shade... Shade-scratch-shade... Smudge-smooth... Smudge-smooth...

'Go on, darling.'

The golden bird stared at me, first with one eye, then the other. Then her eyes caught the light in a full-on red glare.

Sheer swoop no rotten feast! No rotten feast of long-dead meats, BOYYYYY!

I fell backwards off my stool. My sketches flew across the dirty floor.

Làn beòil de bhiadh, is lan baile de nàire...

A mouthful of meat and a farm full of shame!

We'll swoop your skinny carcass - PASTY PLODDER!

I shot up and towards the cage, gasping in shock at the voice. 'Just... fuck off!' I gripped the wire and roared at the mother. 'It is you! It is! I'm not mad. It's your voice. Isn't it? Isn't it?'

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

'You can whistle all you fucking like, but I know it's you. I'm not mad. I'm not!'

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Plodder-boy!

The eagle flared her crown and her eyes glinted. We glared at each other through the wire. The young bird kept on feeding. It made a few gentle, contented whistling cheeps. The mother turned away from me and ripped into the lamb meat. She fed ravenously, as though I wasn't there.

'Flipping mangy old bird!' I picked up my scattered sketches from the floor and blew the grit and dust off. 'I know it's your voice. You old harpy.'

Nothing. The bird ignored me and ripped the lamb.

'OK, then. Pretend it's not.'

Nothing.

'Fine eat your tasty road-kill and keep your beak shut. But just remember, we keep you alive. Grandad saved you and I'm the one who feeds you every day. Surely that's worth something to you? Anyway, we'll be chucking you out soon. Ungrateful old buzzards! We've just got to fit you hoods and teach that scruffy thing to fly. Then, you can both fuck off!'

Nothing.

I sorted my papers and slid them carefully into the folder. Lorna would be here soon, to cook our tea. I pushed my face up close to the wire as the birds ripped the lamb.

'We're bloody worth something. We are.'

There was no voice. The birds ripped meat and twitched their feathers.

No eagle voice.

Nothing.

Cu-cu-cew Cur-lew Cour-lee Cour-li

Lorna's cooking was great. She did a roast chicken and roast potatoes and everything. It was nearly as good as one of my mum's Sunday dinners - although, I had to say Mum's spuds were unbeatable - crustier. I missed my mum's spuds. Peeling all the veg and stuffing the chicken was actually quite easy. Lorna showed me how to flavour the gravy with herbs and chicken fat, and pre-boil the spuds before basting and roasting 'em. The three of us played Monopoly while everything cooked. It tasted lovely and afterwards I was completely stuffed.

'C'mon, Stewie, yer fat lummo. Time for the washing up.' Lorna started to fill the basin with steaming water.

'No. Fair's fair. You two cooked. I'll wash,' said Grandad.

'You're to rest, Mr MacLeod.'

'No. It's all right. I need to stand up a bit. You two go and take a look at the eagles, or something. It'll be good to feed 'em up fer tomorrow.'

'How come?' said Lorna.

'Lord Mooner's coming to train the young'un up a bit, so's we can set 'em free. You can come and watch, if yer like. Meanwhile, make sure this lad feeds em.' Grandad gave me one of his "be a gentleman" warning glances. 'Yer dad'll be here to pick yer up in about half an hour, Lorna.'

Outside, a few stars were just starting to show in the eastern sky. A bird called from down by the shore.

Cour-lee Cour-li. Cour-lee Cour-li.

'Great! We've just got time for some sex in the barn,' Lorna whispered and stuck her fingers in my ribs. 'Hah! Had yer goin! Look at yer face!' She laughed, pulled me across the yard and dragged back the door. 'Jesus! Look at *that* thing.'

The stump was just visible in the dark.

'Yeah, I know.'

'Ooh. I don't like that.' She prodded the black trunk. 'It's too creepy. Let's go and see the eagles. I might come tomorrow. It'll be worth it to see Mooner getting 'em to fly. He seems to know about everything.'

Inside the shed, the lamp sputtered into life. The shadows of looms and tools and mannequins flashed crazily across the walls, and lit up the gold of the birds in the cage.

'Ooh. They're sooo beautiful.' Lorna peered closely through the wire. The birds shifted nervously.

Pinhead

'Lorna.'

'Aye.'

'D'you ever...'

'Do I ever, what?'

'D'you ever... sort of... get the feeling that... er...'

She turned to me and raised her eyebrows. 'That... er... what?'

'Well... that animals can... can...'

Lorna's eyebrows moved higher.

'That they... that they can communicate... with us, I mean?'

She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. 'I don't see why not. Why? What have they been saying? Dr Doolittle. What's this little creature saying?'

She pinned me against the cage and kissed me full on the lips. She slid her tongue into my mouth. *Slippery-warm wet-slide slip-lips pillow-soft slide wire-cold-cage warm-slide eagle-tang cage soft soft Toh-tschil!*

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

'Jesus!' Lorna jumped back, away from the cage. 'Do they do that a lot?'

'Yeah, and more.'

'They were definitely saying something, then.'

'Saying what? Lorna?'

'Get away. And no mistake. Jesus!' She patted the nearest loom. 'So... is yer Grandad still gonna teach yer how to weave, then?'

'So he reckons.'

'Yer don't sound so keen?'

'Nah. I'm not, really. I'll have a crack at it though, for him.'

Lorna pressed a long deep kiss against my lips. 'Yer get rewards fer stuff like that, boy,' she said.

'Wow!' I gasped. 'What do I get for helping with the cooking?'

'Hah! Have to wait and see... meanwhile... show us yer drawings, Stewie.'

I took my sketches from the file. She pored over them, taking her time.

'Yer really should go to art college, Stewie. These are amazing.'

'What, like you going to uni? Nah. Don't think I'm cut out to be a college pudden.'

'Hah! Well yer a pudden already. But seriously. Yer should. Mum knows people. You'd walk in with work like this.'

'Really? You're having me on.'

'I'm not. I'm not. Mum thought yer had real promise. Look. Anyway, we're wasting time.'

Dad'll be here in a minute.'

She carefully put my sketches away and pinned me up against the cage.

Slip slip-lips pillow-soft slide soft soft soft Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

'Oh, shit!' said Lorna, laughing. 'My dad must have paid them. Let's go outside.'

Star-glint lip-slip-slide wet sweet wet Rock hard cock! Cu-cu-cew Cur-lew Cour-lee Cour-li

Stewie-Lorna Lorie-Stewna wet sweet wet Cu-cu-cew Cur-lew Cour-lee Cour-li.

no raven's death

'Are yer sure yer know what yer doing there, boy?' said Grandad.

Mooner, having opened the cage door, was backing away from the mother eagle. 'Aye. But she's a sight bigger than what I flew in Spain, Doug.' He giggled his crazy high-pitched laugh. 'Bloody sight grumpier, too. Here, Stewie, boy...' He handed me a strip of fresh rabbit.

'Yeah.'

'Can ya distract da spiteful ol' bitch, while I hood this wee one?'

'Yeah.'

'Right, now. Just poke him through wire and keep her busy while I... there ya go.' He deftly slipped a small leather hood over the young eagle's head, just as it started to pipe up. It immediately became still. He took another hood from his pocket. 'Right, carry on, Stew.' While the big mother was looking at me, Mooner moved slowly and smoothly into the cage. He spoke to the big eagle in a strange language, whistling under his breath and, as the bird turned towards him he began moving his fingers in a kind of figure of eight before its head. 'Ya... whisht, now. Whisht, now.' The mother became still and seemed confused. In an instant, Mooner slipped the hood over its golden head. He turned to Grandad and raised his eyebrows.

'Aye. So. Yer done it. I'll give yer that,' Grandad said.

'Maybe ah's not such tasty meat as ya-self, Dougie-boy.' He grinned. 'She took no chunks outta me.'

Grandad rubbed his old eagle-wound. 'Yer said it yerself, boy,' he growled back, with an equally big grin. 'I reckon yer fed it some of yer wacky-baccy to slow it down.'

'Ya! I bin blowing me ganga up its arse, boy!' Mooner went off into his high-pitched giggle while Grandad wrestled with his face. He gave in and we all cracked up.

'Ah not be wasting me weed on some ol' bird, me-tinks.' Mooner smacked his skinny thigh. 'Let's be gettin 'em outside, right ya? Ya watch me tie these jesses', boy?' He motioned us forward and carefully tied some fine leather strips around the bird's feet, then scooped up the young eagle onto his thick leather glove. 'Ya see?'

We nodded.

Out in the big chicken-wire pen, he set the eagle on a post and removed the hood and the jesses'. The bird gazed around at the wide-green space - tousle-feather-shift - open-breath-air. It flapped its wings in panic and fell onto the ground. It just sat there.

'Shit!' I said.

'Is all right. Just getting is bearins, ya? Is first time im seen the world, fer a while, ya? Howdya be ya-self, boy?' Mooner tied a strip of meat to a long line, whizzed it round and flung it so it landed in front of the grounded bird. At first, the bird stayed put, but after a few minutes began to take some interest in the food. As it moved forward to take the bait, Mooner twitched it out of the eagle's range. Each time the bird followed, Mooner twitched the bait, so that eventually it chased the bait across the clump-mud-grass. 'Is a weak bird, ya? Stewie?'

'Yeah.'

'We'll soon fix im up.'

Mooner let the eagle eat the small strip of meat, then retrieved the line and tied on another piece. He repeated the whole process a few times, so that eventually the eagle chased the bait faster and more fiercely, flapping its wings. He handed the line to me and I had a go. It was a bit like teasing a kitten with string. The trick was to keep the bait just out of range of the hooked bill and talons. After about half an hour the bird was actually running and fluttering for a few wing beats, before taking the bait.

'That'll do, nicely,' Mooner said. He deftly replaced the hood on the young eagle's head and fetched the she-eagle from the shed. She sat still and hooded on the second post, beside her offspring. He held his gloved palm against her powerful head and felt beneath the wing. 'This wing's healing good, Doug.' He made me go outside the pen, removed the hood and untied the jesses' from the post.

Tsil-tsill-tschil! Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

The mother spread her huge drift-quill wings and beat the air. Before Mooner could even finish tying a strip of meat onto the line, the bird swooped towards him across the pen. Just at the last second, he dropped the meat and darted backwards against the fence, covering his face with his arms. The mother readjusted her flight and dropped onto the meat lying at Mooner's feet. He stayed where he was, as she hissed at him and covered her prey with her wings - *wing-fan splay-feather*.

Grandad roared with laughter at Mooner, who was cowering against the wire. 'Hah! I reckon yer taste every bit as good as me, after all, boy!'

Toh-tSchil! Bàs an fhittich ort! The raven's death to you, old plodder! Tsil-tsill-tschil! We'll rush drift-quill-sheer - Rip red-dead marrow-gash - cleave-slash - Rip this shack!

Mooner edged his way out of the pen. 'Ya gonna have to watch this ol girl, Stewie,' he said. 'She likes her meat fresh by tha looks a tings.'

The three of us stood back and watched the eagle ripping into the bait.

Toh-tSchil! Am mach air an spàrr 's an t-athair gun bhreith... The son on the roost and the father unborn! Rip all plodders! Rip dead-meat - Tear tongue brain gizzard - Thew heart-tatters - Scatter-lacerate bright-lives Yer dead-eyed downers!

When she'd finished eating, Mooner edged his way back into the pen and repeated the teasing training he'd done with the young eagle. Having calmed down a bit, the mother responded in the same way. After a while, Mooner, motioned for me to enter the pen and handed me the baited line. Shaking, I swung the bait across in front of the eagle and twitched it backwards each time it tried to take it. The bird hopped and flapped, using its wings until it eventually caught the meat, which it didn't eat.

'She full.' Mooner grinned. He approached the bird and repeated the strange hypnotic hand movement in front in front of its eyes. He slipped the hood back on and returned the mighty bird to her post. The wind ruffled the eagle's feathers and a fine mist of drizzle blew in from the sea as the bird gazed towards the bay.

Tsil! Tsil-sheer! Plume-glide free-span - Rip this shack!

mist of myth

Mooney came up every day for a fortnight, training the eagles and training me. I soon got quite confident handling the young eagle, but it was a right old challenge to overcome my fear of the big mother. After a few days she seemed to get used to being hooded and moved by Mooney, so he encouraged me to have a go, standing by my side in case she got feisty. I kept expecting her to lash out, slash me with claw and beak. Or worse, I kept expecting her to speak. But she never did. Lorna had been busy at home, but she came over a few times - Oohing and Aaahing as the birds hopped and flapped around the pen. I could see she was impressed that I could train them, but she always stood well back and wouldn't come into the pen. In the second week Mooney moved the birds onto posts we'd set up in the open field and tied a long sort of spindled kite-line, called a creance, onto the bird's jesses, so they wouldn't be able to fly away. It was amazing to see the birds make short swoops to the ground or even to the glove if Mooney was holding the bait. When it was my turn to have the birds fly to me, I was absolutely bricking it, but there was no problem and the mother never attacked me like I feared she would. She didn't speak either.

Whenever we could, after the birds were tired and Mooney had gone home, Lorna and me would head for the shore and lie in the twilight dunes, watching the waves and kissing as the curlews called. Grandad nearly caught us a couple of times, when he came down to call us in for tea, and Lorna would leap up and brush the sand off her jeans. Grandad was still a bit wobbly, but able to do a few things around the place. I noticed that he'd go a bit grey around the eyes towards the end of the day. One evening, Mooney stayed on a bit later and shared in some stew that Lorna had left for us before she cycled home. It was still light outside, but in the Blackhouse the peat was hissing in the stove. Grandad also lit a wood fire in the fireplace and the flames and the gas lamp spread our shadows across the room as we finished off the meal with some tea.

Mooney drained his mug. 'Aah! That Lorna, she can cook good. Eh, Stewie?' Mooney winked at me and spread his legs out. 'Ya fancy a lickle rum, Doug?'

'Yer know I don't keep any in the house, boy,' Grandad scowled.

'Time was when ya had a bottle or two fer company, though,' Mooney grinned. 'But not ta worry yersel. I brought me own.' He triumphantly pulled a miniature bottle from the pocket of his long coat and poured some dark liquid into his mug with a defiant flourish. 'Ya done fine wi' them birds, boy. I reckon ya can train 'em yersel, now. Like I showed ya.'

We all stared into the fire.

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Mooner sipped his rum. 'So Lorna tells me ya seen the trees, then, boy?'

'Yeah. What... those shadows, you mean?'

'Aye. *Those* shadows.' Mooner knocked back the rum and poured some more.

Grandad shifted uneasily in his armchair. 'Don't be filling the boy's head with nonsense.'

Mooner ignored him. 'She said yer seen 'em at sunset, up by the Cairn. What yer reckon?'

'I dunno. Bit spooky. Lorna and her mum said they were part of an old island myth, or something?'

'Aye. That they are. Aren't they, Doug?' He sloshed some more rum into his mug and smacked his lips. 'Describe me what ya saw.'

Grandad grumbled something inaudible.

'Well... I dunno, really. It was like a forest of shadows moving across the land. At first, it was just in the shadows of hills and peaks... in the places that shadows should be. But then it spread into places that should have no shadow... it kind of grew across the land... like you could actually see trees within the shadows.... All shapes and all sizes. Like a real forest.'

'Gah!' said Grandad.

'Not "Gah!"' said Mooner. 'Ya know the myth. The boy's telling ya what's in the myth and he don't even know the story of it. Gah! Indeed. Ya told me ya seen it yersel, now!'

'Really, Grandad? You've seen it, too?'

He said nothing.

'Tell him, Doug. What ya told me... about the danger and the Viking seeds and the warning.'

Grandad rubbed his stubble and stared into the fire. 'It's just an old story, boy.'

Mooner knocked back his rum. 'A story about how the sons and daughters of MacLeods will be called upon to wake...'

'That's enough, now, Mooner.' Grandad stood up and put his hand on Mooner's shoulder. 'Stewie's got enough on his plate just at the minute.'

'But, Grandad...'

'There'll come a time fer yer to learn, boy. Now, Mooner, get yer old carcass home, before yer pickle yer liver.'

Mooner laughed. 'It's just ghosts and monsters, boy. Myths. Same all across the world. The end is nigh. Doom doom doom. Truth is, wherever ya go people are scared o summat, scared o 'emselves, scared o monsters, scared o ghosts of trees. They'll invent anything ta give fear a shape.'

'P'raps their right to be scared o themselves, boy.'

'Ah! The oracle speaks.' Mooner stood up and put his bottle back in his pocket.

Grandad spoke slowly. 'People made a mess o this world in the past and carry on doing it,

now. I seen two world wars, I tell yer. I've seen what people can do.'

'Aye. Ya no wrong there, Dougie boy.'

Grandad opened the door for Mooner.

'Uhoh! Looks like I'm heading home, Stewie.' He winked at me and giggled his high-pitched giggle. 'Ya watch out fer those trees. Eh, boy? An those eagles. Stay safe, now. They take ya eyes out, soon as look at ya.'

Clo Mhor

'I don't think you should be doing this, yet. Grandad.'

Dirty, window-filtered sunlight lit cloud-motes of dust at the back of the shed.

'Rubbish! I'm just going to be sitting here. And I'll get yer having a little crack at it, too. Now, watch what I'm doing. Or are yer bored, already?'

'Course I'm not,' I said. I stifled a yawn. 'I just don't want you to wear yourself out.'

'I appreciate yer concern, boy. But, I'm all right.' He coughed violently.

'Sounds like it,' I said.

'Take no notice of that. It's dusty in here. Anyway, it's not going to do me any good being stuck doing nothing, day after day. Is it?'

I shook my head. He'd been going on about treadles and heddles and bobbins and lichen and lily roots and soot and the Harris Tweed stamp of the Orb, and God knows what, for ages. I was getting a bit confused.

'Now. Just watch, boy. I won't fill yer with words. Watching is the best when yer learning the Clo Mhor... *the big cloth*, as we say.'

I stared at the mystifying wooden machine. It had loads of horizontal threads running from where Grandad sat leaning on a rail, to where they disappeared into a series of three frames filled with vertical threads, and another wooden bar-thing that went right the way across. There were little wooden knobs and levers everywhere.

'Now, I've set me heddles and weft heads, so we can begin.' Grandad peddled on the treadle things and the loom sprang into action, with rapid clicks and clacks. He raised his voice over the noise. 'I prefer these older, single-width Hattersley looms. A lot of 'em took to the modern double-width Bonas Griffiths jobs, but not me. I like the tweel this fine old fella gives gives me.' Every now and then he stopped and flashed the shuttle thing across, or fiddled around with a weft-head thing, or a bit of thread. I didn't know what he was doing, but it was quite relaxing watching him and feeling the rhythm of the loom clacking back and forth. When I had a go, myself, it felt quite easy at first - peddling away, but then Grandad kept stopping me to correct something in the weave.

'It'll take years to make anything at this rate.'

'Speed's not everything, boy. We're not machines. Just keep peddling steady and I'll take care of the weave. Watch what I do. Yer'll start to notice how it's done with time. Keep going and I'll concentrate on keeping a tight weave. That's better,' he said. 'We're getting the hang of it

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now.’ He leaned back in the chair. ‘Seven million yards a year was what the islands were turning out in our heyday. Things are tailing off a bit now, though. The times were when the girls and the women would sing together in the finishing of the wet wool. Ah! It was a fair sound. Yer Grandmother amongst them, too. She had a fine voice, she did. Aye.’ He looked a bit drawn and ashen.

I stopped peddling. ‘I think you should have a lay down now, Grandad.’

‘Hah! Yer mean you need a lay down. Yer legs aching, are they?’

I laughed. ‘Yeah. A bit.’

‘That’s enough fer now, then. Yer know, it’s funny with the weaving. But I wonder if it was our Viking ancestors that brought the weaving with them.’

‘What? The actual Vikings? Like Kirk Douglas?’ I grinned.

‘Hah! That’s just Hollywood, boy. Though I must say, I enjoyed that picture.’ He coughed violently into his hand. ‘Phew! Aye, MacLeods were some of the Norse folk who settled here, long ago. It’s a bit of an interest of mine, our Norse history. I’ll read yer up on it some time, I will. A little about the Vqlva, maybe.’

‘Vqlva. What’s that?’

‘It’s they. *They* were seers. Women folk. Some say they brought the seed with them... of the Children of...’ He paused and looked me in the eye. ‘They were weavers of more than cloth, boy. Guardians of a... a magic that was passed on... that carries on...’ He stopped.

‘Eh? What do you mean, Grandad?’

He rubbed his stubble. ‘Oh. I’ll... I’ll have to tell yer properly, some time... when yer ready.’ He coughed. ‘It’s just... just that I have a theory that it was they who brought the weaving to these islands... nothing more.’ He shifted uncomfortably and stood up. ‘Well. We’ve got to see to those wicked buggers yet.’ He jabbed his thumb at the eagles’ cage.

‘Don’t worry. I can take care of them.’

He frowned at me. ‘Are yer sure?’

‘I’ve been done it enough times, now. You’ve seen me.’

‘What about the Jesses and the hoods?’

‘I can do it. The birds are used to me, now. Anyway, you can keep an eye on me. I’ll get you a cup of tea sorted out.’

I dragged his chair out out of the shed into the hazy sunshine and he plonked himself into it with a grateful sigh. By the time I’d come back with the tea and biscuits, he’d fallen asleep. His head leaned against the back of the chair. He was snoring loudly. I sat down on the grass and tucked into the biscuits until the snoring stopped.

‘I wasn’t asleep. I was just inspecting the inside of my eyelids,’ he said, with a slurred voice. He lifted his head and peered at me out of one eye. ‘Are those Gingernuts?’

'Yeah.'

'Well, I better have some before yer scoff the lot. Yer greedy bugger.'

I laughed - sprayed biscuit crumbs at him - handed him his tea.

'Yer can keep that one. I don't like 'em pre-chewed.'

'Has your tea got cold?'

'It's fine, boy. Cheers.' He raised his mug.

*

This was the first time I'd flown the eagles without Mooner. It wasn't easy slipping the hoods onto the eagle's heads, but I wanted to show Grandad I could do it. As soon as their eyes were covered they quietened down, and although my hand shook as I fiddled with the jesses and the creance, I managed it OK. The young bird gripped my wrist through the leather biker gauntlet as I stepped out of the pen. Mooner had called the young bird a 'Passager', under a year old, which would respond to training, if we'd intended to keep them. The older bird, he'd called a 'Haggard', which was too old to be trained for hunting. The aim was that we were just trying to get the birds strong enough to release, and trying to avoid imprinting too much dependence on humans for food. I put the eagle onto the post.

'Well done, boy,' said Grandad.

I took the hood off and the eagle ruffled its wings and darted glances out around the field.

'Give him a short flight, Stew. Take it slow, now. When God made time, he made plenty of it.'

I walked about twenty yards away before I revealed the food in my hand. I lifted my wrist a few times to give it a hint of the bait. Then, on the third lift the bird opened its wings wide, and with a couple of short strokes, glided across the field, trailing the creance behind it. It pounced onto my outstretched glove, its talons flared and wings spread wide.

'Wow!' I turned to Grandad, and we grinned at each other. 'Did you see that?'

'Aye. Beautiful.'

I repeated the flight three times, then tied it back on the post. Grandad came with me to fetch the Haggard from the cage. She was far more fidgety than her son had been, and my hands shook as I looked at her big hooked bill and talons, but Grandad reassured me as I fitted the hood. Once it was on, she was fine, until we got her outside, and she began piping and calling. I repeated what I'd done with the younger bird, but tried a longer distance of about thirty yards. I stared as her huge wings approached me across the field, and then she smack-clenched her talons onto my glove. She seemed calmer, once she'd flown, folding her wings in neatly when she landed. After that she settled into making a series of longer glides across the field. Somehow, it

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felt like sound stopped whenever she flew. Grandad and I just looked at each other and smiled. She was absolutely massive. Her wings were growing stronger.

‘They’re getting the hang of it, Grandad.’

‘Aye. It’s what they were born for, eh? Good to see ‘em out. It’s not right, ‘em being cooped up like that. We had no choice, though.’ He clapped me on the shoulder. ‘Won’t be long now, boy. Bit more strength in those wings and they’ll be off.’ He nodded in the direction of Clisham.

I took the birds back inside and un-hooded them. I couldn’t imagine them flying away and not coming back.

a wish - for a raven's death

The barn door banged and blew back and forth. It was right old struggle trying to sweep the loose straw back into a neat pile. I jammed it up between two wooden boards and rammed it into the wheelbarrow, then tamped a layer of damp sheep-shit down on top of it. The barn door smashed back again. The old black tree stump squatted in the gloom. As I fixed the door back, something caught my eye. Nah! - It couldn't be. I ran my fingers over the cracked wood where the blood from my scratched hand had dripped. Bits of the wood looked green - new - as though the cracked edges were growing together. Not only that - I stepped back for a better look - the splayed claw of the tree-root seemed to be growing into the patchy earth and concrete of the barn. Shit! Was I losing it, again? The eagle voices in my head seemed to have stopped, but now... was I seeing stuff, again?

Dr Mackenzie's Land Rover drew up into the yard. He wound down his window and started chatting to Grandad.

I called out. 'Hey! Come and have a look at this.'

They carried on talking.

'Grandad! Come here a minute, could y...'

'Stew.' Grandad waved to me from across the yard. I walked over. The Doctor nodded at me stiffly and clenched his pipe between his teeth.

Grandad put his hand on my shoulder. 'It's yer dad. He's phoned again. He wants to speak to yer.'

'Yeah. So?' Why was he bringing this up in front of Dr Mackenzie?

'I'm sorry, Stewart.' The Doctor's pipe jiggled up and down and he took his cap off. 'He's phoned several times to enquire about yer Grandad. He's always asked about talking to you.'

'The Doctor won't get any peace until yer do, boy,' said Grandad.

The Doctor was getting a bit red in the face and pipe smoke looked like it was coming out of his ears.

'A quick word wouldn't hurt, eh?' Grandad was looking a bit pale.

'Lorna'll do yer some tea when yer come over.'

Dr Mackenzie's bribery worked.

'Yeah. OK.' I nodded seriously at him. A bargain had been struck. It wouldn't hurt to get in his good books.

He looked pleased with himself. 'Well done, lad,' he said, amid a cloud of smoke.

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Maybe he was hoping Dad would order me back home, away from Lorna.

'Will you be OK here on your own, Grandad?'

'Aye. Fine. Finish up in the barn and we'll have some tea, afore ye go.'

I left them talking and wheeled the barrow round behind the barn.

*

I revved up my bike, before switching it off and tilting it back onto the stand. Lorna opened the door and smiled. Her green flowery cotton dress whipped up high around her bare legs.

'Hello.' She smiled at me. 'Hello, Mrs Ferguson.' Lorna giggled and waved to the old lady across the road, who was hanging her washing on the line. 'Nosy old bag,' she muttered under her breath. 'Yer should have seen her panic when her giant underwear got caught on the horns of her cow. Hah!'

Mrs Ferguson didn't wave back, but carried on studying us between huge pairs of knickers – all pegged out - flapping wildly in the stiff wind. I waved too and stepped into the hall. Lorna shut the door and pounced on me. We held one another close and tottered dizzily against the wall, as we kissed.

'I'm glad yer came,' she said. 'We've got some time before yer dad calls, and mine's out on his rounds. I've made yer a nice big tea.' She grabbed my hand, pulled me up the stairs into her room and down onto her bed. 'Now, where were we?' She lay back on the pillow, pulling me onto her. We kissed.

Kiss... kiss... pillow-peck-brushes butterfly-wing-tip-beats Kiss... kiss... drowsy-eyes warmth... Day-work falls... away Wind-skin battered - all day... Fingertips finger-comb my hair Her breasts her heartbeat... my cheek... Her breasts her heartbeat... my cheek...

*

'Oh! Oh! Quick! The phone.'

'Uh?'

'Quick! Quick!' Lorna shoved me and jumped off the bed. The phone was ringing in the distance as she thundered down the stairs. I clambered up - nearly fell down the stairs and stumbled into the front room.

Lorna was holding the phone to her ear. 'Hello, Mr MacLeod,' she said. 'Hello, how are you?'

Her voice had changed. Her accent wasn't as strong. She sounded really posh. We both stood breathing hard and trying not to laugh.

'Yes. Stewart's here,' she said. 'No. Dad's out... Yes, Old Mr MacLeod is fine. We've been looking after him, don't worry. Oh. Not at all... You're welcome... Yes, yes... Would you like to speak to him?'

She held the phone out towards me. 'Stewie,' she hissed. 'It's yer dad.'

I stopped laughing and stared at the phone.

'Stewie!' she hissed, and shook the phone at me.

I just looked at it.

'Take it!' She thumped me on the arm.

I took it and held it to my ear. Lorna put her head next to mine. Her hair tickled my nose.

'Are you there? Is that you, Stew?'

I wanted to run. I hardly recognised Dad's voice. But I saw him - sitting frozen on the sofa - staring at my mum's ashes - at home. The atmosphere of the old home I'd left, full of the emptiness of Mum, flooded over me.

'Are you there? Are you there, Son?'

Lorna dug me hard, in the ribs.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I'm here.'

'How are you?'

'Er... All right.'

Big pause. 'That's good.' Bigger pause. 'How's your grandad?'

'All right.'

'Well... that's good... I hear you've been looking after him, an all.'

'Yeah.'

'That's good, Son.' Big pause. 'Look... I'm gonna be coming up to see you.'

'Don't bother! We don't want you here!' I slammed the phone down.

Lorna's mouth hung open.

'He can fuck off!' I said.

Cha d'rinn sàr nach d'fhuilling sàr

'Yer shouldn't have put the phone down on him, lad.'

Rain pelted and battered the windows. I could just see the stump across the yard. I could swear it was looking taller.

'Yeah. Sorry. It just happened.'

The wind skirled wildly around the house - Like a wild banshee-eagle-creature. The fire crackled. Grandad slurped his tea. I joined him next to the hearth.

'I'm sorry I didn't ever write to you, Grandad.'

'Eh? How d'yer mean?'

'When I was a kid.'

'Ah! Not to worry, boy. I had some lovely Christmas and birthday cards, that yer made when yer were a nipper.'

'Really?'

'Aye. I've got 'em somewhere.'

'Wow. I'd forgotten that.'

'Yer mum used to send them every year, and you'd just make a little scribble of yer name at the bottom, at first. Then, yer made me a card with a Christmas tree on it. Lots of glittery stuff stuck all over it. Other cards, too. I'll have to dig 'em out.'

'I'd completely forgotten that. Still. It wouldn't have hurt to try and write, when I got older, would it. With Mum helping me, I mean.'

'Forget it. I never wrote to you, did I? How many letters did yer get from me, eh?' He punched me gently on the shoulder.

'Yeah. But I wasn't stuck up here on me own, was I?'

'Don't worry. I know what it's like when yer a kid. There's more important things to be getting on with, eh? Running around and being alive. I used to run round these hills. I don't know where I got the energy from.' He sighed. 'Anyway. There's folk up here when yer need 'em. I suppose I didn't want or need 'em, most of the time.' He looked at me, with cloudy grey eyes. 'I didn't want to be around other folk. Never did. Not after the wars, or in between, leastways. They didn't wanna be round me either.'

'How come?'

He paused. 'I was put to shame. I was what's known as a conchie.'

'A what?'

Pinhead

'Conscientious objector. None ever did violence but suffered violence. I refused to fight.'

'But you've got those medals... gallantry.'

'I was in prison first, boy.'

'No?'

'Aye. I was given a choice. And when our lads started coming back with bits blown off, I signed up as a stretcher bearer.'

'But you were there... in the fighting... saving people.'

Grandad smiled. 'Thanks, boy. Wish'd yer dad saw it that way. He was ashamed of me. I think that's why he joined up... to fight. I reckon. But he never got to see action, thankfully.'

'But what about the medals? Why wasn't he proud of you? You were in both wars... helping people.'

Grandad looked down. 'My fault, I guess... never told him... Only told yer nan. I never spoke of it... any of it... too... hard...' Grandad swallowed. 'I s'pose it changed me. No use pretending it didn't. But I did pretend.' He paused and gulped and then came a red-flood of words. 'I was seconded to Verdun - nineteen sixteen. They lost near enough a million men there between 'em - French - German - both sides. Not that there's any difference. Men are men. They... it... it was like picking up bits o meat, boy. Men... bits o meat that screamed.' He gulped again. 'It was so bad there, that... that years after... after the war. They just had to grow an entire forest over the battlefields 'cos it were so full o men and shells and poison. Poison. They poisoned the land wi rotten corpses and cordite. The Zone Rouge they called it - the red zone - too poisonous, too dangerous to be in - even now. Zone Rouge... Zone Rouge... Zone Rouge. I went back there once - nothing but trees. Full o trees.' Grandad stopped and kept gulping and gulping. He stared into the flames.

I couldn't speak.

'Yer might have to go there one day, boy.'

'How d'you mean?'

'I'll tell yer. I'll tell yer one day. It... it must have been hard for yer nan and yer dad, living with me. No wonder he never kept in touch. After yer nan died, he couldn't get away quick enough.'

'He should have come to see you.'

'Not his fault, Stew.' Grandad dug at the armchair with his nails. 'I set him a bad example, too. By the looks of it.'

'How d'you mean?'

'He should have laid off yer a bit, when yer was young. Took more care not to push yer away, like I did to him.'

'Yeah. He should of.'

'Should have.' Grandad winked. 'Anyway, yer forgetting something.'

'What?'

'He only had me as an example. Looks like he couldn't escape that.' Grandad stared into the flames. 'Funny how clear it all seems, now. As though I was looking at someone else's life.' He stabbed at the armchair with his fingers. 'But it's not someone else's life. It's mine. Trouble is, it always felt like someone else's life. In the war I was on borrowed time, and that's how it's always seemed. Like if I rested for a second that the sky would fall in. Each day it didn't fall, I felt like a cheat, and it seemed all the more certain that the sky would fall the next day. Then, it did fall in. When yer nan died. I stopped caring after that. And I've wasted the last thirty years being bitter, not caring. Not really living. I should have cared for yer dad.' He looked into my eyes. 'Don't worry about not writing to me in the past, boy. Yer are here now and I'm living. Now. I don't know. Maybe if yer dad comes up here, maybe I can tell him some of this stuff. Try and build something with him, start again. Eh?'

'I wouldn't bet on it, Grandad.'

'Well. Who knows, eh? An dèidh cogaidh thig sith.'

'What does that mean?'

'After war comes peace, boy.' He rested his old hand on mine for a second. As I studied its bulging blue veins and brown spots, I could feel my face glowing. I wanted to hug him and run away at the same time. I tried to hold his gaze. This was important.

'The thing is, Stew. We shouldn't let the heather grow under our feet, so much. Yer turn around one day and life's passed yer by. All the things yer thought yer'd do, wanted to do. Needed to do. Suddenly it's too late. Up in the hills, down in the bays, out on the sea. I've always been surrounded by the past. Memories, dreams, whatnot. I got so I didn't know what was real and what was past, or imagined. But that's not the real problem. There's less of a divide between dreams and life, past and present, aye, and humans and nature, than people care to admit. The real problem is that we don't give enough out, while we're together. Not enough... love, while we're alive. It's easy enough to love people once they're dead, or gone. You've helped me realise this, Stew. You, and the eagles and Lorna.'

I gulped. I wanted to run away. I wanted to hug him.

I tried to hold his gaze. He let go of my hand and we both stared into the fire.

An dèidh cogaidh thig sith...

An dèidh gaoithe thig uisge...

painting in bronze

The birds sat motionless on their posts, in the outside cage. Their feathers ruffled each time the wind blew.

'It's about time for your nap, isn't it, Grandad?'

I could see he was flagging. His movements slow.

'Aye, I spose so. Yer all right, finishing up here? Putting the birds away?'

'Yeah. Of course.'

'Right, then. Bring me in the tea and biscuits at about three-thirty, then.' He grinned at me.

'Right-ho, your lordship.' I tugged my imaginary forelock and bowed. 'What did your last servant die of, again?'

'Gah!' He laughed and walked off around the side of the barn, back to the house. He looked a bit rocky on his legs.

When he'd gone I looked at his watch. This was my chance - I'd got two and a half hours, before waking him up. I sprang into the shed and pulled out the canvas I'd hidden in the cupboard and the easel Grandad had made for me. I took them out into the sunlight and set them up about ten feet away from the bird's perch-posts. I got the rest of my paints and brushes and stuff, rigged up a makeshift table out of an old box and placed them alongside the easel. I looked at the sky - big gaps of blue sky between the fast moving clouds - a bit changeable as far as the light was concerned, but no sign of rain. I got stuck into my work, mixing up base colours for all the shades of eagle I could see.

I'd been pleased with the sketches I'd transferred to the canvas. Eagle-tearing, ripping. Eagle-wings spread wide. Eagles glaring, staring, soaring. Details and complete birds, all scattered over a background of an angry eagle head. So far, what I'd built up was good, but as I looked at my work, I hesitated. I didn't want to cock it all up.

'C'mon, Stew.'

I'd have to work quickly. I didn't want Grandad to wake up early and see his gift before I'd got it finished.

'C'mon, Stewie.' I gripped my brush, trying to think of what Mrs Altmann, my old art teacher, might say. I walked close to the haggard, then the passager. Stared into their black eyes as they twitched their heads and blinked at me. The light died and the birds sat motionless on their posts. I walked back to the easel, kicking at the grass. I just wasn't in the mood, somehow.

Pinhead

Suddenly, as quickly as it had gone, the light returned from behind a fast moving cloud. The breeze picked up and shook the canvas against the easel. It ruffled the feathers of the feathered crowns of the birds. I felt their black eyes flicker over me.

Tsil-tsil-tschil!

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

The wind blew.

Toh-tSchil!

It blew harder. It shuddered my canvas and ruffled my hair, and the birds opened their wings and beat the air. The light caught the napes of their necks and their angry flared eagle-crowns.

I splurged paint on my pallet - Brown Ochre, Chrome Yellow - Madder - Brown Madder. I mixed it right - daubed it on the canvas, working as quickly as I could. *Feathers...* I gripped the wooden handle of my brush, and I worked fast - *Feathers... wings... feathers...* I moved deftly... *Talons... gripping... feathers...* I checked the pallet colours close alongside the heads of the birds. *Wild-eyes... bill-hooks... feathers...* I brushed and stroked the canvas, blended the shades into one another. *Feathers...* I lost myself in light and shade and detail. I lost myself... in... *Talons... feathers...*

Toh-tSchil!

The mother spread her wings wide, and glared. Time was up. Clouds formed quickly, blotting out the light. I packed away as fast as I could – stashed the wet canvas in the cupboard - stacked paints; brushes into jam-jars of white spirit; easel back into the shed - then, back to the birds. They seemed wilder and angrier than ever, at being re-caged. I fed them, locked them up and headed off to make Grandad some tea. He was sitting up in bed, comfortably settled under his duvet, reading the paper. He looked up at me, with a big grin on his face.

‘About time an’ all,’ he said.

I handed him his tea and he settled back against his pillows.

‘Aah,’ he sighed, through a mouth full of Gingernuts. ‘This is the life.’

I took a couple from the packet myself and crunched one, grinning back at him. ‘Yer lazy auld bugger,’ I said.

the fish in the sea, like us mortals be...

'Point the tiller in the opposite direction to where yer want to go, yer big nit!' said Grandad.

In the front of the big skiff, Lorna and Danny were creased up with laughter. For some reason I couldn't get the hang of steering and kept going round and round in circles.

'How can yer ride a motorbike and not steer a boat?' cried Lorna, with tears running down her face.

'Leave off. It's not the same,' I winked at Grandad and made the boat go round again.

'Give it here, yer great nana. Yer'll have us all in the drink.' Grandad took the tiller and throttled back the outboard motor that burbled and bubbled in the water behind us. 'Get yer arse for'ard and watch yer don't fall in.'

I wobbled my way past the lobster creels to the front of the boat, where Lorna and Danny were bundled up amongst piles of lines and ropes. Grandad steered us parallel with the shore, dropping a creel every twenty-five yards or so. When all the pots were gone, he turned off the motor and dropped the anchor. I'd never seen the bay so calm and blue... *sea-ghost-clear blue-gold air-light...* The sea lapped gently at the paint-flaking sides of the boat... *sea-tongue lick sip-sup ripple-slap... wash...* Lorna trailed her fingers in the water. About twenty feet away, a seal popped its head upright from the sea, its speckled face mirrored in the blue surface.

'Look, Danny.' I pointed.

Lorna grabbed the back of his trousers as he jumped up. The boat wobbled. He looked like he wanted to dive in.

Lorna clutched him close to her. 'Yer don't want to scare him off, now,' she said.

The specky kid settled back and rested against her, his eyes fixed on the seal, which dived and resurfaced on the other side of the boat.

Grandad stretched out and made himself comfortable by the motor. 'I'd not say no to some o that cake, now. Lorna,' he said. 'Have yer heard the tale of the Silkie, Stew?'

'Eh? What's that?'

'D'yer not know of the water spirits that walk amongst us folk on the land, now?' said Lorna.

'What? Another myth? Like Seonaidh, our Land Rover?'

'Och, no. Yer twit,' she said. 'It's true. Some of us locals have fins and scales and fur, yer know. And we live in the sea most of the time.'

'Oh. I know all about that.'

Pinhead

'Yer guessed I'm a mermaid, then?'

Images of Lorna's naked swim flickered behind my eyes. 'Er... erm... yeah. I guessed it, right off.'

'Aye, she'll have yer on the rocks if yer don't watch it, boy. Now, stop blathering and pass me some cake.' Grandad held his hand out and I relayed a big chunk of Lorna's chocolate cake back to him. 'Mmmm,' he said.

'D'yer like it, Mr MacLeod?'

Grandad gave the thumbs up and carried on stuffing it in his mouth.

'So. Are mermaids bad, then Lorna?' I said.

'No. I'm a good sprite.'

'Gah!' said Grandad. 'D'yer ever hear from those fellas who were up here, girl?'

'What fellas?' I said.

'A bunch o marine biologists, or summat. Studying the sea-life... seals, fish, seaweed, molluscs and whatnot. Yon Danny took a right shine to 'em, as yer can imagine. What was the name of that group that long-haired fella belonged to, Lorna? He reckoned he was off to the Pacific, with them.'

'Greenpeace, Mr MacLeod. On the Rainbow Warrior.'

'Oh, that's right. He was a nice fella.'

Lorna said nothing.

'Oh, what? Save the whales, an all that?' I said.

'Aye,' said Lorna. 'It's about more than that, though. It's about the whole environment. The whole planet.'

'It needs saving. Fer sure,' said Grandad, motioning for more cake. 'What is it yer call 'em, Lorna? These fellas?'

'Environmentalists.'

'That's it.'

'It's what I want to be. What I want to study. One day.' Lorna stared back towards the shore.

'Maybe yer will, girl. One day. Eh? Yer old man'll get by without yer.'

Lorna looked at Danny, and at me. Then stared off into the hazy blue distance. 'Maybe,' she said.

Tha `n t-iasg sa chuan mar tha `n sluagh air tir...

storm-seed
seed-soul-she
tidal speckled egg-girl
reaches out
draws away reaches-draws all in her moon
ripe as fruit ripe as soil
for seeds fluttering whisper-wise-she
wanting waiting for
circling-life-death cycling-fast-stillness wise-earth-she

in cheek-blossom singing-skin in bloom shifting her our flow the race the

ebb the tide she is in spring now suckle-efflorescence now turn the earth

now make now plant now wind the wild vines now find the forests from

your fern-feather-fingered sketch-scrawl sheer-drawn dreams

clasp-close lick her our lush-lichened-lips speckle-suckle
storm-peat-kiss the groves of earth cliff-crack the
rocks of trees of night of fire of sun-sky of all -

salt ocean shimmers
sea-spark-glimmers
release inner rivers
adrift in silver-shivers
let earth-seed-sap flow

kid Cèilidh

The engine of the bike juddered to stillness. I tilted it back on the rest, outside the wall of a great big old church. I'd decided not to ride right up to the hotel, in case someone got onto Grandad about my lack of insurance and a licence. The gauntlets fitted snugly into the helmet, slung across the handle bars. I headed up the road, hoping I was going in the right direction, guessing where the hotel might be. The wind was really picking up, but the sun was shining and it was quite warm. Eventually, sifted, folkie music drifted down on the wind and I saw the old hotel building around the flank of a steep hill. There was no sign of Lorna outside, but a few kids were milling around in the little car park, giggling and looking in through the window. They went quiet when they saw me, but started giggling again and looking at me while I leaned against the wall in the sun. After a bit, two girls and a boy of about twelve or so, came over to me.

'Is your name Stewie?' said one of the girls. Her red hair was almost invisible in the sunlight.

'Yeah.'

'Are yer a punk?' said the boy.

'Sort of...'

'I told yer,' he said to the girls.

The girl with invisible hair looked me up and down. 'Are yer waiting for Lorna Mackenzie?'

'Yeah. I am. How did you know?'

'She told us to tell yer, that...'. The girls started giggling again, and the boy told them to "Hush!".

'She's waiting for yer inside,' he said.

'Are you Lorna's boyfriend?' said the red-haired girl.

I suddenly realised that I didn't know if I was or not. I thought it best not to drop Lorna in it. Maybe these kids might tell their parents. 'Nah, we're just mates,' I said. 'Just friends.'

'Oh.' The girls looked disappointed.

'Is he your boyfriend?' I grinned at the girl with red hair.

'Oh, no!' The girls gasped and went into fits of giggles. The boy blushed bright red.

'Sorry, mate,' I said.

The hotel door was ajar. Through the front window I could see the backs of people's heads. The room looked full. The music was quite loud, now. All the kids were staring at me. I looked at my reflection in the glass of the door and fluffed my hair up a bit. Lorna had done a

good job on it - just like John Maher. I gripped the handle of the door, but hesitated. The kids were all watching me. I couldn't turn back.

It was always like this - going into pubs. You never knew who'd be in there - your mates, a bunch of punk-hating lorry drivers, a bunch of teds, or worst of all, a gang of NF skinheads. I was a long way from home - a long way from my own tribe, and scared of getting the usual flack. But as always, part of me was ready for it, looking forward to it, proud of my tribe of one.

I opened the door and squeezed my way into the crowded room. Everyone was staring over at the band playing in an alcove to my left, and no-one gave me a second glance. I peered over the hats and tops of people's heads; there was still no sign of Lorna. After a couple of minutes squeezing my way around the room and spilling people's drinks, I was getting fed-up with saying 'Excuse me' and 'Sorry', and my face was stiff from trying to smile. I couldn't see her anywhere. I watched the band. They were playing quite a fast tune and a lot of people were stamping and clapping along to the rhythm. At first I could only hear the twiddly bits of fiddle and accordion, and wimpy acoustic guitars strumming away. It was so quiet compared to the gigs I was used to - no amps or electric guitars. The song ended and the crowd clapped loudly. Then, the band started playing again - a kind of whirling skirling riff that wound up and around and down and about - over and over. Two seated guitarists bobbed their heads rhythmically as the tension began to build. I found myself tapping my boot as a bloke beat out a rhythm on a funny kind of flat drum. The guitars backed him up and a tall dark woman, with her back to me, started playing the fiddle. As the tune built up, she scythed out strange, sad riffs over the chords of guitar and accordion, dipping up and down with the music. The tune picked up a notch and the sound of the fiddle rose and fell, twisting and compelling and mournful, faster and faster. Every head in the room bobbed to the beat, every boot bopped and every fist crumped the table tops. The music sucked me in. It was actually fucking good! The woman's long hair flicked faster and the room moved with her. Then, the song finished and everyone clapped and cheered and banged the tables.

I clapped.

The woman turned round.

She bowed.

It was... Lorna!

She saw me straight away and smiled. Her hair was looking pretty wild stuck all over her rosy, speckly face, and her eyes were glittering. She put her fiddle in a case and left it with one of the guitarists, then waded through the sea of bodies towards me. An old bearded man took out his own fiddle, and the band launched into another stomping song.

'Follow me,' Lorna called into my ear. She led me into a less crowded room with a bar. I felt tongue-tied. I didn't know what to say to this wild fiddle-wielding Lorna. Finally, we reached

the bar.

‘Are yer gonna buy me a drink, then?’ she said. ‘I’m gasping.’

‘Yeah. Oh. Yeah. What would you like?’ I was glad to be doing something familiar and having something ordinary to say. It was weird being with Lorna amongst all these other people.

‘I’ll have a pale ale,’ she said.

‘Two pale ales and two bags of salt and vinegar crisps,’ I said to the barman, who raised an eyebrow.

‘How old are yer, son?’

‘Nineteen,’ I said.

‘He’s Stewie MacLeod, from Car a` mhuiltein,’ said Lorna.

‘Rob’s son, eh?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I was at school with Rob,’ he said. He handed us the drinks. ‘Is he gonna come back?’

‘Maybe,’ I said, relieved I’d avoided humiliation.

‘Tell him, hello from Tam.’

I paid him. ‘Thanks. I will.’

Lorna pressed up against me as a crowd of people surged to the bar. ‘Well,’ she said.

‘What d’yer think?’

‘I didn’t know you were playing.’

‘I wanted to surprise yer.’

‘You did that, sure enough.’

‘Still think fiddles and folk music are naff?’

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I feel a bit stupid. After all I said. I had no idea it could be like that.’

‘Like what? Exactly?’

‘So wild. I was really getting into it. You’re really good.’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘I didn’t mean I was surprised you were good. You’re good at... everything.’

Lorna smiled up at me. ‘Everything?’ She really glowed. I wanted to kiss her.

‘Would yer like to hear some more?’

I nodded and followed her back to the music. We stood, pressed close in the crowd. I had a few funny looks from people looking at my hair, but the room felt really friendly, and everyone knew Lorna. We had a few more drinks. Lorna trod on my foot.

‘Woops! Sorry. I’m getting a bit clumsy, a bit woosy. I haven’t had any supper,’ she said.

‘Let’s get some fresh air.’

I followed her out into the car park. The kids had gone. It had really freshened up and the sun was a lot lower now. It would be with us for hours yet, though. My head swam.

Lorna led me around the side of the hotel. She pulled me close and kissed me. She tasted of pale ale and crisps.

'Mmm,' she said. 'Yer taste nice.'

'So do you,' I said. 'It's beer.'

'Have yer got yer bike?'

'Yeah.'

'Are yer gonna take me for a ride, then?'

'What about your dad?'

'He's not here,' she said.

We walked down the road towards the church.

Sheela Na Gig

I looked out of the Southern window and screwed up my eyes against the sun. The sea between Uist and Harris had churned up into a milky-blue lather of waves.

‘Think of all the people who’ve looked out here,’ I said.

Lorna didn’t answer. I could only just see her outline in the dim loft of the church.

‘You OK?’

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘We better be getting back, eh?’

I followed her down the steep steps, out through the church and back into the yard. The wind buffeted us as we walked to the gate. I looked back at the ladder and scaffolding.

‘Hang on, I wanna take a look at that old carving your mum told me about. The Sheela... Sheela... what was it?’

‘Na Gig.’ Lorna tugged my arm.

‘She said you’d show me. It’s on the South facing side, isn’t it?’

‘Leave it, Stewie. It’s time we went.’

‘Why? It won’t take a sec. What’s up?’

‘Nothing,’ she said.

‘I’ll just nip up the ladder and have a look.’

I walked back to the grey church tower and put my hands on the ladder. Lorna was moping around at the gate for some reason, but I went up anyway - clinging on tight to the rungs of the ladder. The wind tugged at my arms and legs as I climbed higher. It was even worse on the wobbly platform. I gripped the cold scaffold poles and edged round the church tower. The Eastern side was more sheltered from the wind, but the wooden planks shifted underneath me as I crept along. Above me the stone carving was embedded into the wall of the tower. I leaned out to get a better view, gripping the icy scaffolding. The stone carving was really worn and knackered, but I could make out a human figure. Most of its features had been worn away by centuries of fierce weather. Why would Mrs Mackenzie suggest I climb all the way up here to see this thing? I peered closer. I began to see clearly and felt a thrill of surprise, and shock. A bare-breasted woman was squatting, holding what looked like a lamb or a baby in her arms. Her legs were spread wide apart, so you clearly see the cleft between her thighs. Even though it was worn, the detail was still clear. I felt Lorna beside me on the platform.

‘It’s the Sheela Na Gig,’ she said. Her face was red - the wind or the climb, maybe.

‘What’s a Sheela Na Gig?’

'Not sure. Some people think it's a kind of ancient fertility symbol. Others say it's a warning.'

'Warning against what?' I said.

Lorna spluttered with laughter. 'The... the Devil... in the groin.'

'Oh, right,' I said. 'Hah! You've gone all red.'

'Oh, shut up!' She dug me in the ribs.

'Why would your mum tell me to look at this?'

'To embarrass me. And you. One of her sick jokes, maybe. I told you she was weird. Or maybe she wants yer to connect with the Gaelic heart of our revered ancient culture. Hah!'

I made my way further on around the platform, looking at the patchwork of grey stone slabs. I stopped when we came to a second figure. 'Oh,' I said.

'Ha ha! Now, who's gone red?'

A male figure had been carved into the wall. He leaned over us clutching his long stone penis between two fists. The figure looked like it was having a wank.

'That's the lewd man of Rodel,' said Lorna, giggling.

'Right. I've seen 'em, now. Shall we go, then?'

Lorna stayed put and I couldn't get past her. She peered at the carving, moving closer.

'Come on now, Stewie. Yer wanted to see them. Is it realistic? Is it good artwork?'

'How am I supposed to know,' I said. 'C'mon. Let's go.'

Lorna blocked my way, grinning and giggling wickedly. 'Do you do that, then?' She poked me in the stomach. 'Do yer? Eh? Eh?'

'Nah! Leave it out, you nutter. You're as mad as your Mum.'

Lorna stopped poking me and moved closer to the wall. Closer to the carving. 'No, I'm not!'

I edged around behind her on the scaffolding, suddenly aware of the drop to the gravestones as I squeezed past. I tottered on round the platform and Lorna followed. She was quiet. I stopped, confronted with the Sheela Na Gig. I challenged Lorna.

'So, *do you* do that, then?' I said.

'Do what?'

'What she's doing,' I pointed at the carving.

'She's having a baby, yer dope.'

'Oh.'

She caught my arm. 'Ye're right embarrassed by the carvings, aren't yer?' She sneered.

'So are you.' I glowered back at her.

The wind whistled around the tower as we stared silently at each other.

Lorna looked away first. 'OK. I know. Silly, isn't it. Embarrassed by a couple of stone

carvings.'

Her hair whipped across and covered her face. She didn't brush it back, she hid behind it, but I could see her green eyes glinting at me through the shiny dark veil. She took hold of my fingers in her hand.

'So... *do* yer do it, then?'

I didn't answer.

I felt a shiver of surprise run through me as Lorna raised my fingers to the wall and ran them along the cleft between the stone woman's thighs. She gasped and dropped my hand. The wind blew the hair back from her face and her eyes were wide.

'I'm sorry, Stewie. I...'

I could feel my jaw hanging loose, in surprise.

'C'mon, we better go.'

She tried to push past me towards the ladder, but I held her there, pressed against me. I was nearly toppling over the scaffold rail.

Lorna looked up at me. 'I'm sorry. You must think I'm awful.'

'No. No, I don't...' We both swayed on the scaffolding. 'Lorna... Lorna...'

'What?' she said.

'I do, do it.'

'Do what?'

'What the carving was doing. The lewd man.' I felt my mouth getting dry.

'Oh.' She looked down and hid behind her hair. 'I... I do, too,' she mumbled.

'Really? Like the carving?'

'Aye.'

'Jesus! You don't mean *you've* got a stone willy, do you?'

'Oh, Stewie! I was trying to be serious.' She tore away from me and moved back round towards the ladder. I followed her. The smack of the wind nearly blew me off the platform.

'I'm sorry, Lorna!' I yelled.

She climbed backwards down the ladder as I wobbled and gripped onto the top.

'Lorna!'

'Oh, what now? What?' She glared up at me.

I yelled down against the blast of the wind. 'I... I think about... about you.'

'I can't hear yer.' She reached the bottom and stomped off across the graveyard.

I scrambled down the ladder, legged it between the gravestones and caught her by the arm as she reached the gate. She glowered at me through her flailing black stream of hair.

'I said... I think about you...'

'What?' She glowered at me.

'When I... when I... you know.'

'Oh.' She brushed her hair back from her face and the corners of her mouth slowly turned up.

'I didn't want to lie to you... keep it from you any more. I'm sorry.' I couldn't meet her eye. 'It's OK. Don't be sorry, Stewie.' She raised her hand to my face and stroked my cheek.

She put her arms around my neck and pressed her face close to my ear. 'Yer a sweet boy, Stewie,' she said.

She squeezed me close and I held her tight.

'It's a bit scary, all this. Isn't it?'

'Yeah,' I said.

She took my hand and led me towards the motorbike.

'It's a real compliment,' she said.

The sun was beginning to get lower in the sky. I kick-started the JC and Lorna climbed on behind me. She clasped her hands around my waist, gripping me tight and resting her head against my shoulder. I pulled out onto the road and cruised back along the coast. The engine purred below us and I kept it steady - nice and slow, in case Lorna was scared.

'Go faster!' she yelled into my ear.

By the time we reached Scarista, the sun hung like a big orange-pink orb over the sea horizon. The peaks to the north cast long shadows behind them, and all the meadows were lit with a warm gentle light. I pulled off the road onto the grass and turned the engine off. All I could hear was the wind hissing and rustling through the grass. Lorna climbed off the bike and stood looking across the meadows.

'The grass looks like it's all different colours in these fields,' I said.

'It really is. Isn't it lovely?' said Lorna. 'The fields - it's called the Machair. They're filled with lots of tiny wildflowers. All different kinds and colours.'

'Yeah. It is lovely.'

Lorna took my hand and led me down the grassy bank and behind the roofless shell of an old Blackhouse. It gave us some shelter from the wind. She turned round and kissed me, then pulled me down beside her against the wall. Everything became a blur of kisses and hands and hair as we sank down together onto the cold grass. I felt her guide my palm onto her breast. My hand trembled as I gently squeezed the softness under her jumper, and in the half-light, I could see her smiling. My hand began to shake more and I began to feel a sense of panic rising in my chest. What was I gonna do if she wanted me to have sex with her? I tried to remember everything they'd told us at school. I tried to remember what Sumo and the lads had talked about - about their sex-plaits and what girls liked. About tits and pussy and fingering and fucking. Anatomy diagrams from children's Ladybird books flickered behind my eyes - strange alien names

and labels I'd been told, never really knowing which was which - Vagina, Inner and Outer Labia, and something somewhere called a Clitoris. Oh fuck! What was I going to do? I remembered love scenes from films - the rhythmic moving and the groaning. I had to do it right. I didn't want to fuck it up - fail her - fail myself. Splayed centre-spreads from Playboy drifted into picture, and the Girl in the green stockings. I squeezed the little mound of Lorna's breast through the rough wool of her cardigan.

'Mmm... that's nice,' she said.

She unbuttoned her dress at the top and slid my trembling hand inside. My breath was coming in shorts gasps. Her skin was smooth, cool, soft. She stroked my fingers and I lifted the shallow cup of her bra and slid my hand inside. My fingers travelled across her soft skin and covered her shock-hard nipple. My head reeled. I was actually touching a girl's breast. I was touching Lorna's breast. As I took this in, Lorna moaned with a sound of relief and pressed her body against me. She firmly took my other hand and slid it up her skirt, between her legs. We both gasped, and I felt the rustle of pubic hair through the thin cotton of her knickers, as she moved under my hand. I felt distant to myself - almost outside my own body. This moaning, writhing girl wasn't the Lorna who helped me with the cleaning, who tried to teach me to write, or listened to what messed me up. She wasn't the girl I trusted. She kissed me and slid my hand into her knickers. She guided my hand across the startling wiry hair to a sudden single blade of silk-soft skin. She pressed my finger down and I felt the blade divide into hot wetness. We both gasped again, and Lorna moaned as I pressed my hand across, and up, and down, and in and out, desperately trying to remember what the lads had told me.

'Faster,' Lorna whispered, softly. 'Faster.'

As she breathed quicker I could almost feel her excitement and energy travelling through my fingers, up through my wrist and arm, into my chest and the pit of my stomach. Into my groin. Suddenly, she pushed me back - fiddled with my belt buckle, undid my jeans and pulled them down. My erect cock flopped out. She pulled her knickers off and flung them into the grass.

'They're just my second best ones,' she said. 'I didn't know you'd be seeing them.'

'I didn't see them,' I said. 'It's OK. It's too dark to...'

'Shut up, Stewie!'

Lorna kissed me - gasped into my mouth. We rolled down into the Machair. Her cool thighs wrapped around me - my cock hard - against her soft skin - then hand-guided against wiry hair, guided into hot wetness. Guided into a freedom - slowly - deeper and deeper - inside Lorna - *flailing into salt-root-mist - flailing falling failing -*

'I don't want to hurt you.'

'It doesn't hurt me.'

'Don't let me hurt you.'

Pinhead

'I won't let you hurt me.'

'Lorna.'

'It doesn't hurt me.'

Now I am adrift in her - inhaling a river-star-cone – too much – too bright

She gasps.

Swim-linger in her swell - soar ripe in her speckled under-tow

All is breath.

Kiss our lichened lips... suckle heathered peat-kissed spirit-tips

*All is inside Lorna - germ-calling she speckled egg-girl ripe as fruit ripe as soil for seeds
tidal speckled egg-girl seed-soul-she reaches-draws all in her moon peat-kiss the groves of earth
cliff-crack the rock now turn the earth now make now plant now wind the wild vines now find the
forests clasp-close lick her-our lush-lichened-lips speckle-suckle salt ocean shimmers release inner
rivers adrift in silver-shivers*

Let earth-seed-sap FLOW...

Suddenly, she cried out, her hips convulsing, and at the same time - I felt myself spasm as we core-collided - shook-melted together.

Together. We clung together - breathing hard. My whole body glowed, and the top of my head had no ceiling. I was floating up into the sunset sky - unsure if I'd ever come back down. Gradually, our grip on one another's bodies loosened. I felt my heart beating slower, and felt Lorna's doing the same. Her thighs felt hot against my side, but my sweat began to chill and I felt her shiver, this time from the cold. My thoughts whirled in the realisation that we'd done it. We'd made love. We'd had sex. My new ex-virgin-self strutted around before the 'old' Stewie. It paraded in front of Sumo and the lads, fist raised and grinning arrogantly like it'd just scored the winning goal in the FA Cup Final, at Wembley. It flung its head back and yelled to the heavens 'I'm a man now! I did it! I fucked her! The crowd roared and roared! But the 'new' Stewie faded. I held a deeper glow - that went beyond my inner Wembley - I clung to this closeness with Lorna - the trembling strangeness of being joined like this to an other - me inside her. I stroked her hair and held her close until I felt her begin to sob. She shifted beneath me, turned away from me, and as I left the warmth inside her body our mixed liquids trickled cold and wet, into the darkness, onto the grass. I felt her body shaking and the Wembley crowds fell silent.

'Lorna. What's wrong?' I gently pulled the hair away from her face, but she pushed me away.

'Did I hurt you? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'It's nothing,' she said.

I pulled up my pants and trousers. I tried to wrap her up in my arms and my jacket, but

she kept on sobbing. A cold damp patch spread inside my pants.

'Tell me. What's wrong? Have I done something wrong?' I was scared I'd hurt her, inside. Scared she hadn't enjoyed it. Scared she wouldn't do it with me, again. Scared I wasn't as good at it as I thought I'd been.

She stood up and put my jacket on. 'It's not your fault,' she sobbed. 'It's me. I shouldn't have. I shouldn't have.'

'Why? Didn't you like it?'

'Yes. Of course I liked it.'

'So why... what's wrong?'

'I shouldn't have.'

'What do you mean?'

'I've... I've sinned.'

'Er...' I reached out to stroke her arm, but she pushed my hand away.

'We should have used a condom.'

'I...'

'Why didn't yer have a condom?'

'I... I... Aren't yer on the pill?'

'No! I'm not on the bloody pill!'

'You didn't tell me.'

'So yer just bloody assumed everything would be all right?'

'I... I didn't think.'

She started to sob uncontrollably. 'What if I get pregnant? What about me going to uni?' She thumped my chest weakly with the insides of her fists. 'I'll never get off this bloody island! I'll be stuck here forever! Bloody well stuck here!' She stooped over and peered around her in the dark grass, sobbing. 'I can't find my knickers.'

I felt around in the grass on my hands and knees. Her crying quietened a bit. I picked up the tiny piece of cotton. 'I've found them.' I held them out to her. 'They're a bit wet. From the grass, I mean.'

'Thank you.' She put them in the pocket of my jacket. 'I can't put these on.'

'I love you, Lorna.' I rubbed her shoulder.

'Oh, Stewie. Just take me home. I left my bike near your grandad's.' She wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

I pushed the JC up the hill to the road and kick-started it. The noise of the engine blared out into the failing light and the headlamp shone onto flecks of rock along the road. Our secret - our secret closeness was gone. I sat on the bike.

'You better hold on,' I said.

Pinhead

'I don't care if I fall off.'

'Please. You must hold on.'

Lorna climbed on behind me. 'I better hold my fucking dress down, don't yer mean?' She laughed, bitterly.

I laughed too, and felt myself crying. 'I love you,' I said again.

She gripped me round the waist and pushed her face into my shoulder. 'Oh, Stewie. C'mon. Dad'll wonder where I am.'

I let the clutch out and we roared away from the derelict house. I wound around the endless twilight turns and over the hills. Strange shadows were falling. I could feel her sobbing, against me. She tapped me on the shoulder and I pulled up at the hollow where she'd left her bike. She jumped off and chucked my jacket on some rocks. I clutched at her arm, but she pulled away.

'Not now, Stewie!'

She peddled off down the track, out of the beam of the headlight. I watched her go, pulled on my jacket and stood there in the twilight, clutching her second best knickers in my pocket.

strange pursuit

I leaned against the warm JC and held Lorna's knickers in my hand. The hot engine spit-ticked in the dew-air. At least I'd done it. I'd done it. I'd had sex. I'd fucked her. I tried to hold onto this cold trophy that I could parade in front of myself and the lads. But it wasn't enough - now. I tried to hold onto the feeling of being so close to her - the humming-bird-flutter of being inside her - but the aching bird flitted off to find her, down the track. Now, the lack of Lorna was growing like a sad-egg inside me - a seed-loss. She'd gone - just when we'd felt so close.

'Fuck it!'

I should have had a condom. I shouldn't have been so selfish.

'Fucking idiot!'

I didn't deserve a lovely girl like Lorna. I was just shit and dirt. I was just like Shit-Sumo and the Shit-lads. I looked over towards the hills and the dim-weird shadows began falling. The strange tree illusion was happening again - a forest of shadows, grope-growing towards me along the slopes. I looked closer - it really was weird - it was almost as though you could see real trees - spooky. I didn't like it. I kicked the bike into life - revved the engine gently.

'It's just an illusion, you idiot!'

I tucked Lorna's knickers into my pocket and zipped up my jacket. It was freezing cold. My breath rose like a mist. I looked back at the shadows as the sunlight left. Slowly, growing closer along either side of the road, trees of all kinds were rising from the ground. Getting nearer, with every second. This wasn't shadows! Panic spread through my chest until I could hardly breathe. The trees looked so real... they were... *they were* fucking real! I kicked the bike off its stand, revved wildly and careered onto the road. My back wheel span, sending mud and grit flying into the air as I shot across the rough tarmac. I glanced down at the wing mirror and choked in horror to see a wall of trees eating up the ground behind me.

'It's not! It's not real!'

I raced through the gears and leaned forward against the tank. 'C'mon!' Go faster. Go faster. The road dipped and curved - I dropped and swerved - leaned to get more speed, pushing the bike to its limit. Tyres slipped sideways. Again and again I felt myself almost losing control, only just pulling the bike back from sliding into walls of roadside rock - nearly flying off into gaping black voids that dropped beyond the range of the headlight. At last - a straight section of road. I roared the bike to its max but in the mirror - in the mirror - trees reached right behind me! I flash-glanced over my shoulder - yelled! Twig-finger branches - grasping-wood-limbs - they grab-

Pinhead

reached for me. Ahead - a solid wall of rock. Brake! Brake! Turn! I felt myself enveloped among masses of must-mulching leaves and clasping bark-arms. A yell grew into a long drawn out scream as the front wheel slipped beneath me, I braked with the back wheel and pushed it out - skidding speedway-style to try and save myself careering across the grass verge. Bang! Bounce! Skid! Slip across glass-grass. Bike-break! Bike-slip sideways - under me - Skid-scream-batter- Bang! Into harsh-sharp stick-thicket of gorse. Engine fail - hiss. Headlight-lit - trunks, limbs of trees, finger form - grip-gather around me.

*Slumber deep in sleep-melt-moss our nation branches our down-falling
folk our tribe of wisened-oak leaf beds of pine-soft-pins broad birch blankets juniper-
cloaked settle in aspen in ruined rowaned-dreams clasp our ferned-fingers lick our lichen-lips.*

My vision misst-sswim assss I-we-all lay back in nessst of needle-sss - pine-sssoft-pinsss.
Twigg-fingerssss - musst-leavess brush my cherry-cheeksss - root-armsss grow vinesss acrosss my
moss-legss. Root-sssap ssswirl-fill my wooden-head assss I flailing-failing-fall deep into-under
earth-sssoil-darknesssss...

Cuckoo-waking

Cuckoo calling - Cuckoo answering. The grey smudge of dawn-morning seeped into my eyes - silver mist hanging below a darker sky. The JC was keeled over on its side on a grass verge. Beyond it, came the slow muffled lull-sip, flop-crash of waves.

‘What the fff...?’

I was caked from head to foot in black peat-mud and leaves and twigs - I shook it all from my hair and scraped it from my eyes, ears and nostrils. Shit - my biker jacket was clog-smothered in it. Around me, across the glass-grass and tarmac, countless more finger-twigs, leaf-palms and branch-arms lay strewn. Root-feet were wound around my boots and legs. I spat black mud - choked up some chewed green leaves and what looked like gob-crushed red blood-berries. I stumbled over to the bike. The spoked wheels and chrome were caked, like me, in peat, and the tank was a bit scratched up. But it wasn't too serious - not really damaged or fuck-bent-up. I lifted it and wheeled it onto the road.

Cuck-cuck cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!

The unseen word-birds were close. I kicked the JC into cold-metal life and snail slowly, tyre-wound my way back to the croft.

*

Grandad was waiting at the gate. I rumbled into the yard and turned off the engine.

‘Where the hell have yer bee...? Whoah! What happened?’

‘I dunno. I just woke up... like this.’

‘Yer look like yer made of mud, boy. Are yer all right?’ He squeezed my arms and shoulders to check nothing was broken. He looked at the bike and scowled. ‘Were yer going too fast? I told yer to go careful!’

‘Grandad. Pack it in! I *had* to go fast... there were...’

‘What yer mean, pack it in? Too fast is too fas...’

‘I had no choice... I... there were...’

‘What are yer talkin about?’

‘Trees! Last night. Bloody trees! Chasing me! Chasing me down the bloody road!’

Grandad turned away from me.

‘I’m telling the truth! I thought I was going mad. But look at me... look at me! I just woke

Pinhead

up like this. I've still got leaves in me ears and roots in me pockets.' I dropped Lorna's knickers and quickly picked them up. 'What's going on? I'm *not* going mad, am I? Am I?'

He stood looking away from me, rubbing the back of his neck, staring up at the hills. He faced me. 'No, lad. No, yer not.'

'Well, thank fff... Thanks... for that. Well... what was it? What's happening?'

Grandad held my eye, then looked away. 'This place...'

'Yeah?'

'There's a bit more to it than what yer see.'

'You're bloody telling me! I bloody know that, don't I?' I pulled a clump of twigs and leaves from my hair.

'Shh, lad. Look. Some of the stories folk tell. Maybe there's a bit more to 'em than they let on.'

'Like with Mooner, ye mean? And the ghosts of trees?'

Grandad stroked his stubble.

'Well?'

'Aye... aye. And there's more to it than what *he* told yer. There's other names for 'em... around here.'

'How d'you mean?'

'Well. It's to do with us. The MacLeods. Our ancestors.'

'Yeah?'

'The fathers and mothers and the sons and daughters of MacLeods.'

'OK. How d'you mean?'

'Vikings. Norsemen. They were Vikings, boy. Our ancestors. They had other gods and other ways, and they carried their beliefs here with 'em, on the first raids. Then, when they came to settle. Folk say they brought some of the gods with 'em, too.'

'Your avin me on, aren't ya?'

He brushed some leaves from my hair. 'What do yer reckon, boy?' He put his arm around my muddy shoulder and motioned towards the Blackhouse. 'Look, now, yer mucky devil. Come in and get cleaned up and I'll tell yer... about... about the Children of Yggdrasil.'

the children of Yggdrasil

'Is ann a dh'fhàsas an siol mar a chuirear e... The seed grows as it's sown. In the beginning was the seed and the seed was all. All was in the seed. The seed cracked into the Earth and sent sprouts down to join with Earth, and from there it grew. Up and down and to all. Rain-dew spoke to the Earth. The Earth spoke to the seed and the seed was called Yggdrasil. Yggdrasil sprouted and grew - Up! Up! - Bursting from the soil - Up! Harvesting rain, wind and shine. Yggdrasil grew higher than all trees, higher than the mountains in which its roots took hold. Some say Yggdrasil was Ash. Some say Yggdrasil was Yew. But all say it was the greatest tree of all. The tree of life. Above us, its branches reach across heaven and sky. Beneath us its roots run to all trees, and to Urðarbrunnr - the well of fate and heaven, to the spring Hvergelmir - from where all waters rise, and to Mímisbrunnr - where the Völva, Mímir, drinks from Odin's eye. In the heights of Yggdrasil sit the eagle, the stag and the hawk. Beneath Yggdrasil, lie the dragon, the snake, the hare and the wolf. When Yggdrasil shakes, all shall be afraid. When the waters rise in Ragnarök, Yggdrasil shall be the sanctuary. Líf and Lífþrasir shall hide in the wood and together shall bring forth the new people of the Earth. All is in the seed and the seed is all.'

Grandad, closed the old leather notebook and stared into the fire. All was silent, except for a whispering skirl in the eaves.

'What a load of old bollocks! What the bloody hell does that all mean, then?'

He glared at me. 'Yer don't have to keep swearing, boy.'

'Sorry. What does it mean?'

'I'm not sure. It's part of the Old Norse history about the tree of life. It was named Yggdrasil. What it doesn't say, and what has only been passed down through many spoken tales and stories across the generations on these isles, is that the nuts, the seeds from the great tree, were carried here by the MacLeods. These seeds were planted across the lands made barren by Western winds and hail and felling. They were planted so that in time of storm and struggle, the children of Yggdrasil would rise and grow from the earth as a warning to the sons and daughters of MacLeods.' He set the notebook down on the table and sipped his tea.

I pulled the towel around my shoulders and shivered. 'A warning about what?'

Grandad poked the fire and stared into the flames. 'I'm not sure, boy.'

'You must have some idea?'

Grandad's razor-grey eyes bored into mine. 'Ragnarök, maybe.'

'What is that? You keep saying that.'

Pinhead

Our eyes locked together across the generations of MacLeods. 'Ragnarök. A time when the waters rise and all is lost upon the Earth.'

The red-fire crackled in the hearth as we stared silently together into the flames.

is ann a dh'fhàsas an siol mar a chuirear e

Mist-jewels pooled on my biker, my cheeks, and Lorna's eyelashes and hair.

'We're just going to walk down to the bay, Grandad.' I called back in through the door.

'Aye, then. See yer later.' He bent over the newspaper that Lorna had brought for him.

'Thanks again, lass.'

'Yer welcome.'

I followed her down the track. Her hips swung. Her jean's tight-mould-crease.

'Are you OK?' I said.

'Aye.' She didn't look back.

'I've been worried about you.'

'Oh, aye?'

'Yeah. You rushed off so quick, after...'

'After...?'

'Afterwards.'

She stopped and glared at me. '*Afterwards*, aye. Shame yer weren't so worried about me *before*. *Before* we did... *it*.'

'How d'you mean?'

She huffed and carried on down the slip-hill-track.

Boot-crunch.

Gull-yelp.

Mist-muffled, sea-shift.

She stopped and whipped round, again. 'Yer should have brought... used a condom.'

'Yeah. I... I know. I know.'

'Well why didn't yer, then?'

The close drift of mist. Gulls - hidden - high.

'I wasn't expecting to... you know. I've never bought them before. Do they even sell them, here?'

'Bloody hell, Stewie! We're on Harris, not bloody Mars. People have had sex here, before us.'

'Look. I'm sorry. I didn't know we were gonna... you know.'

Lorna stamped her boot into the earth. 'Yer didn't think. Full stop.'

'Crikey! It wasn't just up to me, was it? You didn't think either.'

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A boat chugged somewhere out in the bay. I moved closer to her.

Her warmth calling.

Her breasts, her skin, her warmth - calling my hands. I wanted to hold her. I pulled my hands from my pockets. Moved closer.

'I did think about getting some, but I just couldn't do it. They'd have known... if I'd got 'em in the chemist.'

She pushed me away and stomped off towards the soft rush from the sea. 'So, I have to pay the price for your embarrassment over buying a few condoms?'

'But, they'd have known... that they were for you.'

'They wouldn't have known.'

'Who else would they have been for? I don't know anyone else. I'm sorry.'

Lorna stopped. She frowned at me and rubbed her nose on the back of her hand. Her dark hair was plastered against her forehead.

'Do you think you're pregnant?'

'Shhh! Not so loud.' She looked back towards the croft. 'How the hell do I know?' she whispered.

'I'm sorry. I don't know how it all works.'

'Yer seemed to know enough the other night.' She stepped towards me.

I squeezed her shoulder. 'I mean about... girl's stuff.'

She pulled away and stomped onto the sand towards the gentle rush of the sea. 'Well, yer bloody well should know. Didn't yer listen at school? Girl's stuff and boy's stuff is linked up in a pretty big way, or hadn't yer noticed?'

'Shhh!' I said. 'Can you stop shouting at me?' I caught up with her.

'I'm not bloody shouting,' she whispered and kicked her boot into the sand. She kicked a ridge open and picked up a small black egg-shaped rock. 'You're bloody right,' she said.

'What about?'

'They would have known. In the chemist, I mean. They'd have known the condoms were for me. It would have been all over the bloody island.'

'I'll marry you.' I said. I held her shoulders, carefully. I wanted to hold her. Hold her tight - to me.

Against me.

With me.

Lorna burst out laughing and looked up at me. 'Hah! Yer big nit!' Tears rolled down her cheeks. She rested her head on my shoulder. The mist began to clear. Grey light revealed our end of the little bay.

I hugged her softly, spoke gently - my mouth against her wet head. 'I'll get a job. I'll look

after you. I... I love you, Lorna.'

She pushed me back. Wiped her eyes and her nose. 'This is no time for heroics, Stewie.'

'But, I would.'

Lorna leaned against me and stared out across the water. Then, she examined the black egg-rock, fingering it gently. 'I know yer would. It's very sweet of yer.'

'Don't you want me to, then?'

She wriggled free of my arms and launched the rock-egg into the sea. 'Look. Maybe it won't come to that, eh?'

'How d'you mean? Aren't you pregnant, then?'

She took my hand and led me along the shore. 'Who knows? Maybe I am. There's more than one option.' She wiped her nose and sniffed.

'I don't get it.' I could feel a sick sense of panic rising in my chest. 'What option?'

She dropped my hand. 'Look! I'm not ready to marry anyone. I'm not ready to have a baby. I wouldn't have it. Is that clear enough?'

'Oh.' I felt sick.

Lorna walked off through the rocks. I watched a seagull skim the surface of the water. I followed her and caught her up.

'Wait, Lorna.'

She turned round. She was crying. 'I bet yer hate me, now.'

'No. I don't. I couldn't, Lorna. What... whatever you do. I'll help. I'll help you. I promise. I promise. Here.' I said.

'What?'

'It's your knickers.'

She laughed and went beetroot, stuffed 'em into her pocket and took my hand, again. We walked alongside the loch.

Her hand was warm.

Her hip bumped against me.

Lorna sniffing mist.

Flop-lapping of the water.

White gulls crying in grey sky.

the weave of the Vqlvas

'Why won't you show me what you're making on the other loom?' I said. The rain was pummelling the windows. The wind rocked the walls every now and then, with mighty angry hands that gripped the shed. Harsh rain-squalls stung the windows. The eagles perched silent and still - warm-gold and fire - behind flimsy wire.

Grandad fiddled with the weftheads for a while, before looking up. 'Yer'll get to see it one day, boy.'

'Is it a surprise for me? Are you making me a kilt, or something?' I laughed.

'Hah! Yer should be so lucky. No, it's not a kilt.' He gestured for me to sit at the loom. 'Like I said, yer'll see it one day, when it's finished. There now, off yer go.'

I began treadling at the loom. Grandad peered intently over my shoulder at the weave. The breath whistled in his nose.

'Not bad, boy.'

I settled into the click-clack rhythm of the loom. My legs were getting used to the motion. Every now and again, Grandad stopped me and made some adjustments to the weave, explaining what he'd done and why.

'So what were you gonna tell me, Grandad?'

'Eh?'

'You said you'd tell me more about the ancient weavers. The Volvos or something.'

'Hah! Volvos, indeed. *Vqlvas! Vqlvas!* They were seers, not Swedish bloody cars. Hah!'

'Well. What about them? Does it tie in with what you were telling me about the myth of the trees, and that?'

Grandad coughed violently and sat down. 'There's a lot to tell yer, lad. I'm not sure if I'm up to it just now.'

'Yeah. Sorry. Maybe we should pack up, now.'

'Hah! Bored with weaving, already. Eh?' Grandad ran his hand across his eyes. 'The Vqlvas. They were seers. Women seers of the future. Shapers of it, some say.'

'How d'you mean?'

Angry wind-hands shook the shed. Storm-spite spat hail - bash-rattled the glass.

Tsil-tsil-tschil!

The young eagle spread its wings and beat them.

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

Pinhead

The mother eagle flared her crown and glared at us across through the wire.

‘Whisht, now. Whisht, now.’ I moved across to the cage. The eagles settled, making soft whistles. ‘Crikey what set them off? What were you saying?’

Grandad took a deep breath. ‘The erm... Vølvas. Seers. Well. Some books refer to them as lesser gods. Shamanic prophets who are tied to this goddess of theirs. Freyja. Not all Vølva were women, either. By all accounts.

‘So. What do they have to do with weaving, then?’

‘Well. It’s been said that the seers would adjust the weave of the cloth, and even the tools themselves, to shape the futures of their men, in battle. To shape future events, and such like. Others say that spells could be woven into the cloth itself.’ He looked over at the covered loom. ‘There’s so much to tell yer, boy. But so little time.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘There’s a lot yer need to know about... about...’

‘About the trees, you mean? The trees that chased me?’

Grandad sighed. He looked really knackered. ‘Aye, boy. Aye.’

‘Why did they chase *me*?’

‘It’s because yer a MacLeod, boy. And because now is the beginning of the tide-time...’

‘The time for what?’

‘To act, boy.’

‘I don’t understand.’

A violent coughing fit shook him. When he finished, he looked shaken. His face the colour of ash.

Scratch scratch...

‘Shall... shall I get Dr Mackenzie?’

‘No, boy. It’s just a cough. Time for a rest and then something nice to eat, eh?’

‘Yeah... yeah. OK.’

Scratch scratch...

We were both dazzled by a flash of lightning. A deep thunder-rumble followed.

Tsil-tsil-tschil! Cha laigh na siantan anns na spueran...

‘The storms rest not in the skies,’ said Grandad. Looks like this one’s gonna last.’

I helped him up out of the chair. The eagles cocked their heads and fixed us with their eyes. Grandad leaned on me as we battled across the wind-raked yard. The barn door swung - banged - bashed back and stood open. The old black stump sat squat in the shadows.

after wind comes rain...

An dèidh gaoithe thig uisge... it pummelled down on the barn roof. The open doors rattled violently, so I trod one of the foot-locks into the ground.

Lorna stood up and moved away from the stump. 'I don't like that thing. Why is it in here?'

'I dunno. Grandad wants it for something. I... I don't like it either. D'you see, d'you think it's grown...?'

'Don't be daft. Look. Just shut up and listen!' She moved from straw bales, to the loft ladder, to the back wall hung with rusting tools - back and forth. 'I've got something to tell yer.' She looked pale. Her lips were thin.

'Are you pregnant?'

'No. No. It's not that.'

'What, then?'

She picked at straw, splintered steps, jagged metal.

'What, then?'

Finally, she met my eye.

'You're going, aren't you?'

She stepped towards me.

I stepped back. 'You're going to university, aren't you?'

'Stewie.'

'Where?'

'Southampton.'

Scratch...

'*Southampton!* Blimey! Couldn't you choose somewhere a bit further away?'

She edged closer. I turned away and watched the veils of hail and rain that swept across the yard.

'I've got to get away from here. I don't want to end up like Susan and Heather. That's not what I want.'

The air was thick with storm - the rush of wind - the hammering of hail.

Scratch...

Scratch...

'Yer don't understand, do yer? It's different for you. You're not the one who's gonna get

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knocked up and spend yer life cooking and cleaning and changing nappies. I don't even know if I want kids. There's all these things I want to do and see.'

'Yeah... yeah... yeah. There's a whole great big world out there.'

'Don't take the piss out of me! Don't!' She tugged at the elbow of my jacket. 'Look at me!'

I turned round. Her face was all red.

'I haven't even been to a big city. Or seen a movie in a big cinema, or even had a hamburger.'

'You don't like meat!'

'That's not the point! I mean I haven't had the chance. I haven't even seen any of the bands I like. You've done all that. People don't get me, here. There's just Mooner and a handful o punks in Stornoway, and I never even get to see 'em.'

'So you'd rather choose a hamburger over me?'

'Don't be stupid! Yer know what I mean.'

'I thought you loved me.'

She turned away. 'I never said that.'

'You had sex with me.'

'That's not the same thing.'

'You know I love *you*. You just...'

'Used yer?'

'I don't mean that.'

'Why not? Because that's what a girl would say?'

'Fuck off!'

'I'm sorry. Look. I wasn't using yer. It wasn't like that.'

Scratch... scratch...

I walked into the darkness of the barn. The saws and scythes swung in the moving air. The stump sat there like a black statue. She'd bloody used me!

'I didn't know yer loved me. 'Til I thought I was pregnant.' She tugged my elbow again.

'And I'm not saying I don't love yer.'

I could just make her face out in the gloom.

'Do ya, then? Cos' it don't bloody sound like it.'

'OK! Maybe, I do. I don't know. But even if I do, it doesn't change anything. I have to get away from here. I'm unhappy here. I'll be even more unhappy if I stay here.'

I held her shoulders. 'You don't have to be unhappy.'

Lorna pushed me away. 'I've always been unhappy here. I want to be out in the world and *do something!*'

'But I wasn't here, before. I can make you happy.'

'One person can't make another person happy. It's not like that.'

'But what about me?'

'What d'yer mean?'

'What do I do?' Stream-cold-rain - drip-trickled me - down my neck.

'I don't know. Look, it's not like we can't stay in touch.'

'Yeah. I'll write ya a nice letter every day, eh?'

Scratch... scratch...

Lorna clenched her fists. 'I can call on the phone. I'll be back during holidays.'

'Great! You can bugger off and have fun. What about me? What do I do?'

'I don't know. Yer can come and visit me.'

'Yeah, me and all ya posh uni mates are going to get on great. And I can't even read.' Rain-flurries tear-sweep - torrents tear-air.

'Yer know that wouldn't matter to me. And anyway. It's not about you. I've got to get away. I've spent all my life making up for Mum not being here. Looking after Danny, looking after Dad. And...'

'And, what?'

Scratch... scratch...

Scratch... scratch...

She paced between the saws and the steps. 'I don't want to be staying here looking after you, either. I want to have a life... and not... just having babies, like Susan. Here, it's just bloody cooking and cleaning and making sure noone's ill, that they've had enough to eat. I don't want just that... not to mention all the other stuff.'

'What other stuff?'

'All the stuff yer don't see. Not looking tarty. Not staying out too late. Not being alone with a boy. Not being too clever, or saying too much, or playing the fiddle, or liking punk bands, or wearing make-up, or doing anything that makes yer stand out from the crowd. Yer don't get what it's like here.' Lorna began to stomp her boots into decaying floor of the barn.

I reached towards her shoulder. 'I do. Grandad's told me.'

She pushed my hand away. 'Well yer should bloody well understand, then. Shouldn't yer! Yer should be helping me. Not making me feel worse for leaving my family, my home, everything I've ever known. I thought yer were my friend. I thought yer'd help me get away from here. Yer just trying to chain me down like everyone else.' She broke away from me and ran out into the yard. Volleys of rain splash-plastered her hair to her head.

'That's it,' I said. 'Just run away. I knew you didn't care about me!' I yelled at her. 'No-one fucking does.'

She shouted above the whack of wind and the beating of rain on the barn roof. 'That's not

Pinhead

true, yer bastard! I do care!

We stood panting and staring at one another, our breath-heat gasp-misting up into the air.

'I do care.'

I could see she was sobbing, but her tears were washed away in the rain.

'Lorna, please.' I reached out to her, again. 'Wait for your dad to come and pick ye up.'

'No! No! Not til yer understand. Not 'til yer act like a *real* friend!'

She turned away and ran across the storm-flurried yard. She grabbed her bike and pushed it off, disappearing into the spit, the spite, the pain-drenched rain-haze.

Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...

Scratch... scratch...

Scratch...

stewie
 soft-seed-boy
 sleepy-crown-hair
 I can't stroke-hold your tendril-head close
 or frond-soothe back loss-cut-loose-lost speckled-egg-girl
 can
 can't hold the silver-blue-green mist-kiss
 of her flailing-awailing in heart-rooted branch-broken core-failing
 sometimes
 sometimes the she and the he travel across
 the
 love-loft flown like ice-petal-shatters thrown river-star-
 cones too brittle-spirit
 too bright too soul-woven
 close
 for selves scatter-blown
 across the storm-face-rocks
 don't hack yourself to stumps
 ivying for longer tearing
 bark-holes stealing leaf
 growth hear gold-loam voices
 seek blood-forest routes
 hold wind-words within
 spread leaf-trust message
 of weald-wood ocean
 now nothing ever is gone

Pinhead

flight-on-air-iteal-the-wing

'We better let 'em go one at a time, eh? Otherwise it's going to get complicated.' Grandad fished around in the deep pockets of his overalls for the shed key.

'Yeah. I s'pose.' I booted a big lump of moss across the yard. It thwacked into the stump beside the open barn door.

'C'mon, Stew. We can't keep 'em here forever, can we?' He produced a fluffy sweet from the pocket, which he blew on and popped into his mouth before continuing to hunt for the key.

I scored with another mossy shot that thudded into a wheelbarrow goal. 'Yeah. I know,' I said.

Grandad clapped me on the shoulder and smiled. 'Good lad.'

*

The birds shriek-shifted, clamped on dead-grain perches, plume-spread their pinna-wings. Grandad and I glanced at one another. 'We'll do the mother first, take her up the hill. Then, we'll come back for him.' He put on the heavy gauntlet and I handed him one of the hoods to cover her head. 'Here comes the tricky part,' he said. He opened the wood-cage door and stepped in. The golden mother twitched her feathers and whistled, but Grandad crooned softly in Gaelic until she settled down. I distracted her with a tiny piece of meat and quick as a flash he slipped the hood over her head. As usual, the moment the hood was on, the bird went completely still. Grandad fastened the ties, and putting his gloved hand under her tail, gently scooped her up. Her huge talons bit into the leather. I opened the side door and shut the cage, then we stepped out into the sunlight. Grandad spoke softly to the bird and I followed him up the hill.

Grass-spanned green - wide green.

Bright.

Sky - tall, high, calling.

When we'd got about halfway up he stopped and stared around. Limpet-domes - shadow-green, tan, whip-bristled grass.

'This'll do.' He was breathing hard.

I nodded. Down below us, the bay wind-shimmered beyond the black-rock-croft. Sheep dotted the fields.

'This is it, Stew.'

Pinhead

The eagle spread her huge wings wide. I stepped back out of the way.

'Shh, now. Shh,' said Grandad.

The bird settled.

'Untie her, boy,' he whispered.

My hands trembled, but I managed to untie the Jesses. She wouldn't wear them any more, she'd be free. I nervously stroked soft feathers as I took the hood off. 'Goodbye, girl.' I stepped away again.

The bird blinked and darted its head this way and that, gazing all about.

'Go on!' said Grandad, and launched her skywards.

For a moment she clung onto the glove, startled.

'Rach! Rach! Imich!'

She released her hold and rose up into the air, flapping her wings desperately, looking like she was going to stall. Then, a warm gust of wind caught us all. It lifted the eagle. She span-soared up - flapped twice before sky-rising straight out beyond us. She turned her body awkwardly, then wheeled and crossed below us, level with the hillside. The wind picked her up again and with one powerful stroke of her wings the she-eagle sky-soared smooth - arcing around and above us, air-scything - gliding until she landed deftly on a big slab of grey rock. Grandad and I stared at one another with our mouths wide open.

'Phew!' he said. 'Let's go and get the other bugger.'

We returned to the shed. The young'un was pretty fired up, but Grandad insisted that I take him on *my* wrist. He whispered to it as he slipped the hood over its head, but the bird made a fuss and it took a while to get it onto the glove. It had grown a lot since I first held it, but still felt surprisingly light on my arm. We climbed through the rock-knuckle bones, back up the hill. Grandad was puffing a bit and had to stop. I waited until he caught me up. We reached the launch spot.

The big she-eagle was still sitting on the rock above on the slope. *Tsil-tsill-tschil! Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!* she called.

Tsil-tsill-tschil! her son answered.

Grandad untied the young'un's legs.

'Say goodbye,' said Grandad.

'Goodbye,' I whispered. 'Slàn leat!'

'Slàn agad!' said Grandad, softly.

The wind blustered. The young bird began to fidget. Grandad slipped off the hood. The bird looked about him and the feathers of his tawny nape ruffled like a crown.

Tsil-tsill-tschil! Tsil-tsill-tschil! Tsil-tsill-tschil!

'Now!' Yelled Grandad.

I shot my arm skywards, lifting the eagle into the air. I felt him leave my hand - loft-lifting - high - higher - higher - into the Up. Up - into voices of air. He shrieked, unfurled his great wings wide - and rose - Up - above us. Almost in slow motion - feather-wafting air - strong-span downbeats... then... he nearly flipped over in a strong rush-gust. He recovered and swooped down the hillside, turning and taking a long semi-circular arc, around and above us, gliding above his mother, before wheeling to land about twenty yards further on. Grandad and I slowly made our way towards them. They sat and watched us getting nearer. Grandad put his hand on my shoulder and we stopped. Golden crown-feathers russet-ruffled, flickered in the sun.

Tsil-tsill-tschil!

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

They rose together in the wind. Grandad gripped my shoulder. They rose over us on the hillside and we craned our necks as they swooped close and passed over, above. Levelling in the air, they turned in unison and let the wind take them higher, away from us. We watched until they disappeared north - over the tan-brow of the hill, and we stood there, empty of their voices - their eagle-goldness, empty of their presence - looking up towards the stone-bone Cairn.

‘Well, that’s that,’ said Grandad, and gave my shoulder a warm squeeze. ‘Hopefully we’ll catch a glimpse of ‘em from time to time.’ He handed me the bag with the rabbit in, and the binoculars.

Gunshot-crack! The sound of a gunshot cracked out - from the east. From beyond the brow of the hill. Grandad and I stopped dead. Stared at each other.

Scratch... scratch...

‘Bloody MacDonald!’ said Grandad. ‘Maybe they flew over his land.’ He started up the hill.

‘Wait! Wait!’ I grabbed his arm. ‘I’ll go. I’m quicker. You need to rest.’ I left him behind and legged it as fast as I could up the hillside. I knew it! I bloody knew it! He’d shot them. MacDonald had shot them. Maybe he’d killed them both. ‘No!’

Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...

I slipped in the soft grass and bashed my knee on a white bone-lump of rock. I limped on as fast as I could - nearly to the top - nearly to the top. I slowed, scared of what I’d see. I tottered the last steps - reached the brow. Gasping. Staggering. I saw MacDonald bent, stooped over something. His shotgun broken, ready for reloading.

‘Don’t shoot! You bastard! Don’t shoot!’ I yelled.

Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...

He straightened up and looked across at me.

Tsil-tsill-tschil!

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

MacDonald looked up. We both looked Up Up Up - blinded by white-sky. Up Up Up. Two

Pinhead

silhouettes. Two black sailing pirouettes. Two eagles soaring way high. Way beyond reach of any gun.

a tartan of feathers

'Yer shouldn't have thumped yer dad, Stewie,' says Grandad. He's limping heavily as I follow him between the rocks and heather of the Na Hearadh. His accent's as thick as this dark fog that swirls around us in the hills above Car a` mhuiltin. 'He did the same, when he was about your age.' He looks at me and rubs his stubbled jaw. 'You've been no bother to me, boy,' he says. 'I want yer to know that.'

'You don't hassle me like Dad.'

'Well, it wasn't my car you wrecked, was it, Hedgehog?' He ruffles my faded orange spikes hair with his big weaver's hands, gnarled from gripping peat irons and shuttles and beaters. An eagle calls in the distance - *Tsil-tsill-tschil!*

'I can't go back, Grandad. He just used to stare at Mum's ashes.'

'He's trying his best, boy...'

'He's flipping not. He never has. That's why I came up here!'

He scowls at me.

'It's true! I'm just a disappointment to him. Why can't he stay in London?'

Scratch... scratch...

I'd blotted it all out, but it was coming back - the blurry night before Dad'd found me unconscious, lying in a pool of my own blood. The whiskey-sparkle of the drinks cabinet, the rip of my school artwork and the crash of Mum's ashes smashed in the hearth. I'd a vague memory of plowing Dad's red Volvo through the garage doors. But after that, everything was a haze of kitchen knives and scar-ribbons, then a silent drive home from casualty. It felt like ancient history. Like someone else had ridden the train from Euston. This was normal for me, now - being stuck halfway up a Scottish mountain, looking for eagles, wondering how to get back down.

'We better rest here, Stewie,' says Grandad, breathing hard. 'Afore yer brek yer ankle, yer big softie.' He swallows a pill and rubs his chest. 'There's a letter to read some time. Get Lorna to read it yer.' His voice is gruff. We plonk down on our rucksacks.

'We're lost, Grandad.'

'No, we're back nearer the Cairn, now. Here, stuff yer gob wi' this.' He frowns and hands me a thickly wedged butty packed with Strathdon Blue - it really tasted like mouldy soap, but after hiking for three hours, I'm glad to cram it in.

'Mmm,' I say sarcastically. 'Thanks.'

He grins, but I can see it's a brave effort. A blizzard of breadcrumbs falls over his tatty boiler suit. He shivers as he forces himself to chew.

Pinhead

'Grandad.'

'Aye.'

'Sometimes... did you ever...?'

'Go on...'

'Since I've been here...'

'Just say it, lad.'

'Look... it's like I hear things... the eagles... voices... it's like I hear their voices.'

Grandad put down his sandwich.

'D'you think I'm going nuts? D'you reckon I... I... should see the psychiatrist? Like Dad said?'

Grandad chewed, slowly. He held my eye.

'Nothing wrong with you, boy. No need for a trick-cyclist.' He ran his hand across his eyes.

'As fer the voices... let's just say... yer wouldn't be the first. Yer a MacLeod, after all.' He coughed.

'I never thought Mum would actually die,' I say. 'Life's not like in films.'

Grandad coughs harder. 'Fraid not, Stew. We're born dying, boy.' His eyes are milky grey.

'She'd want yer to patch things up, yer know.'

'But, I can't go back... to him talking to a tin can. It's just ash in there, not Mum.'

'Where is she then, Stewie?'

Tsil-tsil-tschil!

She's in the trees, boy...

'I dunno.'

Tsil-tsil-tschil!

'Mum's here, perhaps, flying free like an eagle.'

'Aye. She loved the hills... the heather.' He pauses. 'I spoke to yer dad, to bring her ashes up.'

I look up. 'What you actually spoke to him, again?'

'Aye.'

'And?'

'We didn't say too much. He says, maybe.'

'That means no.' I rub the tender new weal of skin under my watch strap.

'Scars heal. Eh, Stew?'

'Yeah, maybe.'

He sighs, tugs my spikes. 'Peas in a pod, you two. It was an Elvis quiff, with him.'

'And you?'

'Pah! Vera bloody Lynn, and dodging German bullets.'

I laugh. 'So you were a bit of a punk too, then, Grandad.'

'Aye,' he says. 'Gabba gabba hey!'

It's strange, how his face changes when he smiles. 'These strides...' He points.

'Bondage trousers.'

He laughs. 'They're like no tartan I've ever seen. Horrible. Yer need some proper cloth... of our own clan,' he says.

'Is that what you were making on the other loom?'

'Er... aye.' He scraggles at his grey stubble with bony fingers.

Tsil-tsil-tschil! An eagle's calling, closer.

'That'll be one of ours,' he says. 'Remember when yer saw 'em, that first time?'

'They were fff...' I stifle my curse. 'Fffflipping amazing!'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Speak as I say, not as I do.' He winks, then rubs his chest again.

The rain plops onto the scree.

'You all right, Grandad?'

'Aye. Just a wee touch of indigestion.'

I know he's lying to me. He's very pale.

Scratch... scratch...

'I must see them.'

'Maybe yer will, Stew.' Grandad peers into the gloom. 'Yer remember how scared yer were, feeding 'em, eh? Yer certainly had the trembles,' he laughs.

'You did, too.' He dodges my cheesy missile, then coughs painfully and rubs his arm. The fog is growing thicker and the light is nearly gone. 'What about this letter, Grandad?'

'It better wait. Let's be getting on.' He stands, unsteadily. A whistling yelp cuts through the air. 'They're right above us.' He looks up. 'Above the fog.' He staggers and overbalances. 'Bugger!' he says, and slumps heavily beside a boulder. I can't help but laugh. But he stays down.

'Grandad?'

Scratch... scratch...

'Come here, boy.' I can barely hear his words. I kneel beside him. 'Just give us a minute,' he says. His face is grey, his lips are blue. *Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...* The fog boils around us. 'The letter... get Lorna... read it yer...' He sips water from the bottle shaking in my hands and closes his eyes.

Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...

Ten minutes pass on the scratched army watch. Then, his eyes flicker open, staring and wild. His words fall between weak breaths as he clutches my hand. 'Not so good, Stewie... Look in the rucksack... Cover me with feathers. Stay with me...' He fades into unconsciousness.

Cover me with feathers - What does he mean? I grab his battered rucksack and pull out spare socks, some apples and a crinkled map. There's a letter with my name on it. It's in

Pinhead

Grandad's handwriting. Then, a penknife and something soft - a blanket. It'll keep him warm. I wrap it around him with trembling hands. It's a great length of tartan, richly coloured - cobalt tartan shot with deeper greens and blues. I can recognise his handiwork in the colours of the craft he was teaching me. But, there's something else, something golden woven into the cloth - tawny barbs and after-feathers, primaries of amber in the twisted Harris wool. An eagle cries mournfully overhead. *Cover me with feathers*, Grandad said. *Cover me with feathers*. Maybe this was what he was making, in the shed. I look closer. The feathers. Even in the gloom they seem to shimmer.

Tsil-tsil-tschil! Tsil-tsil-tschil! Their donors are circling above us, unseen.

Despite the tartan, Grandad trembles as the fog drifts around us. Half an hour passes. The light fades. Then, I feel him squeeze my fingers.

'Two peas in a pod,' he says again. 'You've both taken it too hard.' His cheek feels cold against mine. *It's not Dairin's beard Rob! It's her, she's dead! It's Steve!* Let her go.'

'An vair a thig an latha, thig comhairle.'

'Grandad?'

'With day counsel will come...'

'Grandad! Please, Grandad!'

He falls unconscious again. The rain is falling hard now - like icy bullets - striking through my Ramones t-shirt. I blink away the drips on my eyelashes and try to focus as an eerie light smoulders from the blanket.

'What the fff...' It's the feathers - the feathers in the tartan are glowing. I rub my eyes and run my fingers through my sodden spikes of hair. I've got to keep him alive. I've got to keep him warm, keep him here with me. My teeth chatter and I lay as close to him as I can. Fingers of heather twitch in the rain. Beyond them, past the rocks, hidden by the mist, I can feel the ghosts of trees watching us, standing there.

Patient.

Silent.

Still.

Their phantom sap seeps into the shallow soil of the mountains. It runs through the veins of all my family. But the roots of the ancient Caledonian forest run deeper than ours. They reach down deep in the peat - to the rocks. We all cling on in these islands.

With roots.

Cold fingers.

Or talons.

Toh-tschil!

'Please. Hang on, Grandad. Please.'

He's got to hang on. I can't go back. I won't go back to London. Please, don't let his clock stop. I close my eyes. The rain taps its distress code on my back. And the heather whispers *Scratch-scratch* against my jacket.

Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil! Toh-tschil!

Above us, the eagles are circling, watching, waiting, unseen.

Pinhead

somersault

I open my eyes. The fog has lifted - a bright dawn burning. He was right - we're almost beside the Cairn-stone - a tomb or a waypost? Car a` mhuiltin is nearly a mile beyond it, in the valley below. His hand is cold.

Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...

'Grandad!' I lay my head against his chest, but there's nothing. It's completely still.

Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... 'Grandad!' My voice rises up into the empty blue sky. *Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...* I want to follow him - he's left me here, alone. *Scratch... scratch...* I see his knife glinting in the sunlight and open the blade - honed and oiled, a metal chill against my wrist. *Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...* I want to stay with him. I want... to cut away this empty black hole in my gut. *Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch... Tsil-tsill-tschi!* I glimpse a golden wingspan as it soars close overhead. *Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!* - They're back. Back, but he'll never see them. *Scratch... scratch... Scratch... scratch...* 'He's bloody dead!' *Scratch... scratch...*

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil! Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

I fling the knife away and run run run - crash-scramble across scar-moraine, dash towards bright blue bay, sucking air - life into my lungs. I leap and stumble away from death, but I fall. I feel myself spinning over - hanging - turning in the air for a second, longer, longer - Car a` mhuiltin - I'm feather-flying - eagle-soaring - I'm... Whack! My face smacks into the must-wet earth. I lie still - wind-whispers through heather-fingers - I'm breathing.

We're born dying, boy - Grandad said. I know I can't end it sooner. My heart just won't stop beating, not beside the dead, or the living-dead. *He's trying his best, boy* - he's carrying Mum's ashes over The Minch - to rest here maybe, just maybe.

Tsil-tsill-tschi!

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

I struggle to my knees and look up at the dawn-lit hillside, blurring through my tears.

'Gabba gabba hey!' I gasp.

There, above the russet heather, there's not one, but three golden eagles - soaring, circling above the stone-bone Cairn.

I'm crying.

I'm burning.

Pinhead

I'm spinning.

I'm gripping Grandad's letter with my name on it.

Slan leat, a charaid choir

'Thanks for coming. For coming to see me off.'

'I just wanted to make sure we'd got rid of yer.' I wrenched my face into a smile.

Lorna smiled back, lopsidedly.

The new Teddy-bear hidden in my jacket jabbed into my chest. This is how we all leave-left-are-left. Stabbed. Bitter. False-bright shite-brave. Pretending we're OK. I don't... I don't-won't feel this... this grey grounded sky-meadow-shore-lark. Not even this... this... mist-seep-silver - this... *mist-taste mist-seep-silver - salt-tang-air gull-screaming air - sea-ghost-hair Lost-left-leaving ghost-apple-hair. Red-raspberry-lick lollipop-lips...* Lorna's leaving.

'The funeral went well.'

'Yeah. Mooner was great. Helped sorted it all out. That speech he made. Even Mr MacDonald's helped out, with the sheep and that.'

'Aye. People always do that, here... help out.'

'Turns out he was a bit matey with my dad, in the old days. Grandad didn't like him, though.'

'No,' said Lorna. 'No, and he's not the only one.'

'I don't trust him somehow. Anyway, thanks... thanks again, for coming.'

Mist-breathe...

'What did yer make of our psalms then?'

'It sounded like people were talking... singing backwards.'

'Hmm! Maybe to you.'

Mist-taste mist-seep-silver salt-tang-air...

'I never finished Grandad's painting. He never saw it.'

'Oh.'

Gull-screaming air - sea-ghost-hair... ghost-apple-hair.

Lost-left-leaving... Lorna's leaving.

'Your dad's not taking you to uni, then?'

'No. I'll take the bus, then the sleeper. I'm going on my own. I want to. I'll go down the same way you came up. Besides, I couldn't bear Dad all that way, just me and him. He's not happy. Now he's got Danny for the weekends.' She reached out to my arm, but drew her hand back. 'I've something to ask yer, Stewie. A favour.'

'What's that?'

Pinhead

'Would yer keep an eye on him, for me?'

'What? Your dad, or Danny?'

'Danny, of course. Yer big nit!'

'Oh. Yeah. I'll let him take me on one of his big nature treks, eh? Or I'll take him fishing, in Grandad's old boat.'

'Yeah. Well, don't go out too far, though, eh?'

'Nah! Not me. I get seasick. You know me.'

'I dunno, Stewie. Do I?'

'What?'

'Know you.'

'Nah. Probably not. A man of mystery, me. Eh, Lorna?'

She smiled.

'Here it comes.' I pointed out across the harbour. The ferry was just appearing from out of the mist. 'It'll be a while, yet.'

We both watched it slowly drawing closer. Behind it, the mist cleared a little and the horizon opened up in a yellow band of light. Everything else was grey, or silver light. Cloud, iron grey rock. Constantly moving bands of mist. The ferry vanished, then appeared again.

It was gonna take her away from me.

Mist-taste - silver...

Lorna's leaving.

'How's it going with yer dad?'

'All right. I gave him his money back, so he's happy. He let me keep a hundred quid.'

'Really?'

'Trying to buy me off, I reckon. Anyway, we're keeping out of one another's way, so far.'

'That can't be easy in a Blackhouse.'

'Hah! Nah. He's shacked up down here at the Tarbert hotel. Thank God.'

'Oh.'

'I showed him Grandad's medals. I think it upset him.'

'Really? What did he say?'

'Nothing. He just went out and didn't come back for quite a while.'

Lorna reached down and took her ticket from a pocket in her rucksack.

'You haven't got much, have you?'

'I thought it best to travel light, at first. Dad might bring some more stuff down, when I'm settled.'

'Hah! A truckload of CND posters and Teddy-bears, eh?'

She laughed. 'No.'

'You grown out of them, then?'

'I spose. Maybe, I have.'

'You won't want this, then?' I pulled the Teddy-bear out of my jacket and shoved it into her hands.

Lorna looked down at it for a long time, stroking its fur. Then, she looked up. Her eyes were glistening.

'His name's Stewie,' I said.

She turned away from me, towards the ferry.

'I thought maybe you could cuddle him, if you get lonely, down there.'

The ferry was growing bigger and bigger - nearer, nearer.

'Yer sobby sod,' Lorna sobbed.

'Don't you want him, then?'

'Course I bloody want him.'

I stood watching the back of her head. 'I see you've got your fiddle, an all.'

'Aye.'

'That'll make you some friends, eh? Those cat-strangling tones should be a real hit with your uni crowd.'

'Thanks,' she said.

She still didn't turn round, so I leaned on the railing, alongside her.

'Stewie?'

'Yeah?'

'Can I phone yer when I'm down there? And...'

'What?'

'Will yer call me?'

'Yeah. If you want me to.'

'I wouldn't ask if I didn't want yer to, would I? I'd write, but...'

'...it wouldn't be much good.' I laughed

'Also... I've asked Dad to bring my music centre over, for yer.'

'Eh?'

'So I can send yer tapes.'

'What? Compilation tapes, of new bands?'

'Well, yeah. But, I thought I could record messages for yer, and send 'em yer. Recorded letters, kind of. And yer could record your own, and send them back to me. Until I see yer.'

'Yeah. OK... I... got a letter from Grandad. Would you read it to me... when I see you?'

'Aye... of course... aye. Would yer visit me?'

'I... I reckon. Yeah.'

Pinhead

'Yer don't hate me, then? Leaving yer now, when... yer know. When yer need a friend.'

'It would be a lot easi... It's not as easy as that, is it, Lorna? Eh?'

'I'm sorry.' She reached down and pulled a tape from her rucksack. 'Here's a letter-tape to start yer off.' She kissed me on the cheek and turned back to the railing, away from me.

I talked to the back of her head. 'You've got to do this. Don't worry about me. All this travelling lark, it's what Grandad called "A great big adventure". That's what he said. I don't wanna spoil yours, before you've even got going, eh?' I rested my hand on her shoulder. 'I'm still your friend, Lorna. I promise. I... I... I'm the best one... you're... you're ever gonna have. I dunno what the fuck's going on half the time, but I'm learning... and most of that... it's down... it's down to you.'

'I'm scared. I don't want to go.' Lorna's voiced was wobbly.

I squeezed her shoulder. 'You'll be all right. You'll get down there, make some mates. It'll be a right laugh. And we'll have the phone-box in Tarbert, and the tape-letters, right?'

She laid her hand on mine. She stroked my fingers. Warmth spread from her -thawing the numb-frozen arm.

The ferry was huge, now. Coming in to dock.

'Stewie?'

'Yeah?'

'Would yer go now?'

'Yeah. OK. If you want.'

'It's just... if I turn round and see yer, I won't be able to go. If yer go, I'm gonna pick up my rucksack, face straight ahead, and leave. And I'm not gonna look back. I can't look back.'

The ferry pulled in. A few cars and passengers wobbled off.

'Slan leat, a charaid choir,' she said.

'Slan leat, a charaid choir.' I let go of her shoulder and felt my hand slip through her fingers. The numbness - the dead feeling returned.

I kick-started the bike - revved it up - skid-road-burn wind-smack - I burnt up the road. I burned the bend all the way up the Cliffside road and looked down across the harbour. *Silver-wind-smack - slow-mist-chill*. I propped the bike and sat on rough-scrabble-rock. Tiny figures and tiny cars boarded the ferry. Toy people and toy cars on a toy boat. The ferry pulled away from the quayside and got underway. I smack-punch-pain the rock! Now go - *silver-slow-mist*. I can't feel... I don't feel. Not now - *Slow-mist mist-seep-silver* - I'll hold it - feel it another day, instead - *fist-blood-seeps mist-taste mist-seep-silver - salt-tang-air* - I'll feel it another day, instead - hold on to my Lorna - *apple-hair - ghost-apple-hair. Breast-beat-crush. Red-raspberry-lick-lollipop-lips*.

Lorna's leaving. Lorna's leaving.

Fist-blood seeps-deep into birth-bite-rock. *Ghost - ghost-loss - ghost-apple-hair*.

where do you belong to?

I kicked the bike into life and headed back to Car a` mhuiltein. Swoop dip roar soar - all the miles back along the golden road... *Cold-silver tear-stream tear-mist - ghost-loss hollow - ghost-apple-hair*. At the croft, Dad's hire car was parked outside the open gate. He didn't seem to be around. I climbed the gate and scanned. The mist was clearing on this side of the island - fresh squalls charging in from the West. A figure stood down by the shoreline - must be him. The bang of the door closed me in - sudden silence - an empty Blackhouse. I stoked the stove - my stomach growling. By the time the kettle was boiling, there was a knock on the door.

*

I took Grandad's keys from my pocket and undid the padlock. As I pushed back the door of the shed, Dad saw the old army watch that covered the scar across my wrist.

'The old man's timepiece,' he said. 'Going all right?'

'Yeah. Mustn't over-wind it, though.'

'I bet he told you that more than once, eh?' He smiled a little.

'Yeah.' I paused. 'Dad.'

'Aye?'

'You know I ... I took... stole your gold Timex.'

The gulls cried down by the Loch. The wind was getting up a bit. Dad stubbed his fag out on the door frame.

'I guessed it. OK. It's done now. I got a new one, anyway.' He pulled back the sleeve of Grandad's duffle coat and revealed a giant stainless steel digital job. 'Flash, eh? LED, stop watch, waterproof to fifty feet.'

'Nice,' I said. 'You going swimming in the bay, then?'

'Hah! Funny.' He wasn't laughing.

'You can keep the Timex,' he said. 'Case Grandad's conks out. You better give all the others back though. What is it with you and watches?'

'Oh... er, thanks. I dunno. Sorry.'

'That's sorted, then.' He stepped inside the doorway and sniffed the air. 'Christ! That takes me back.'

'What?'

Pinhead

The smell... of this place... the shed.' He breathed in deeply. 'Your Grandad virtually lived in here. When I was big enough he'd have me in here with him. Keep an eye on me.'

He unhooked the lamp from the wall, a match fizzed as he lit the wick. We picked our way through the maze of strange shapes and bric-a-brac.

'Blimey, he's let it go a bit. Used to be spotless in here.'

He held up the lamp. Our shadows flew like giants across the walls. Arms became wings, noses, hooks, fingers spread like eagle flukes. The wind began to rattle the shed as gaslight bled into the corners. I smelt the mould and damp, the strange fading feather-tang that was part of it all. Water dripped from the roof beams into my hair as I followed Dad into the gloom, ducking through the brush of new cobwebs that fingered my cheeks and lips and eyelashes. He held the lamp up high and made his way forward into the shadows, surrounded on all sides by the weird warped shapes. Light filtered in through the window on our left. As my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, gradually the weird shapes became familiar trestles and frames, benches, oil drums and big wooden chests.

'The old man's workshop.' He patted an old moss-bucket that hung from the wall. 'Old looms and stuff. From when he was a weaver.'

'I know.'

The squall from the West arrived. Rain beat down on the roof and the wind whistled low. Something moved, just out of sight, at the back of the shed. I trod softly forward, trying not to trip across the tools and boxes that still littered the floor. I peered around, holding my breath, but Dad hadn't noticed anything. He saw nothing but the dusty looms, cupboards and stuff that hadn't been touched for years. He shook his head at three tailor's mannequins leaning drunkenly against mouldering shelves - piled high with the drab swatches of decaying tartan.

'Can you hear that?' he said.

For him it was the wind that shrieked out - not a warning, piping whistle that greeted me at feeding time. At the back of the shed, I saw them looking at me. Behind the wall of wire fence that spanned across the room. Gold-perched on the beam, side by side - the two massive eagles.

Un-shell, boy. Coit do'n buin sibh?

'I don't know,' I answered.

'What did you say, Stew?' said Dad. 'What you looking at?'

We're no pecking scrabblers or clucking beaters, boy! Answer! Coit do'n buin sibh?

Tsil-tsil-tschil!

Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!-Toh-tSchil!

The birds opened and shook their wings a little. The she-eagle ruffled out her head feathers like a crown, and they both fidgeted in anticipation. I could see Grandad holding up the skinned rabbits and setting his lantern down on a bench. 'Whisht, now. Whist now,' he crooned at

them. 'It's just me and the boy, to bring yer dinner.'

'What are you looking at, Stew?' said Dad.

Grandad swung the rabbit carcasses onto the wooden trays by the beam. The eagles flapped their wings, casting huge splayed shadows against the back wall. The lamplight lit their rich sheen - brown and amber shoulders gleamed as they turned their powerful heads this way and that, tugging, ripping into the rabbit flesh with big, hooked beaks. The light caught the napes of their angular necks as they pulled at the meat – hot gold glowing in the dark.

Coit do'n buin sibh?

'Stew!'

'Eh? Eh?' I said. The eagles and Grandad flickered away, into the shadows.

'It feels like he could walk back in at any moment, with a mug of tea and a cheese butty,' said Dad.

'Er, yeah.'

Coit do'n buin sibh? They whispered from the shadows.

Dad lit other lamps and stood them on the looms. He moved from one work-bench to another - examining tools and setting them back down in the exact same position. He nicked his palm on the teeth of a saw.

'Bugger! Still sharp.'

I knew there was a small first aid kit that Grandad kept in a draw. There were no plasters left. 'Let me look at it,' I said.

He held his hand under the lamplight and gasped when I dabbed the cut with surgical spirit.

'Looks like you learnt a bit about Grandad being a medic, then.'

'Yeah, he taught me a bit. There's some plasters over in the kitchen.'

Dad sniffed again.

'Wood-shavings, glue and kerosene,' he said. 'Dusty old cloth and a thousand miles of yarn.'

He pulled open the oak cabinet.

'This stuff's still OK... still good.' He ran his fingers over the big reels of wool. 'I bet you heard all about the magic family tartan. Eh, Stew?' He laughed.

'Sort of.' I remembered Grandad lying dead under the glowing tartan feather-ore, on the mountainside. Dad wrinkled his nose. I said nothing.

'Phew, there's something dodgy in here, as well.' He held up a lamp and looked over at the wire cage. 'What's this? Stew?'

'Eagle's cage. There were two Golden eagles.'

'Golden eagles? But, there's been none here for years and years?'

Pinhead

'A few came back. They were sick. We... we healed them.'

He raised his eyebrows.

'Sounds like I've got some catching up to do. You'll have to fill me in.'

I nodded. He drew the cover off the loom Grandad had kept hidden from me. It was empty.

'Blimey, it's still in working order.' He ran his hand across the worn, dark wood. 'I'd stand here for hours, watching him work.' He patted the loom affectionately. 'He's kept it well. Sometimes he'd set me up over here at the bench, give me a task, keep an eye on me while he worked. He'd stop every now and then and show me what to do. Teach me to make a little box for Mum... your Nan, or a little boat or something. Mark it up, cut it, trim it, plane it up, sand it down and varnish it. "Give it a nice lick of paint, boy," he'd say.' Dad paused. 'We made that little red boat, you know. The one I gave you. Set it on a Loch-side in the sun, see if it sat right. Gave it some sails and sent it out, fetched it back in the skiff, one oar each. Still got it at home... You remember, Stew?'

I shook my head.

'We sailed it on the heath pond, you remember? The little red boat.'

'No.' I lied.

'You OK, son?'

I nodded. The familiar smells of sawdust and eagles filled my senses. I thought of all I'd shared with Grandad since I'd come to Na Hearadh. How we'd fed and freed the eagles together, rowed in the bay, hiked in the mountains. I longed for his happy stories of Nan and Dad and his sadness of her death. And the war - the fear and friendship, the dead mates he'd never forgotten. The places he'd seen and the myths of sea and mountains. I could still hear him. *Coit do'n buin sibh?* Still feel his strength in my blood. I knew I'd never deliberately cut myself again. I'd never waste it - that "Good red stuff" he'd said we were all made of. I was strong now - and it was Grandad who'd helped me. I glared across the shed at this other man standing among the family looms and tools - Grandad's son - my dad. I didn't know *him*. The red riddle of our family surged through my veins, but now my skin was too strong for it to drip from self-made cuts and wounds. I spoke with the voice of the *Sheer*.

'Eh? Say again?' said Dad.

I said it loud so he could hear it. 'Why didn't we have a shed at home?'

He stopped looking at the tools and the yarn that wound back to his own childhood.

'Why did you leave the island?'

Outside, the wind was really beginning to pick up. I knew the clouds were racing over the bay, across the sky - blotting out the sun - but that the clouds would break for the light to fall again. I knew that above An Cliseam, the eagles would be soaring free on voices of air, reading the

rocks for meat - hearing the song of the heather, the sigh of the wind, the word from the river and the spiel of the sea. Sounds that spoke from all *beLow* - that echoed back granite-self and ocean-meaning. Grandad heard these voices - *he* taught me how to read the rocks and trees, *he* taught me how to listen. Had Dad never learnt? Or had he just forgotten how to hear and see? - gone deaf and blind in the city - deaf and blind to the wind-words of Na Hearadh, like all those too long from the wind and the wild.

'Grandad said you stopped listening - to him, the sea, the island. That you didn't want to hear any more.'

Dad scooped up a fistful of sawdust from the bench and let it trickle through his fingers.

'Why did you leave?' I said. 'Was it cos he was a conchie? Were you ashamed of him... cos he wouldn't fight?'

I saw him standing at the Cairn, watching, as Mum and Grandad's ashes were swept away on the wind. I saw him looking out across the bay where he used to row the skiff, retracing his footprints with Mum and Nan and Grandad across Scarista Bay. He looked round at the dirty shelves of tools and stacks of decaying family tartan.

'He shoulda told me. Why didn't he tell me? He shoulda told me about the bloody medals! I... I dunno why I left, Stew. Maybe the same reason you left me. Like father like son, eh?' He paused.

Mac mar an t-athair... Mac mar an t-athair...

'I don't know why I left, Son. But, I... I've come back.'

'Coit do'n buin sibh?' I said again - the voice of the *Sheer*.

He turned to me and for the first time we weren't strangers. His eyes were the same colour as Grandad's, the same colour as my own - grey as razors and just as sharp.

'Maybe, *here*. Maybe, I belong *here*. I don't know.' He answered me, and sucked the blood from his fist.

Fàilte!

Welcome!

Coit do'n buin sibh?

Where *do* you belong to?

I don't know

I somersault

Car a` mhuiltein

A leaf?

A memory?

A moment?

A hand held?

A person?

A sun-moon-ray-beam?

A star-planet-shine?

A sea-splash rain-snow-flake-drop?

A sigh-breath of wind?

A kiss?

All of these?

All

To Líf and Lífprasir - wild-words shift I grip the letter in my hand I somersault above the croft I feel the eagle's loft I read the Sheer-dead-drop grey-knuckled-rock - that punch-worn growth below sparse grass - ash-battered layered past of family-bone - a groan of the mast that sailed from home - the drag of the blood-anchor pulled alone - the wail from the root-womb - pulsed not known. The barn door slam-bangs - swings wide - Inside - the wound of a stump has grown green shoots new leaves roots unfurl -
Midnight chimes on the rock-face-clock

something is moving...

time...

àm

Time is
the blood-tide running
from a father-mother's hand. Time is the foam
on the sand, the otter sunning itself, the flood
as it races across the land, the shining-child-faces, the slime of
seaweed shelf-tooth-rock, the shock of bright spaces - silver-white sand, green-
wet-floss, freeze-burn weather, the frost of loss, the cost of breath, the mist-kissed
wind-blasted eyes, the feathered death, the rock black house. All at once I see all. I
see I read I feel. Not words but weather. Not sounds but voices. Not colours but words of
a different feather. The touch of sight-sound. The thing reaches inside me with
a talon-caress - scratching me-itself - reporting back to the other -
the other that is the same - that is also me. Now, I can never close my
eyes my ears my nose-mouth-lungs my arse-cock-cunt-holes
my-skin. I am open-erect. Outside within. I see it-them but I am
them-it. And now they grow in shadows across the hills
and peaks, from races of shadow to where shadow
shouldn't be. They closer-flow-grow, towards me,
sprouting to sunset sky with a first-last-light
of stars calling. Closer - grow
oak, birch, beech, yew, ash
around me. In shadows move
flicker-roam loam-ghosts -
my mother, my father-father,
feather-sheer-gold-eagles,
deer, hare, fish, butterfly
sparrow, worm, beetle -
All in shade-sunlight rain-
hail-snow - Ashes grow
close reach-surround me
in thunder lightning-root
trunk-shafts, sprouting high,
climbing sky, shouting to stars,
shrieking a wind-warning to all
wild sons and daughters of Earth.
Tide time is come! Act-burst-grow!
Let all bright earth-blood-seed-sap flow!

crìochnaich